

Brickley leads call for more area trails

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Editor's Note: This is the second in an occasional series on parks and open space in Prince William County.

The best way to see the world, according to David Brickley, is on foot.

The 62-year-old lawyer and former Prince William County legislator is fighting for a return to nature - or at least the option to do so.

"He's a visionary," said Doug Pickford, a colleague of Brickley's and the director of Environmental and Heritage Resources for the Northern Virginia Regional Commission. "He's a great guy and an enormous help in his public life and his private life."

The Dale City resident has become a key player in the development of several regional trails that will tie into the East Coast Greenway, a nearly 3,000-mile-long trail from Maine's border with Canada to the tip of Key West.

Amid major growing pains, the county continues to lag behind in establishing trails that would save wooded areas that are fast disappearing while raking in tourism dollars, Brickley said.

"I don't think they realize the tourist potential," he said, standing on the wood-planked footbridge that spans the Occoquan River into Fairfax County. "We need to get a little bit more of a sense of urgency to get this together."

"Once you destroy that beauty it's hard to get it back."

And while the county is still developing a new parks and open spaces plan, the Prince William County-based attorney has pushed forward helping add pathways in Occoquan to the East Coast Greenway's plans.

Soon, he said, people traveling along the greenway will be able to pass through the Town of Occoquan - on foot along the town's redbrick riverfront pathway or by bike along the store-lined streets.

Hamlets like Occoquan, where bikers and walkers can stop to cast a line into a river or just sit and listen to the crashing sound of water running over the dam, provide an opportunity to commingle nature with private industry - a mark of strong urban design.

A large part of Brickley's love for the outdoors boils down to him being an "old Boy Scout at heart," a fitting description for someone who has hiked 190 miles on England's coast-to-coast trail and has devoted the better part of his career to building trails.

"My wife says I spend as much time building trails and greenways as I did [in public office] ... It's a lot of fun working with people to build something that will be a lasting facility for this generation and generations to come," Brickley said. "So that's why I spend all these hours doing this."

As Prince William County's legislator, Brickley sponsored legislation to create Leesylvania State Park and afterward served under Gov. Jim Gilmore's administration as head of the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation where he had a hand in mapping the state's outdoors plan.

Brickley worries, though, that budget shortfalls mixed with a park authority already operating on a limited budget could have direct effects on the county's ability to expand its trail system.

The ironic thing, Brickley said, is trails are among the most demanded amenities in the state.

Trails for hiking and bicycling have consistently placed on the top of the Virginia Outdoors Survey, which asks Virginians what they think of the open space and natural resources in the state.

And as member of the East Coast Greenway Alliance's board of trustees Brickley has worked to promote and plan the Potomac Heritage Trail, playing an integral role in converting an abandoned rail bed into a usable trail, despite some opposition, in neighboring King George County.

That trail, along with trails in Prince William, will tie into the East Coast Greenway's braided trail system connecting cities on the eastern seaboard and making the greenway the "urban sister" of the Appalachian Trail, a congressionally-designated national scenic trail.

Prince William's segment will run from the town of Occoquan to Belmont Bay, south through Veterans Memorial Park down to Leesylvania State Park on 500 acres along the Potomac River in eastern Prince William. Trails in Leesylvania could also possibly connect to other existing trails in Prince William Forest Park.

More than just tourism, a multi-state trail would be integral in fighting obesity particularly in an area short on sidewalks and town centers that allow an alternative to driving, Brickley said.

Prince William area residents have the most unhealthy lifestyle and rank highest in its percentage of obese adults - 19.8 percent - of any jurisdiction in the greater metropolitan Washington, D.C., area, which averaged 15.6 percent, according to the Community Health Indicators for the Washington Metropolitan Region report released in 2001.

A little more than 270 of the greenway's total 2,946 miles are in Virginia, and only 18 percent of the stretch through the commonwealth is currently sponsored. Funding for the trail's development is expected to come from federal, state and local governments and private gifts, Brickley said.