



## Priority Action Plan 2021-2023

The mission of Friends of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail (Friends) is to bring together communities and volunteers to build a simple footpath connecting North Carolina's natural treasures for the enjoyment and education of the people. It is with this mission in mind that the board met January 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2021 to develop strategic priorities for the next 3 years. Mindful of events that have occurred particularly over the last year and a heightened awareness that special efforts must be made to include all citizens, communities and visitors to the state, the Friends board is committed to viewing all activities and decisions through an equity lens.

The list below reflects strategic new actions and ongoing activities of the Friends. Details of new actions are described in more detail on the following pages.

1. Sharing our trail and vision requires us to communicate what and where it is and to reach out to current and new trail users by:
  - a. Developing a plan to enhance signage that directs people to the trail and explains the trail to users. (Action Item #7);
  - b. Using all forms of communication, including print, electronic and social media, to connect with the public.
  - c. Organizing an annual Gathering of Friends and a Birthday Hike to educate and involve people with the trail.
  - d. Providing accurate, easy to use information about how to hike and access on the trail online and through printed guidebooks.
2. Our long vision is for a fully off-road trail. In order to fulfill this vision we seek ways to secure land for new sections of trail by:
  - a. Working with land managing agencies, local governments and private landowners to gain permission to build and steward new sections of trail;
  - b. Establishing a board committee to develop policies around our role and likely partnerships (Action Item #5);
  - c. Developing a master plan, similar to what we have done for the Coastal Crescent route, to move the trail off-road in the Piedmont (Action Item #5).
3. Maintaining the off-road sections of trail so that they are safe, accessible, and have minimal impact on the surrounding natural environment by:
  - a. Supporting our dedicated trail builders and maintainers;
  - b. Recruiting, training, and supporting new volunteers in areas where we are starting to build trail.
4. It is critical that our work and the trail itself serve all communities, fulfilling our commitment to inclusion and diversity by:
  - a. Establishing and using an equity lens to guide all decisions and programs (Action Item #2);
  - b. Working with State Parks to develop an equity lens to guide decisions about the location of new sections of trail (Action Item #8);
  - c. Developing an outreach strategy to engage with people from our marginalized communities (Action Item #3).

5. Financial resources are required to meet all of our goals by:
  - a. Continuing fundraising efforts, with the immediate focus on major donors (Action Item #1);
  - b. Taking full advantage of governmental sources of funding (Action Item #4).
6. Even with significant funding resources we cannot fulfill our mission without volunteers. We will expand our capacity to accomplish the goals above by:
  - a. Recruiting and engaging a wide range of volunteers and volunteer talent to help us (Action Item #6).

The table below provides more detail about each of the new action items developed by the Board at its 2021 retreat. The order does not reflect priority, but the first five are expected to be underway in 2021 and the second three in 2022. The timing is based on organizational capacity, funding needs, and the potential for the 2022 action items to build on work completed in 2021.

This Priority Action Plan should be used to structure board meeting agendas so that the Board receives regular updates on our progress toward meeting our goals and can make adjustments as needed based on capacity and funding availability (See Note 1 below).

## ACTION ITEMS

<b>Action Item #2021-1</b>	<b>Establish a Major Donor Program</b>
What is the needed action?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop a major donor program to steward donors who give \$500 or more. The 2021-22 program will include a series of               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ special hikes</li> <li>○ zoom presentations</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Raise funds in Kate Dixon’s honor for the MST Forever and Coastal Crescent funds</li> <li>• Raise final \$153,000 to complete the Coastal Crescent Campaign (Coastal Crescent funds raised for KD Legacy will go to this campaign).</li> <li>• Transition to new ED: Use stewardship events to introduce donors to board members and staff; Kate will document donor relationships in Neon</li> </ul>
Who is responsible?	Development Committee
Lead staff:	Kate Dixon and new Executive Director
When will this work start?	February 2021; Report on progress at each board meeting
<b>Action Item #2021-2</b>	<b>Establish an Equity Lens for all Decisions</b>
What is needed action?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop, adopt, and post on website:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ a statement of our commitment to justice, equity, diversity and inclusivity (JEDI) and</li> <li>○ an equity tool (ie, checklist, questions or another format) that board, committees and staff can use to build programs and a trail that are just, equitable, diverse and inclusive (JEDI)</li> </ul> </li> <li>• To ensure that we develop a JEDI culture, the Board President will open each board meeting with a reminder that</li> </ul>

	we seek to consider JEDI in all discussions and close each meeting with a final agenda item to review decisions using our JEDI tool
Who is responsible?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Board President</li> <li>• Angela Lee and Carrie Bonds to draft JEDI statement</li> <li>• Kate Dixon will work with board members to draft the equity lens tool</li> </ul>
Lead staff:	Kate Dixon and new Executive Director
When is it going to happen?	Starting February 2021; statement presented for approval by May 2021; equity lens tool presented for approval by July 2021
<b>Action Item #2021-3</b>	<b>Engage with People from Marginalized Communities</b>
What is needed action?	<p>To welcome people from marginalized communities (Note 2 below) to use the trail and get involved with Friends of MST:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engage a marketing consultant who specializes in outreach to diverse communities to help us develop a plan and implement this program (See Note 3 below)</li> <li>• This engagement plan will build on the marketing plan completed in February 2020.</li> <li>• Employ an intern from 8/2021 to 7/2022 to help with this program</li> <li>• Recruit an ad-hoc committee of board, volunteers and other experienced volunteers to advise and help with development and implementation of the plan</li> </ul>
Lead staff:	Betsy Brown and Elizabeth Hipps
When is this going to happen?	<p>May 2021 – start advertising for intern</p> <p>June 2021 – RFQ for marketing consultant</p> <p>November 2021 – Complete plan with budget recommendations for 2022-2023</p>
<b>Action Item #2021-4</b>	<b>Advocate for \$2 million for N.C. Trails Program</b>
What is needed action?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engage board, staff and members in asking General Assembly to expand N.C. Trails Program and fund each State Trail (including MST) at \$150,000 per year</li> <li>• Recruit a board member experienced in lobbying and government relations</li> <li>• Support efforts by the Great Trail State Coalition to expand funding for paved and natural surface trails and to promote trail communities through Visit NC</li> <li>• Transition to new ED: Friends of MST has hired a lobbyist with special funding from a donor. Kate will also involve new board member in this work.</li> </ul>
Who is responsible?	Kate Dixon, new Executive Director and board member
When is this going to happen?	Ongoing

<b>Action Item#2021-5</b>	<b>Expand role in land and easement acquisition</b>
What is needed action?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop a policy that defines our role in land and easement acquisition</li> <li>• Review land projects for presentation to the board</li> <li>• Assess whether we might partner/contract with a land trust to acquire land</li> <li>• Using the process developed for the Coastal Crescent, identify priority areas for trail design, land acquisition and construction in the Piedmont along the planned corridor between Stone Mountain State Park and Smithfield</li> </ul>
Who is responsible?	New Committee – chaired by Heather Cotton with board and non-board members who have experience and interest in land and easement acquisition
Lead Staff:	Ben Jones
When is this going to happen?	Committee established in March 2021
<b>Action Item #2022-6</b>	<b>Recruit volunteers for new roles (in promotions, advocacy, land, diversity, trail angels)</b>
What is needed action?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Build on engagement plan for involving people from marginalized communities</li> <li>• Review our current volunteer programs and recommend enhancements (recruitment, support and recognition)</li> <li>• Determine strategy for using Neon CRM to identify and track volunteer hours.</li> <li>• develop job descriptions for volunteers (including people from diverse groups (See Note 1 below)) who can expand our work in promotions, advocacy, land acquisition, and hiker support</li> <li>• advertise new volunteer positions</li> <li>• coordinate and support volunteers in meaningful roles</li> </ul>
Who is responsible?	New Committee – chaired by a board member with additional members who are MST volunteers and/or have experience in nonprofits with strong volunteer programs
Lead staff:	Betsy Brown
When is it going to happen?	Form Committee: February 2022
<b>Action Item #2022-7</b>	<b>Enhance Signage</b>
What is needed action?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop and implement a plan to install signs that identify the MST at trail heads and intersections</li> <li>• make maps, write text, layout graphics for kiosk information</li> <li>• Information and photos on kiosks and signs should demonstrate that the trail is welcoming to all people (see Note 1 below) and strive to include information about local history of diverse communities</li> <li>• gain permission for signs and kiosks from land managing agencies</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• work with volunteers to install signs and build kiosks</li> <li>• work with NCDOT to gain permission to install signs on road sections</li> <li>• coordinate volunteers to install and maintain the road signage system</li> </ul>
Who is responsible?	New staff member (See Note 2 below)
When is it going to happen?	Hire new staff member in Spring 2022; three-year signage plan developed by January 2023
<b>Action Item #2022-8</b>	<b>Review Planned Trail Route with an Equity Lens</b>
What is needed action?	<p>Approximately 40% of MST has not been built, and only a rough corridor has been identified for where the trail will go in those areas.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work with State Parks to explore a process for establishing an equity lens to determine final trail route.</li> <li>• Great Trails State Coalition may be interested in hosting a webinar on this topic for trail groups statewide</li> </ul>
Who is responsible?	Smith Raynor, NC Division of State Parks
Lead staff:	New Executive Director will appoint
When is it going to happen?	2022

**Note 1:** As it reviews and adjusts the Priority Action Plan over time, the Board will consider whether it has capacity to undertake the following action proposed by a board member: “Identify, catalog and develop programs/policies for natural attractions such as waterfalls, cliffs, and or/naturally occurring phenomena along trails.”

**Note 2:** Friends of MST welcomes diverse groups to get involved and enjoy the trail – including but not limited to Black, Indigenous and People of Color; LGBTQ+ People; People with Disabilities; People of Size; Veterans, etc.

**Note 3:** Additional funding required to implement these priorities:

- 1) 2021: Funding to hire a marketing consultant(s) to assist with outreach to people of color and to help organize the 2021 Birthday Hike and 2022 Gathering (Primary source of funding—unrestricted reserves.)
- 2) 2022: Funding for a new full-time staff person to implement signage program and assist with cartography, support for task forces, and outreach. (Possible sources of funding include funds for signage raised during the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary campaign; AJ Fletcher Foundation, Jandy Ammons Foundation; BRP Foundation; Gipson Family Foundation; and unrestricted reserves.)