

## **Luray VA – Luray-Hawksbill Greenway**

### ***Welcome to Luray's "New Front Porch"***

Luray Virginia is a town of fewer than five thousand residents. It is situated in the Shenandoah Valley between the Shenandoah National Park and George Washington National Forest. Despite its small size, the town has over 300 acres of parks including the Luray-Hawksbill Greenway.

The Luray-Hawksbill Greenway was constructed in 4 phases with a completed trail length of 2 miles. This highly visible walking/biking trail borders the Hawksbill Creek for most of its length and runs through the middle of town. The Luray-Hawksbill Greenway links several neighborhoods and parking areas with the downtown shopping district. The greenway is popular and highly used by residents and visitors. Even though it has no special lighting, people can be seen walking its paths from early morning to late in the evening. There is an overall feeling of safety because the greenway is highly visible from many view points and is patrolled by police on bicycles and on foot. To assist our walkers in determining the distance walked on the Greenway, there have been yellow dots placed on the trail every 1/10 mile. By installing these markers, trail users are able to enter the trail at any point, and by counting the number of markers passed, easily calculate the distance walked. For example, if you enter the trail and pass 10 markers, you will know that you have travelled 1 mile. Luray has truly become a "walking community."

The greenway was the obvious catalyst for many improvements and activities in Luray.

- The Downtown Historic District
- Tree City USA Year 9 and the Improvement Award
- Luray Downtown Initiative and the award of a Community Block Grant
- Local artists have painted over a dozen murals along the greenway and Main Street
- Construction of several downtown pocket parks

Many communities in Virginia have sent representatives to Luray to see how a small town was able to develop this award winning greenway in such a short time. The town has received many achievement awards, including:

- Valley Conservation Council – 2003
- Merck – Champions of the Environment – 2004
- Scenic Virginia – Best Improved Waterway in a Town – 2004
- Virginia Municipal League – for a town with less than 5,000 population – 2005
- Shenandoah Valley Soil and Water Conservation Department Urban Forestry – 2006
- "Visual Effects" Parks and Recreation, Luray Downtown Initiative – 2007
- "Award of Excellence" Virginia Downtown Development Association – 2007

The greenway project began in 1999, when the Virginia Department of Forestry invited the Page County Tree Board, a local community forestry organization, to attend a conference on greenways and trails. Luray's Director of Parks and Recreation, Pat O'Brien and a member of the Tree Board, Kenneth Beyer were chosen to attend the conference; they immediately realized the potential benefits of a paved walking/biking trail known as a greenway. After attending the conference, the idea was presented to the Mayor and Town Council who approved the research for potential benefits of such a facility as well as funding sources.

An overall route plan was established and professional advice was sought from the Virginia Department of Forestry (VDOT) and the Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR). Both organizations were familiar with Luray and the development of greenway trails and both willingly reviewed the route plan. The VDOT offered to assist with the conceptual design, but with minimal funding; the DCR offered to help with “bricks and mortar” funding, but only if the greenway could be developed in phases. The two resource contacts immediately posed two problems:

- The Hawksbill Creek would have to be assessed for pollution control and ways to improve the trout fish habitat
- Engage a landscape engineer

A landscape architectural firm in Roanoke, VA proposed the development of a conceptual design plan for under \$10,000. This proposal was submitted to the Town Council, who authorized payment. The plan was presented, and the Town Council decided to go to the community for a public hearing. The residents whole-heartedly supported the idea and the Council made recommendation to proceed with the plans for the first phase of construction and to seek grant funding. Application was made to the Department of Conservation and Recreation for the initial grant, and the town was awarded \$62,500 for the construction of the first one-half mile of the trail. The Town of Luray provided the remaining funds required to complete Phase I.

During the time when the first phase of the greenway was being planned, work also began on the town-owned flood plain situated on the north end of town. The town purchased this area because it contained a spring that might be used as a future source of water. This area was situated on both sides of the creek and was an active beef cattle operation. An area farmer had leased this field for years and his animals drank from and defecated in the creek for many years.

After consulting with the Virginia Department of Forestry, a grant application was submitted to the Chesapeake Bay Restoration Fund. Upon receiving \$4,000 from the fund, the Town Council granted permission to develop a riparian buffer. More than sixteen acres on either side of the creek were fenced off, drinking stations for the farm animals were installed, and volunteers helped to plant over 3,000 tree seedlings between the cattle grazing field and the creek. The cattle are now rotated among the three grazing areas, still occupying a visible portion of the riparian buffer as part of the greenway, but no longer have access to the creek.

Volunteers have donated many hours to the greenway project. Boy and Girl Scout troops have given many hours of their time and effort to plant trees in the riparian buffer. Garden Clubs, Page County Tree Board members, Page County Master Gardeners, and interested citizens volunteered their time to develop the riparian buffer. This was an important step for the Town to clean the waters of the Hawksbill in order to improve the fish habitat. This general area ultimately became the third phase of the greenway.

The grasses and trees trap nutrients and prevent runoff from entering the Hawksbill Creek which has resulted in the creek being established as a well known Class A trout stream, the highest designation by the Department of Game and Inland Fisheries. A kids only trout fishing day is held each year on the first Saturday in May. This event is sponsored by the Page County Sheriff’s Department, Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, and the Town of Luray’s Department of Parks and Recreation. Approximately two hundred children enjoy this popular annual event.

A local artist volunteered to paint a mural on a building that is next to the walking trail. The building was constructed of concrete block and was very unattractive. A committee from the Wrangler Jeans Company and The Luray Garden Club each donated \$500, which was used to power wash, tuck point the mortar joints, and coat the building with green paint. The artist provided a design that focused on the wildlife normally seen along the greenway corridor, but added an image of the American Flag draped over the Blue Ridge Mountains, in memory of 9/11. This mural was so impressive, that other artists, working with the Town's Tree and Beautification Committee, painted eleven more murals along the greenway and throughout the town. The Tree and Beautification Committee plan to add one or two murals each year.

The Luray Parks and Recreation Department continued to submit grant applications for further development of the greenway, and by 2007, had obtained over \$400,000 for construction of additional phases. The Ruffner Plaza was designed on the site of the first two lots sold in 1812 during the early stages of the Town's development (Isaac Ruffner was an early settler who sold property to individuals in order to create the town so that it could become the county seat.) The Page Valley Master Gardeners volunteered to design the gardens of the plaza, donated monies and plants, and assisted in the actual work of planting.

Phase IV of the greenway was completed in the fall of 2008 adding approximately 1,800 feet to the trail. This phase has become a popular area for walking and sight-seeing with its beautiful scenery and trailside amenities.

Trail-side bench and picnic table designs were researched due to the possibility of a high water event; the designs chosen have proven to be virtually flood proof. As the greenway phases were being constructed, town residents, businesses, and visitors to the greenway, have donated many of these benches and tables, as well as drinking fountains, trees, and gardens. Thus far, donations have exceeded over \$350,000 for trail-side amenities.

The corridor now occupied by the greenway was not always a source of pride for the Town of Luray. From 1880 to 1980, the Virginia Oak Tannery operated on the east side of town, often drying animal hides on the banks of the Hawksbill Creek which contributed to the water pollution. The creek banks were overgrown with unsightly vegetation, and the water was stagnant and "swampy". In a relatively short amount of time, this "eyesore" which was the gateway to the town, has been transformed into a place of pride and beauty for residents and tourists to enjoy not only for recreation, but for the health benefits as well. This project would not have been possible without the dedication and hard-work of staff, the support from our Town Council, monetary contributions, and the many volunteers who have dedicated priceless hours to this rewarding project.

*The Luray-Hawksbill Greenway has truly become our "**New Front Porch**".*

For more information about the Luray-Hawksbill Greenway Trail, visit the Town of Luray website at [www.townofluray.com](http://www.townofluray.com) or contact the Luray Parks and Recreation Department at 540-743-6475.