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Trail News from the Mountains to the Sea **May 2021**

The NC General Assembly considers trail funding and other trail updates from Executive Director Kate Dixon

The outpouring of people onto trails over the last year helped elected officials recognize how important trails and parks are to public health and well-being. That awareness led Governor Cooper to include \$40 million for trails in his proposed budget, and 34 NC House members, led by Representatives Arp, Blackwell, Clampitt, and Pare, have introduced a bill, [H936](#), that would provide \$23.6 million for trails, including \$3 million for North Carolina's nine state trails, including the MST. Please [e-mail or telephone your House member](#) to urge him or her to support this bill. If you don't live in North Carolina, contact a House member from an area you visit. Let them know how much the MST and other trails mean to you.

Another exciting announcement is that we just received our largest individual gift to date when an anonymous donor contributed \$100,000 to establish the [MST Forever Fund](#). We'll use the fund to build and improve the physical trail. Example projects include improving signage and installing kiosks, building bridges and boardwalk, even acquiring land and easements. We plan to use about 15% per year and fundraise to replenish the Fund as a continual, steady source for the MST. We welcome you to donate to the fund at any time.

Thanks to the MST trail crews who have worked steadily through COVID, heavy rains, and heavy trail use to keep the MST in great condition. The trail has brought joy and solace to so many people, and these volunteers are the heart of the MST community. The photo to the right shows our volunteers with our Upper Haw Task Force replacing steps near Burlington.



It's wonderful to begin seeing trail folks in person again -- volunteers, members, staff and board. All the staff are fully vaccinated, so we've been able to work together in the office for the last couple of weeks. The board is planning its first in-person meeting since 2019 this July. I hope you are having these same joyful experiences.

For the 21st-year in a row, [REI](#) has made a leadership gift to support our work. This year their grant is for \$15,000. REI is a model corporate donor, providing steady, generous support with needed flexibility. And they always do so much to help customers learn about our work and get involved. They have truly made a tremendous difference for the MST.



Early this year, the board met by Zoom to develop a **priority action plan** to guide our work from 2021 to 2023. The plan affirms our commitment to building, maintaining and promoting the trail and identifies six areas for expanded work: 1) acquiring land and easements for the trail; 2) improving signage; 3) recruiting volunteers for expanded roles; 4) advocating for the trail to the NC General Assembly and Governor; 5) raising needed funding; and 6) welcoming people from diverse communities to the trail. You can read the full plan [here](#).

This final focus area is a particular priority and passion for many board and staff members. We will be hiring an intern for the 2021-2022 school year and a marketing consultant experienced in working in communities of color to help us develop and implement an outreach and engagement plan. The board also just adopted the **land acknowledgment** and statement of **commitment to justice, equity, diversity and inclusion** that are cited in the newsletter article below.

I announced at the unGathering of Friends in March that **I plan to retire in April 2022**. At that time, I will have worked for Friends of MST for a little more than 15 years. Working for the trail has been a highlight of my career – because the trail itself is inspiring, but also because I work with so many talented, passionate people and I love being part of such a joyous, welcoming community. But my husband Dan has been retired for three years now, and I am ready to have more time to spend with him – hiking, travelling, cooking, gardening.

The Board and staff have known for more than a year, and they have been working hard to prepare. Part of that preparation was development of the priority action plan described above. We will begin advertising for my successor in June or July. Honestly, my retirement is still far enough off that it doesn't feel very real yet, and I'm very excited about all the work we have in front of us. But we want to keep you informed. We welcome you to share ideas for the transition with me or members of the Board, and we also encourage you to let potential candidates for the position know about it too.

Friends adopts Land Acknowledgment and Commitment Statement to Justice, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion

As part of our continued commitment to promote access, equity and inclusiveness in the Mountains-to-Sea Trail community, Friends of the MST has adopted the following statements:

LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Friends of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail respectfully acknowledges that the trail traverses traditional and ancestral homelands of indigenous peoples whom we honor as the original stewards of the land.

COMMITMENT STATEMENT

Friends of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail strives to provide equal opportunities to all trail users, and does not tolerate discrimination against any trail user or member of the trail community based on race, national origin, religion, age, gender, disability, sexual orientation or identity, or status as a special disabled veteran or veteran.

Policies and practices of Friends of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail will reflect our commitment to promote access, equity and inclusiveness, and to discourage discrimination that denies the essential humanity of all people.

MST Community unGathered and reGathering: News from Outreach Manager Betsy Brown

The biggest relief in my world is that the virtual **UnGathering of Friends** happened without a major technical glitch! Over 200 of us connected on Zoom for two days: sharing trail updates, honoring hikers and volunteers, and hearing from trail leaders and state parks. I could feel the energy of our community, and I am excited to begin planning for us to come together in person in 2022.

We've posted recordings of all the unGathering breakout sessions [here](#) and will shortly post more of the key speakers. We had some great topics and panels, so I hope you'll take time to watch one or more.

We'll be celebrating the MST's 45th anniversary at our **Gathering of Friends, April 8-10, 2022** in Lake Junaluska, the community where the trail was first proposed in 1977. Excursions, hikes and trail workdays will spread across Haywood and Buncombe counties and even onto the Cherokee Reservation. We're thrilled to work with Carolina Mountain Club, VisitSmokies, the Eastern Band of the Cherokee and others to make this a very, very special Gathering.

I've just returned from a busy three days of planning with these partners and the only problem I've encountered so far is that we have entirely too many options of excursions and hikes! Information about accommodations will be up on our website in June, as we're locking down everything with the conference center at Lake Junaluska. We are reserving nearly the entire campground for tents and RVs, plus more standard room options throughout the conference center. We plan to hold the meeting portion of the event in Shackford Hall, the very same meeting space where trail leaders met in 1977, the white building across the lake in the photo below.



Also mark **September 9-12, 2021** on your calendar, as I've started planning for the **44th Birthday Hike**. One of our goals is to welcome more people of color to the trail, so I hope you'll think about ways to invite people from diverse communities to celebrate with you.

In the last month, we [founded a Facebook Group](#) attached to our Facebook page which makes it easier for folks to share photos, ask questions, and get to know other MST fans. If you do the Facebook thing, it's easy to join after answering just a few questions. Until we meet in person again, it's another way to connect with the MST community.

Thirsty? Bottoms up in support of the MST

But in this season of mixed-up weather, do you want a warm drink or a cold drink? Both!



[Joe Van Gogh Coffee](#) has brought back the MST summer blend again! Starting May 20th, you can grab a 12-ounce bag of beans online and at JVG cafes for \$15.50. Some of their cafes will be brewing the blend for single cups, too.



[Raleigh Brewing Company](#) has launched a Mountain to Sea Seltzer Series, which features four flavors inspired by the trail. The seltzers are available in grocery stores and bottle shops across the state and their Triangle taprooms.

[Thanks to Joe Van Gogh](#) and [Raleigh Brewing Company](#) for bringing visibility

and financial support to the trail in this tasty way. May we also suggest the perfect pairings from our online store?



MST [mugs](#) and [pint glasses](#) are available from our [online store](#).

A new era: News From Ben Jones, Coastal Crescent (and beyond) Project Manager

The MST is in a new era, one in which new trail requires the **acquisition of land or trail easements** since most of the trail possible on public land has already been built. I've started working with a new "Land Committee" of the Friends of the MST Board to investigate ways to acquire land for the trail. Committee members include Heather Cotton, Jim Cobb, Carl DeAndrade, John Lanman, Tammy Proctor, and Bill Scott.

Volunteer Albert Shaw is also helping me and the committee to investigate opportunities in Eastern NC. Albert is an experienced buyer and seller of land, tree farmer and storyteller extraordinaire. You can learn more about Albert in [this profile](#).



We're particularly focusing on opportunities to acquire land near Bushy Lake State Natural Area in Cumberland County and Holly Shelter Game Land in Pender County.

Thanks to a generous grant from the Duke Energy Foundation, I've been working with State Parks on the design for a special **MST terminus sign at Jockey's Ridge State Park**. Our goal is an iconic sign that celebrates those who start or complete the trail at Jockey's Ridge and introduces everyone who sees it to the adventure of the MST. We've agreed on a location for the sign (it can't be on the top of the dune because that location is always in flux), and I am working on final designs based on feedback from State Parks. We hope to share it with you in the next e-news.



El-Genk Family of Durham hiking the 40th Day Hike at sunset

At **Belews Lake**, north of Winston-Salem, we've been making progress on our Duke Energy Foundation-funded project to develop a conservation and trail development plan. The lake, which was built about 40 years ago as a cooling basin for a Duke plant, lies in the middle of Segment 8 where little off-road trail has been built to date.

Ken Bridle, Stewardship Director of the Piedmont Land Conservancy, has helped me prioritize areas for an on-the-ground natural heritage survey of lake. This survey, which will continue through the summer, will allow us to document significant natural areas. We'll use the data to identify priority areas for conservation and to guide decisions about where trail can best be located.



Belews Lake

40 Hike Challenge Update: 14 completers so far...

Guys, gals and [pups](#) are [Great Day Hiking](#) all along the MST! We're seeing photos and stories from the 40 Great Day Hikes are all over social media ([#MST40Hike](#)), and some folks are even emailing to let us know how their hikes are going. Fourteen hikers have reported that they completed all 40 of the hikes, and a few are just a couple hikes away from being done. Here's a photo of Julie "Jester" Gayheart with her patch, urging you to get out and earn yours!



For the uninitiated, the [40 Hike Challenge](#) is completed once all 40 Great Day Hikes in our new guidebook, [Great Day Hikes on North Carolina's Mountains-to-Sea Trail](#) are walked. There are roughly 2-3 hikes per segment of the trail, and the hikes have been carefully chosen to appeal to explorers of all experience levels. All the details are on our website, including how to report when you have completed the Challenge. Also, as a reminder, always check the [Trail Updates page](#) for current trail conditions before heading off to hike, as even the day hikes can be affected by reroutes, closures and other unforeseen circumstances. We've added a tab specifically for the day hikes.

Just in case you were curious, Great Day Hikes has sold nearly 5,000 copies (UNC Press is preparing a 2nd printing). That must mean we're about to get 5,000 completion forms for the 40 Hike Challenge! Right!?

How to drink from the firehose: News from Operations Manager Elizabeth Hipps



I started working for Friends at the end of September. In these 6 months, I have been learning as much as I can about managing non-profits, the Friends, the trail, trail culture - all from my home instead of a communal office environment. When I managed operations for a branding firm, we called this kind of quick learning "drinking from the firehose."

My firehose observations are that instead of a profit loss statement a non-profit has a statement of activity. Instead of clients or customers, there are literally friends and a strong community.

The UnGathering's planning sessions and the actual events demonstrated what a community the MST has. The breadth of uses and the interest folks have in the trail is truly astounding. I can only imagine what the group will be like next year when the Gathering will be in person at Lake Junaluska. My first job ever was at Lake Junaluska. I laid out the newsletter to mimeograph, delivered the mail, answered the front desk phone and was trusted to count collection on Monday morning. I have come full circle!

Stories from the Trail

Two amazing hikers and vivid storytellers, [Tara "MK Candy Mama" Dower](#) and [Julie "Jester" Gayheart](#), have wrapped up their MST trail journey recaps recently. While their tales are very different, both Tara and Julie share a love for the MST and the community around it.



Tara set the Fastest Known Time on the MST in September of 2021, 29 days 8 hours 48 minutes. She shares an honest, painful and ultimately joyful [series of videos](#) depicting what it's like to attempt an FKT. Divided into three segments corresponding with the MST's segments, Tara's series is not just about going fast, but about finding the strength to keep going. Tara and crew managed to shoot gorgeous and haunting (the shark on the beach, yikes) images from the trail while hiking over 40 miles a day.

Jester completed the 40 Hike Challenge a few months back and just wrapped up her [corresponding podcast series](#) last week. While on each hike, she describes what the trail and area is like, and then goes on to share what she appreciates off trail, including the best chicken sandwiches across the state. Jester also interviewed many trail luminaries during her trek which gives great color commentary to each podcast.

We highly recommend both!

Breaking and Fixing: Update from Jim Grode, Trail Resource Manager

Since our last newsletter, I've spent significant time **updating our technology** as some of our cobbled-together solutions have proven inadequate for our increasing size and reach. I've faced ups and downs -- failures, repairs, upgrades, and planning -- but everything is coming into place and I'm excited to begin using these tools to enhance our work. They may not be visible to the outside world, but they will definitely help us communicate and exchange information better, make our new format for trail guides even easier to update, and allow us to create maps and other geographically based information more efficiently.



I've also been working on improving our **kiosks** at Falls Lake. The photo above shows the first of a new design for MST kiosks developed by Ben Jones on our staff and built by Ben and State Parks staff. Working with our volunteer cartographer Curtis Belyea and our graphic designer Sara Birkemeier, I'm now finishing up the content of maps, photos and text that will be installed soon.

My recent move to New Bern has allowed me to learn more and more about the MST and other conservation lands in Eastern NC. I've enjoyed meeting members of the Carteret County Wildlife Club who serve as our "Task Force" for the Neusiok Trail in [Segment 16](#). Ben Jones, pictured below, and I spent a fun day earlier this spring fixing signs and trimming vegetation on a stretch of the Neusiok Trail (Segment 16).



Much of our recent staff work has revolved around the theme of community. It reminds me how fortunate I am to be part of this great community, which allows me to do this work that I love. I'm grateful to all of you who make it possible.

Thank you to a surprise sponsor

The technical side of the recent unGathering of Friends of the MST was so successful because of the care and attention of the unflappable William King, event producer with **Meeting Contact**. Back in 2019, we hired Will to produce our in-person Gathering in Surf City. This year, we turned to him again for the unGathering. Through these two events, Will grew to appreciate our mission.



Will surprised us after the unGathering by donating ALL of his (already discounted!) production services, which was a gift of more than \$2400 to the trail. Thank you, Will, for your dedication that helped our community come

together this spring.

Other Ways to Support the MST

ONE: Become a member. Join [online](#) or [print and mail](#) your membership form today.

TWO: Buy an MST license plate. For \$30 per year, you can show the world your love of the trail and help financially too. \$20 of your annual fee will come back to Friends of MST to build, protect, and promote the trail. Order your plate [directly from NC DMV](#).

THREE: If your employer hosts a workplace-giving campaign, look for Friends of MST as a giving option. We are a member of [EarthShare NC](#) which promotes workplace giving for conservation and environmental groups. We are a giving option in the North Carolina state employee campaign and in many local government and corporate campaigns too. Friends code numbers are: State employee campaign -- 1102; United Way of the Triangle - 60001159.

FOUR: Link your AmazonSmile account. Simply shop at smile.amazon.com/ch/52-2204330 and Amazon will donate half a percent back to us at no cost to you.

Looking forward to seeing you on the MST again.

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Members save 10% on Friends merchandise available at our [online store](#).

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Volunteers are the heart of Friends of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail.

We need people with a wide variety of skills and interests to build and care for this beautiful trail.

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