

FRIENDS OF THE MOUNTAINS-TO-SEA TRAIL

2021 ANNUAL REPORT

Dear Members and MST Enthusiasts,

2021 was a year of transition for Friends of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail. Like so many others, we began to cautiously transition out of the worst of COVID and safely begin gathering in person again for hikes and other events.

Of course, the big transition was the retirement of our long-time Executive Director Kate Dixon. The Board of Directors undertook a thorough and lengthy search for a new Executive Director and announced her successor, Brent Laurenz, at the end of the year.

The increase in MST usage and excitement we saw in 2020 as so many people turned to trails and the outdoors for safe recreation opportunities during the worst of the pandemic didn't wane in 2021 either. More and more people, from those going for a short walk to those trying to hike the entire MST, continued to turn to nature for a place of solace and refuge. And our trail guides and other resources helped guide thousands of people to explore the MST.

While we were saddened to miss another year of a big, in-person Gathering of Friends, our transition to a virtual UnGathering of Friends was a big success and still offered opportunities for us in the MST community to connect.

At the end of 2021, the exciting news came that the state budget included nearly \$30 million for state trails—a record investment by the state. That money will be truly transformational for the MST and our state trail partners. A portion of this money is allocated specifically for the MST, and we're thrilled to see it in action on the trail.

2021 may have been a year of transition, but we remain as committed as ever to our six core activities:

- Helping people find and enjoy the trail and get involved.
- Working toward a fully off-road trail by securing land and easements.
- Maintaining built sections of trail so that they are safe, accessible, and have minimal impact on the surrounding natural environment.
- Ensuring that our activities and the trail itself are welcoming to everyone, including people from underrepresented communities.
- Engaging volunteers to support the trail and build a trail community.
- Raising funds to accomplish all these goals.

We're at a moment of incredible opportunity for the MST and we welcome you to join us in the work ahead, whether as a donor, volunteer or even just a trail enthusiast. Big things are on the horizon for the Mountains-to-Sea Trail, and together we can achieve our goals.

Happy Trails, Carl deAndrade Board President 2021

Marcia Bromberg Board President 2022



MST and COVID

As 2021 began, we saw some light at the end of the COVID tunnel as vaccines became widely available and people continued to slowly return to some semblance of normal life. During the height of the pandemic, people across the state turned to the outdoors for safe recreational activities. Whether they were discovering the joy of being in nature for the first time or rekindling an old passion, North Carolinians showed up at state parks, national parks and trails in every corner of the state to find safe ways to gather together or enjoy time alone outdoors. On the MST, the interest level didn't wane as other activities that people previously enjoyed returned. We had a record number of completers in 2021, as well, with our trail angels providing meaningful support to assure the safety and comfort of hikers. Our volunteer task forces worked steadfastly through the pandemic. implementing protocols that ensured the trails remained open. Through these experiences, more and more people have come to realize that trails like the MST aren't just nice things to have, but are integral to our communities for mental and physical well-being and to simply provide opportunities to get outside and enjoy the beauty of North Carolina.

New Trail

In part because of pandemic-related slowdowns and lingering maintenance backlogs, new trail construction continued to be slow in 2021. However, we added three short but important sections:

SEGMENT 6

The "Spice Farm Trail" east of Elkin added 0.6 new miles, allowing hikers to avoid a dangerous blind curve in the road.

SEGMENT 9

Guilford County Farm added 0.3 new trail miles near the farm building complex.

SEGMENT 11

Sam's Branch Greenway in Clayton added another 0.5 mile of new trail to the existing trail system, taking hikers off busy City Rd. and connecting them to the town's Municipal Park.

COVER: © Jennifer Browndorf; **LEFT:** Blue Ridge Parkway © Sara Birkemeier; **ABOVE:** Wildflower Hike in Segment 3 © Betsy Brown



Guidebooks, Signs and Kiosks

Our guidebook, *Great Day Hikes on North Carolina's Mountains-to-Sea Trail*, published in March 2020, sold out of its first print run and has become a go-to resource for people who want to tackle short hikes on diverse sections of the MST. The book also inspired the 40 Hike Challenge, which challenges hikers to complete all 40 hikes in the guidebook.

Friends of the MST created a new design for trailhead kiosks with plans to install them across the state. Our first kiosk with the new design was installed at Bayleaf Church Road along Falls Lake in Segment 10.

Trail Improvements

In 2021, dedicated MST volunteers logged over 38,000 volunteer hours. With a noticeable increase in hikers out



Boyds Creek Bridge Grand Opening, Alamance County

on the trail during the pandemic, these volunteers were absolutely essential to ensuring the MST could stay open, safe and accessible. Volunteer trail crews, or task forces, worked hard in every segment of the trail, and below are some of the highlights.

SEGMENTS 2-3

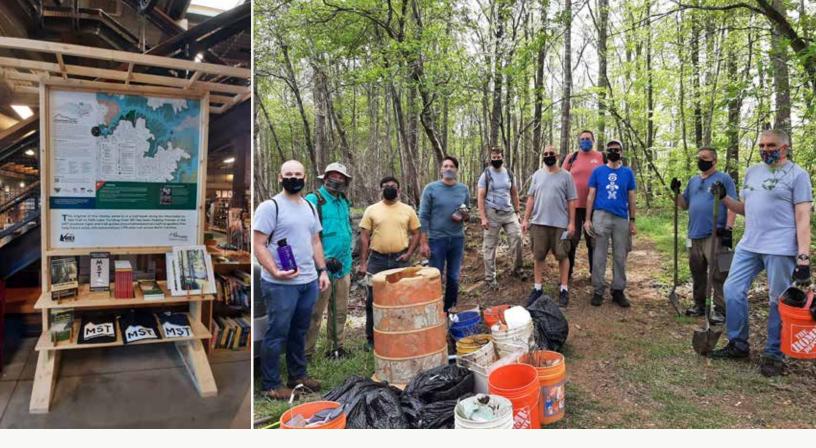
Volunteers with the Carolina Mountain Club (CMC) conducted a major rehab of the MST from Doubletop access to Old Bald access, removing rocks from the trail, building/rebuilding rock steps and widening tread. Similar work was done in the adjacent sections.

The CMC crew also added over 50 steps, a new bridge with rail, check dams, rock crossings, and numerous other improvements to a 2-mile section near Asheville (Bent Creek Gap to Beaver Dam Overlook). Along a heavily used stretch of the MST from the Folk Art Center to the Arboretum, significant improvements were made to the MST from basic trail clearing of blowdowns, weed trimming, and brushing. CMC also added railings to all of our bridges, repaired the Dingle Creek bridge, and completed an estimated 350 steps and a number of turnpikes and water diversions to improve the tread.

On the Hard Times section (from the Arboretum to Sleepy Gap), CMC volunteers added new locust and rock steps, turnpikes, water diversion features and water crossings.

SEGMENT 4

The Central Blue Ridge Task Force continued to do rock work and put in locust steps to improve steep, muddy sections of the MST, gradually improving and making the MST safer in this rugged area.



FROM LEFT: MST Kiosk inside Raleigh REI; © Betsy Brown; Trail workday along the Eno River with Earthshare; © Betsy Brown

SEGMENT 5

The Watauga County Task Force needed to rebuild a bridge that was destroyed when a large tree fell on it. In another example of bridge problem-solving, volunteers manually moved a 24-foot bridge about 12 feet. The meandering creek beneath had eroded the bank and undercut the footing of the bridge making it unsafe, so the task force got creative and was able to lift the bridge on one end and pivot it into place without machinery.

Another huge undertaking that we can be thankful for was the recovery from a massive rockslide that closed the Blue Ridge Parkway and trail for months. Eventually, we were permitted to plan out a new trail route and build over 100 feet of new trail above the landslide.

SEGMENT 6

The Elkin Valley Trails Association completed 3/4 mile of future MST trail on the west side of Carter Falls, which will be opened when the Bridge of Dreams is completed. We also resolved issues to allow for the reopening of 3/4 miles of MST known as Spice Farm Trail.

SEGMENT 9

The Alamance County Task Force opened a new bridge on Boyds Creek. The Boyds Creek Bridge

opening was a grand celebration of the numerous people and organizations that brought this project to fruition. The nearly 60-foot bridge spans Boyds Creek as it flows into the Haw River. When water levels were low, crossing it meant getting your feet wet, but when the water was running high, it was a dangerous and nearly impossible crossing, requiring a long road walk to hike through that section.

Volunteers also added a new set of stairs to replace deteriorating railroad ties on the section of MST between the Glencoe Paddle Access and Carolina Mill.

SEGMENT 10

The Falls Lake Task Force was able to complete a 2.1-mile route at Falls Lake around a DOT bridge washout near Hereford Road for the hiking community. With 63 miles at Falls Lake our trail maintenance is never ending, but we had a great year of keeping the trail in good shape for the hiking community.

Trail Planning

Trail planning efforts during 2021 covered most of the state as we continued to plan for the future of the MST and identify new opportunities to shift the trail off-road or expand in new areas.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Mike "Glider" Forde finishing the MST at Jockey's Ridge; MST Completers Hali Grantham and Daniel "Danny G" Graham enjoying sunset at Jockey's Ridge State Park; Jerry Barker, John Pepin, Joanne Perri and Bill Meador on the MST © Joanne Perri; Hiking with Howard Lee, founder of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail—pictured from left: Jerry Barker, Bill Meador, Howard Lee, MST Completer Cedric Kopa, and Dan Hill; MST Completer Jennifer Browndorf hiking on the Outer Banks © Jennifer Browndorf

Some of the highlights from our 2021 planning work include:

- **Belews Lake:** Performed field survey work for the trail and conservation assessment of Duke Energy property
- Goldsboro: Completed the Goldsboro Trail Development Plan
- North River: Planning work started, land acquisition opportunity identified, site visit Dec. 2021
- Jockey's Ridge: Developed plans and received approval for Eastern Terminus Monument and reroute of trail
- Roseboro and Pondberry Bay Preserve: Identified opportunities for MST expansion outside Pondberry Bay Preserve, worked continually with task force for access to the preserve, began design for brick path along old rail bed in Roseboro.
- Bushy Lake: Began work to identify opportunities to expand trail near Bushy Lake and drafted proposed new MST route
- Neuse River Trail Feasibility Study kicked off Nov. 2021

The Gathering and Birthday Hike

With the uncertainty surrounding in-person events during COVID. Friends of the MST shifted to a virtual platform for our annual meeting, dubbed the "UnGathering of Friends." The two-day virtual event featured "The State of the Trail" from executive director Kate Dixon, who also announced her pending retirement, a delightful keynote address from Jeremy Markovich, producer of the recent Our State podcast season on the Mountains-to-Sea Trail, and a panel on Inclusivity and Joy on the MST. Breakout sessions included how to hike the MST with kids, guickly, slowly and every way in between. We also explored natural history and ecosystems along the trail and learned how trails can be sustainable habitats for wildlife. It wasn't the same as gathering in person, but it was still a vibrant and meaningful two days of connection for the MST community.



Our 44th birthday in September featured a 44-mile Challenge and a special fundraiser to support the trail. 96 people completed the challenge by hiking 44 miles or more on the MST during the month, with 7,180 total miles hiked! Prizes from our partners at REI were awarded to the five hikers with the highest mileage, and six others chosen at random from all those who completed 44 miles. Additionally, those who made a special donation of \$44 during the month received the new MST patch before it hit the stores later in 2021.

Challenges

40 HIKE CHALLENGE

The 40 Hike Challenge was launched in 2020 to coincide with the release of our day hike guide, *Great Day Hikes on North Carolina's Mountains-To-Sea Trail.* In 2021, 19 total

people explored the trail across the state to complete the challenge. The 40 Hike Challenge has also spurred multiple video series on YouTube, inspiring folks to take the challenge or providing an armchair view for those who prefer to enjoy the trail in that way.

COMPLETERS

2021 was a record-breaking year for MST completers, with 25 adventurous hikers finishing the entire trail. The popularity of the MST continues to grow within the long-distance hiking community and 2021 solidified a shift that brought more hikers from outside of the state and abroad, including our second and third international hikers, a couple from the Netherlands. Completions are still roughly evenly divided between thru- and section-hikers.

Advocating for the MST

Years of hard work came to fruition at the end of 2021 when the North Carolina General Assembly passed, and Governor Cooper signed, a state budget that included a nearly \$30 million dollar investment in North Carolina's official state trails, including the MST. Distributed among the 12 state trails, that money will be used for capacity building, trail development and planning, and land acquisition from willing sellers. It marks the most significant and transformative investment from the state for trails.

The Great Trails State Coalition, of which Friends of the MST is a founding member, continued to work together and put forward plans to advocate for the MST and all trails in North Carolina.

2023 was officially declared the "Year of the Trail" during the 2021 legislative session as well.



Leadership Changes & Growth for Friends of the MST

2021 marked the end of an era for Friends of the MST, as our first and only Executive Director Kate Dixon retired. Kate's vision and dedication to the trail was transformational, and her impact will be felt for years to come. Following the announcement, the Board of Directors undertook a lengthy and wide-ranging search to fill the position and publicly announced Brent Laurenz as the next Executive Director in December 2021. Brent's lengthy nonprofit leadership experience, including more than 10 years at statewide North Carolina nonprofit organizations, and his personal passion for trails and the outdoors made him an impressive addition to the staff.



HAPPY TRAILS, KATE!

Thank you for helping make the Mountains-to-Sea Trail what it is today and more importantly what it will become.

© Julie "Jester" Gayheart

In 2021, we thanked a great crew of Board Members for their service to Friends of the MST — Millie Chalk, Mark Rostan, Bill Blackley, Carrie Bonds, Chris Grams and Greg Yahn. We also welcomed John Lanman and Susan Hester as new members of our Board of Directors in 2021. The board also increased its focus around Justice, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (JEDI), forming an official working group to focus the organization's efforts in this area. And the board was excited and relieved to finally meet in person again in 2021, with many members meeting each other for the first time off screen.

With the pandemic upending so many things in our lives, we were grateful that your support of the outdoors and trails was unwavering. The trail was a place of safety, solace and connection during these untethered and tumultuous days, and you made it possible because of your new or continued support. We were thrilled and thankful that Friends saw a 228% increase in membership from 2019 to 2021, during the worst of the pandemic. Thank you.

FINANCIAL STATEMENTS

January 1, 2021 to December 31, 2021

ASSETS	12/31/2021	12/31/2020	Expenditures by Program Area
Cash & cash equivalents	\$651,938	\$561,326	Total Expenditures = \$478,475
Grants receivable	5,000	3,302	
Sales tax & other receivables	2,936	13,960	Advocate for
	7,314	7,470	the Trail
Prepaid expenses Beneficial interest - MST Forever Fund	6,792 215,378	8,072	Improve the Trail 5%
Net fixed assets	3,592	- 3.362	10%
Beneficial interest - endowment	103,979	86,496	
Deposits and Long term pledges	1,051	2,051	Build & Maintain the Trail
	CONTRACT OF DESCORE	1020431 0102011 ST-	11% Help People
TOTAL ASSETS	\$997,980	\$686,039	Enjoy the Trail
LIABILITIES & NET ASSETS			56%
Accounts payable	\$3,555	\$3,021	Management & Fundraising
Refundable advances	2,500		20%
Net Assets			
Without donor restrictions			
Available for operations	254,928	257,252	
Invested in fixed assets	3,592	3,362	
Board designated - specific purposes	10,000	23,073	
Board designated - MST Forever Fund	** 235,945	- 0	
Board designated - endowment*	90,469	72,986	Sources of Income
With donor restrictions			Total Income = \$787,382
Restricted - specific purposes	383,481	312,835	
Restricted in perpetuity - endowment*	13,510	13,510	
TOTAL LIABILITIES & NET ASSETS	\$997,980	\$686,039	
*The endowment is held at the NC Community Foundation			
** MST Forever Fund is held at the Triang	le Community	Foundation	
			Foundations
			28%
			Individuals
VALUE OF VOLUNTEER LABOR			52%
In 2021, MST volunteers worked 38,815			Corporations 8%
HOURS to support the trail. At the State			
Parks assigned rate of \$27.20 per hour, these			Other 7%
volunteers DONATED TIME WORTH AN			
ADDITIONAL \$1,055,768 to the MST.			License Plate
	101.		& Earth Share 2% - / /
			Merchandise (net) $2\%^{-1}$
			Program Income 1% $^{\perp}$

2021 FRIENDS OF MST MEMBERS

\$10,000+

Carl and Dianne deAndrade Harold Erickson Chris and Odile Gould Richard Hibbits Leslie R. & Catherine Love REI White Lake Marine

\$2,500 to \$9,999

Ann and Lex Alexander Athletic Brewing Carol Banaitis and Sarah Hogan Jerry and Sandy Barker Danielle Bernstein Marcia Bromberg Kate Dixon and Dan Wilkinson Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians Foliage Concepts **Gipson Family Foundation** Great Outdoor Provision Co. Richard C. Huelsman John and Margaret Lanman Rich and Marilyn Preyer Robert P. Holding Foundation Tanawha Adventures Williams Foundation Scott Zimmerman

\$1,000 to \$2,499

Heather Alley DeWana Anderson Bernard and Holly Arghiere AST Prowash Atkins Family Foundation Beverly Bell and Lucy Piner Bill and Sandie Blackley Blue Ridge Hiking Co. William and Leigh Bordley David and Laura Bourne Lewis and Barbara Boyles Barbara Braatz Christopher Brand Cooper Brantley David Brendle Lynne Bresler and Mike Vaught Camp Clearwater Rick Cavallaro Bill Chatfield and Jean Marie McManus J.K. Coward, Jr. Crawford Crenshaw and Laurie Dunn Fred Dietrich and Jenny Tenor Bob Dillard and Cecily Lohmar Shirley Drechsel and Wayne Vaughn Duke Energy Todd Eveland Falconwood Foundation David and Lucy Fountain Amy Fowler Robert Fruehwirth Frank and Carole Gailor Kathryn Gavaghan and Scott Sanner Karen Hammett and Larry Reeves Susan Hardwick Ronald M. Hart Amret Hawfield Susan Hester Dan W. Hill Timothy Hitch Larry Humbert Jeanne Johnson Robert and Laura Johnson

Robert and Julie Keely Patti Keith Warner Lucas Michael Malaska John S. Manuel Iulie Marusich Bill and Alice Meador National Environmental Education Foundation Bo Newsom Allen and Rhonda Parker Peg Parker Petersen Family Fund Steve and Janice Pierce leff Poupart William and Mary Ann Pruehsner Wade Rawlins and Judith Tillman Michael Reves Mark and Leslie Rostan Sampson County Tourism Bill and Darby Scott The Sherwin-Williams Company Myles Standish Jason Taylor Robert Trawick Thomas Weaver and Kathleen O'Donnell Ben Wells Peter Wetzel William Stern Foundation Shawn and Charlotte Williams Constance Winstead and Robert Glenn Smedes and Rosemary York

\$500 to \$999

Alamance County Visitors Bureau Allison Armieri Sydney and David Atkinson Roger Bardsley and Elaine Brune Iwona Birk Blue Ridge Hiking Club Jacob Boehm Bill and BJ Boyarsky Jeff Brewer Jane Brown Beth Brownridge Dr. John Buckwalter and Dr. Ester Poza loel S. Bulklev Rebecca Bumgardner Bill Campbell John and Ann Campbell Kathy and Don Chatfield lim Cobb Heather Cotton Steven and Janet Covert Bill and Janet Cox Carolyn Crump Mike Dieffenbacher Anne Faircloth and Fred Beaujeu-Dufour Ben and Libby Fehsenfeld Chris Grams Tom Griffin Jan Grossman and Lynn Heinrichs Eric Hallman and Elizabeth Woodman Stephen and Pamela Hassenfelt Pamela Hoffman Larry and Elizabeth Horrell John and Anita Howell Sunny Huang Ray Huger and Beth McKee-Huger Peter and Sandra Jacobi Lianna Jarecki James D. Johnson Ms. Leslie Killeen and Mr. Kenneth Pugh

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15 to 19 years

Jerry and Sandy Barker Sindy Barker Don B. Bergey Danielle Bernstein Paul Black Piet B. Bodenhorst Bill Borden **Richard Bostic** leffrev N. Branin Nancy L. Cormany Crawford Crenshaw and Laurie Dunn Kenneth and Carol Deal David DeHart Thomas Dillon and Grace Mauney Kate Dixon and Dan Wilkinson Gordon Ferguson and Bobbi Owen



Upper Haw River © Greg Yahn

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THANK YOU

to each of the **1100+ volunteers** who together worked more than **38,815 hours** to build and maintain the Mountains-to-Sea Trail in 2021. Those volunteers worked in 21 task forces – each responsible for building and maintaining a different section of trail.

VOLUNTEER HOURS

Alamance County **118** Alleghany **71** Ashe County **1,412** Bald Knob **206** Carteret County Wildlife/Croatan **878** Central Blue Ridge **3,903** Carolina Mountain Club **14,672** Elkin Valley Trails Association **4,491** Eno River **1,160** Falls Lake **5,180** Friends Office **474** Friends' Board 242 Grandfather Mountain 707 Greensboro & Eastern Guilford 403 High Peaks Trail Association 326 Orange County 897 Outer Banks 37 Pilot Mountain and Hanging Rock 982 Sauratown Trails 756 Stones Creek 188 Upper Haw River 955 Watauga County 520 Western Guilford 258

FROM LEFT: Volunteer workday at Stones Creek Game Land in Onslow County; Building a new bridge at Falls Lake in Segment 10; Moving a bridge in Segment 5 © Shelton Wilder



The **HONOR ROLL** below recognizes volunteers who are members of Friends of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail and have contributed 75 hours or more to build, maintain, and promote the trail in 2021.

Karl Anderson Allison Armieri Aram Attarian Linda Attarian Jerry Barker **Bob Beach Curtis Belyea Bill Blackley *** David Bland * Bill Boyarsky * Jeff Brewer Haley Burch David Butler Butch Clark Paul Curtin * Carl deAndrade Joel Deaton **Fred Dietrich**

Richard Evans* Todd Eveland **Richard Figura Bob Flanigan** John French **David Gardener** Sacha Greer Tom Griffin Jim Hallsey * Peter J Hampson **Bob Hillver *** Larry Humbert Laura Johnson Randy Johnson **Bob Johnson Bob Kilpatrick Timothy Kurtz** Les Love

Steve Lund * Victor Mariano * **Roger Mays** John McCulloch Candace McGuire William Meador Joe Mickev Steven Mierisch * **Richard Moore** Eric Motzno Ron Navik **Dolores Neil Richard Nifong** Kit Oaburn Jan Onan Michael O'Neill David Pace Arlene Pace

John Pepin * Michael Phillips Phil Piaski **Michael Reves Brian Rollins** Jane Rollins Don Russ Andrew Sam **Gregory Scott** * **Keith Sidden** Mel Skiles * **Jason Taylor * Betty Thomas** John Turley **Douglas Veazey * Richard Vitolo** Garry Vogelpohl **Thomas Wade**

Vance Waggener Ron Walther Tom Weaver * Chris Werbylo * John Whitehouse Dave Whitlow Bob Wicklund Shelton Wilder Billy Williams Donnie Williams Harry Wilson Paul Wulfing Greg Yahn * Germaine Yahn

* Volunteered 250 hours or more



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2022 Friends of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail.