MINUTES
ECUSTA TRAIL ADVISORY BOARD 2.0
Wednesday, July 29th, 2026 – 3:30 PM
City Hall Council Chambers

Members Present:	Aaron Baker, Co-Chair, Council Member Dean Lytle, Co-Chair, Council Member Larry Chapman, Transylvania County Commissioner Dee Dee Perkins, Transylvania Development Authority Mark Tooley, Friends of Ecusta Trail Shelia Carland, Transylvania Economic Alliance Doug Miller, Heart of Brevard Kathy Klepfer, Conserving Carolina
Absent:	Meredith Carli, At-Large Appointment Chris Burns, Ex-Officio Maureen Copelof, Mayor, Ex-Officio
Staff Present:	Wilson Hooper, City Manager David Todd, Assistant City Manager Paul Ray, Planning Director Aaron Bland, Assistant Planning Director Edievith Gass, Board Clerk
Guests:	Tad Fogel, Friends of the Ecusta Trail Laura Rice, Director, Friends of the Ecusta Trail Lonnie Watkins, NCDOT Teresa Buckwalter, McAdams Jonathan Rich, Brevard Beagles Megan Foy, Equinox Lauren Faye, Equinox Drake Elder, Watermarks Hunter Marks , Watermarks (Via Zoom)

I. Welcome and Call to Order

The meeting was called to order by Chairman Aaron Baker at 3:30 PM, following a brief welcome to all attendees.

II. Certification of Quorum

A quorum was established and certified by Board Clerk Edievith Gass.

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III. Approval of Agenda

A. Baker proposed amending the agenda under New Business to reorder the items. The final map of amenities and developments will be discussed first, followed by Watermark's involvement. Hearing no further amendments, D. Perkins moved to approve the agenda as amended. L. Chapman seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.

IV. Approval of Minutes

Minutes Corrections (May 27, 2026): The following revisions were entered into the record:

- Dee Dee Perkins requested a correction to her pronouns from "he" to "she."
- Mark Tooley clarified that he was the sitting representative present on that day, rather than John Detillo.

D. Perkins motioned to accept the minutes as amended, which was seconded by M. Tooley. Hearing no further discussion, a vote was taken, and the motion carried unanimously.

V. Public Comment

T. Fogel provided an update on the upcoming Cycle North Carolina event, noting that several hundred cyclists will stay at Brevard College over the weekend and ride various routes—including the Henderson County portion of the Ecusta Trail, despite construction closures. This marks the event's fourth time in Brevard, delivering a strong economic boost to downtown businesses, hotels, and restaurants.

VI. Unfinished Business

None.

VII. New Business

W. Hooper introduced the guest speakers, Teresa Buckwalter and her team from McAdams, who have been leading the development of the amenities menu. He turned the floor over to the McAdams team to conduct the presentation.

A. Map Amenities and Development

T. Buckwalter (McAdams) introduced the project team, noting that Christy Staudt serves as the primary project manager for NCDOT. She introduced support team members *Megan Foy* and *Lauren Faye* from Equinox, as well as *Drake Elder* from

Watermark, who has been collaborating with long-term project partner Hunter Marks.

Background: Amenity designs have reached the construction document phase, with NCDOT submissions completed for pedestrian signals, environmental reviews, and the Blade Creek bridge, while field inspections and parking scouting are underway.

Amenities are categorized into two levels:

- **Level 1 (Trailside Features)**, which covers final amenity designs utilizing a mix of grant and local funds, and
- **Level 2 (Trail Access Sites)**, which focuses strictly on initial conceptual investigations.

Estimated Amenity Unit Costs (Installed)- Grant Funded Level 1 Amenities:

- **Mile Markers**: Recommended at half-mile increments to match Henderson County's system ($1,950 each).
- **Bicycle Racks***:* Branded with the Ecusta Trail logo, grouped in sets of five ($6,000 per set).
- **Trail Stations**: Engineering reviews are underway for three to four recommended wayside structures costing $18,000 each.
- **Trail Benches:**
  - *Custom Wood Benches:* Trail-station matching units designed by Magenstein are estimated at $3,000 each.
  - *Prefabricated Metal Benches:* Leisure Craft will manufacture matching Henderson County trail benches for $4,000 each, installed.

D. Perkins proposed a community trail bench sponsorship program to meet local demand. Supported by T. Buckwalter, the program utilizes extra, unfunded bench locations already added to project maps and will maintain design consistency despite NCDOT rules requiring three manufacturer options.

Responding to L. Chapman's transparency and cost concerns, L. Watkins clarified that the low-bid process requires only one valid bid and that NCDOT can scale amenity quantities to accommodate private donations. D. Perkins confirmed the installed bench cost is $1,400.

T. Buckwalter reported unit pricing is finalized at $2,000; the purchasing timeline is a pending group decision.

D. Elder (Watermark) took the floor to report that the sign suite design with FOET is complete, with focus shifting to exact trail placement.

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- **Orientation & Trailhead Signs ($3,600/ea installed):** High-traffic/parking tier signage incorporating modular replacement components, historic depot scheduling aesthetics, and navigation mapping.
- **Kiosk & Etiquette Signs ($2,300–$3,200/ea installed):** Post-mounted tiers delivering maps, partner branding, educational content, rules, QR links, and safety alerts.
- **Depot Naming Plates:** Side-mounted station title plates styled after historic railroad lines.

T. Buckwalter clarified that the upcoming menu items on the slide are not covered by the grant, meaning they will require local funding if the group decides to proceed with them.

- **Interpretive Signs ($3,800):** Pedestal-mounted local history/ecology panels.
- **Bike Repair ($2,500):** Concrete-mounted maintenance stations at key intervals.
- **Trail Counters ($6,000**): Infrared or pressure-wire usage tracking technology.

T. Buckwalter confirmed that the chosen trail counter model distinguishes between different user types, delivering empirical usage metrics vital for securing future maintenance grants and funding. She noted that unit costs are set, but final counts remain a work in progress. Additionally, the team's 30% design phase GIS mapping tool continues to guide asset deployment, which must navigate a variety of physical and regulatory restrictions within the trail corridor:

- **Wetlands:** Multiple historical railroad-adjacent wetlands, marked in blue on the project map, limit the available spatial layout.
- **Floodways:** Encroaching flood hazard zones near the Henderson County line legally prohibit large vertical structures (stations, benches, large signs) in the right-of-way.

Despite environmental constraints, the team identified viable locations outside restricted zones, currently planning 16 bench locations, three to four stations, and several dedicated sitting areas. Foy's team will develop "pocket park" plans for these sitting areas as trail pull-offs for scenic views or conversational spaces featuring benches, bike racks, or repair stations. Bridge-attached seating was eliminated due to structural limitations. M. Foy highlighted specific scenic "pause points" currently under evaluation:

- **Davidson River / Unnamed Lake Area:** High-elevation flat spot identified past the river bridge crossing; provides elevated views of the river and lake.
- **French Broad River Area:** A potential viewing area has been identified in a field location further north, navigating around the strict floodway constraints closer to the river bank.

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Ecusta Trail Design Update & Spatial Walkthrough via Google Earth: The design team's exported layer displays the physical trail alignment in *white,* safety fencing/guardrails in *orange,* and planned amenity zones in *yellow:*

- **Oskar Blues Segment**: A primary "pause area" is designated near the start of the trail. This footprint is a strong candidate for a major trail station or an expanded seating layout.
- **Ecusta Road Triangle***:* Where the rail tracks split, a triangular parcel has been secured for a pocket park. The design team (led by M. Foy) is actively incorporating landscape buffers here to address local requests for physical separation.
- **Davidson River Bridge & Overlooks**: The bridge offers panoramic mountains and water views. An additional small, single-bench pull-off is planned further down to capitalize on the mountain vistas.
- **Thrash Branch**: A dedicated bench asset is placed near the stream to offer trail users an acoustic, nature-focused resting point.
- **Everett Road Access & NEPA Status:** Landowner agreement finalized past Everett Road; site officially locked into NEPA environmental documentation.

T. Buckwalter reported that her team is conducting an immediate site visit with the highway division to finalize the driveway entry point for maximum seating and parking capacity.

In response to D. Lytle inquiry, T. Buckwalter clarified that sitting areas are chosen opportunistically based on topography despite right-of-way constraints, whereas standard trail benches are distributed evenly to ensure user accessibility, with 16 benches currently planned.

To illustrate how geographic constraints directly dictate the trail layout, T. Buckwalter highlighted the segment running past the airport.

- **Airport Corridor Constraints**: An orange safety fence heavily constrains the airport runway section, creating a narrow right-of-way that requires trail users to remain strictly within pavement limits.
- **Crab Creek Node (Midpoint Station)**: Upon clearing the airport corridor, the trail crosses Crab Creek into a major planned amenity node.
  - *Strategic Spacing*: This location sits perfectly at the three-mile midpoint between the Henderson County line and the western terminus.
  - *Multimodal Access*: Situated near an existing French Broad River access point, this site features a concept plan for a full sitting area and future parking expansion to prevent overcrowding and support river-to-trail connectivity.
- **Design Status:** Approaching 65% completion milestone; grading and drainage plans finalized while preserving flat footprints for future features.
- **Seating Locations:** Includes a mountain/river scenic overlook sitting area outside the floodway and a final minor pull-off just south of the county line.

- **Restricted Zones:** Strict northern floodway boundaries limit pull-offs, substituting standard low-profile benches instead.
- **River Access:** Grove Ridge Road node features a sitting area using existing lower river-access parking (private land acquisition for extra parking was unsuccessful).

In response to public inquiries, the team confirmed that immediate restroom facilities are excluded from the active trail segment due to water and sewer infrastructure limitations, though a future site placeholder is mapped at Crab Creek. D. Miller proposed utilizing existing project grants to fund an immediate temporary vault toilet, arguing that grant-funding a restroom now protects private fundraising capacity for high-donor features like benches. M. Tooley advised that staff are actively researching cost data for vault structures.

With vault toilets estimated at $50,000–$80,000 plus ongoing maintenance, the group discussed strategic funding allocations. D. Perkins and M. Tooley reinforced that private donors heavily prefer funding highly visible features like rest stations, kiosks, or benches rather than bathrooms. To address long-term infrastructure, A. Baker suggested exploring nearby municipal water and sewer extensions near Vista Labs to potentially support a fully plumbed restroom at the Everett Road staging site.

T. Buckwalter confirmed no restrooms are planned on the Henderson County side of the trail. L. Rice and A. Baker noted that the "trail partner" business restroom model is restricted to the first three miles; past Laurel Park, a three-mile gap with no businesses poses an infrastructure challenge. To address this temporarily, Buckwalter proposed a trail partner arrangement with a gas station near a newly identified property opportunity, though talks must continue to resolve roadside safety access issues. Moving into the signage phase, D. Elder mapped out six orientation sign locations from Grove Bridge to Oskar Blues, noting that Oskar Blues and Crab Creek Road will function as primary entry hubs with comprehensive trailhead signs.

D. Miller pointed out that Brevard City Hall is the official downtown trailhead. He argued that while it may not be considered for this specific round of funding, it must be included in future downtown signage planning. D. Elder agreed, explaining that the City Hall location belongs on the Estatoe Trail mapping layer but was accidentally placed on the Transylvania County layer.

D. Elder outlined the remainder of the signage plan:

- **Trailhead and Etiquette Signage Program:** Plans include 2 trailhead signs and 18 double-sided etiquette signs (36 total panels) focused on intersections, property lines, and traffic/waste management.

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- **Interpretive Signage Proposals:** 6 locations proposed at trail pause areas; currently excluded from grant funding but matches Henderson County's existing signage density.

In response to D. Lytle's question regarding emergency location tracking, T. Buckwalter and D. Elder clarified that the trail features consistent half-mile markers (indicated by red dots on the map) for safety tracking. L. Watkins noted that trail-advisory signs at all intersections will display crossroad names, adding that signs near DOT roads require district approval for sight distance and right-of-way compliance. Furthermore, any signage outside immediate project limits requires local funding rather than project grant funds.

Responding to queries from D. Miller and D. Perkins, T. Buckwalter clarified that the waste receptacle mapping is still a work in progress, while D. Elder confirmed there will be 12 total orientation signs across six intersection locations. Buckwalter added that the overall trail map remains ongoing as final amenity quantities depend on the upcoming construction budget. She noted that trail access points were added during the 30% design phase to secure parking property, adding that a formal driveway and concept plan for the smaller Old Hendersonville Highway access lot will be presented later.

T. Buckwalter introduced M. Foy, who presented the concept plan for the Crab Creek access point. The layout features ample parking with a one-way entrance from Crab Creek Road and a two-way entrance/exit via Apex Drive to optimize traffic flow. The site includes a restroom, bike racks, a trail marker station, trash receptacles, a short greenway connection to the Ecusta Trail, and a central stormwater catchment basin required by floodplain and impervious surface restrictions.

The structural engineer is reviewing the trail stations while the team locks down final amenity quantities to stay within the overall construction budget. Concurrently, concepts for pocket parks and trail access points are being designed for upcoming board review, with the landscaping plan focusing strictly on providing natural buffers near homes. Finally, "special provisions" are being compiled to outline technical specifications for pre-manufactured items.

L. Chapman recommended proactive coordination with County EMS and law enforcement for emergency planning, prompting T. Buckwalter to note that emergency services were engaged at a public meeting a year ago. In response to queries from A. Baker, Buckwalter clarified that a grand total for amenities will not be compiled until baseline pricing is finalized next month. She confirmed that benches, mileposts, and wayfinding are top project priorities, whereas larger items like the four proposed rest stations remain flexible based on future budget constraints.

A. Baker provided initial feedback regarding amenity funding, suggesting that benches should be excluded from immediate grant allocations. He expressed

confidence that benches could successfully attract private donors and sponsors. By relying on private fundraising for the benches, the organization could strategically preserve its grant funds for other critical project needs that are more difficult to fundraise for externally.

M. Tooley and T. Buckwalter reminded the group that several previous capital campaign donors are still owed naming opportunities. These existing obligations must be factored in before selling sponsorships for new amenities. Additionally, Tooley shared a successful manufacturing example from a past collaboration with Leisure Craft, who built amenities featuring the trail logo alongside built-in mounting points for donor plaques.

T. Buckwalter confirmed to P. Ray that the team is seeking immediate amenity list approval to keep the project moving forward. While formal budget figures will be reviewed next month, she emphasized that initial feedback on prospective cuts helps staff optimize procurement for the grant-funded "Level 1" list.

D. Miller strongly advised removing bike fix-it stations from the plan, labeling them a waste of money due to high risks of tool theft, vandalism, and frequent malfunctions (e.g., pumps deflating tires). D. Lytle and D. Miller also raised long-term upkeep concerns, emphasizing that the project must proactively plan and fund ongoing operational requirements for all proposed amenities, including basic infrastructure like trash cans.

T. Buckwalter corrected a misunderstanding by W. Hooper, clarifying that public restrooms are grant-eligible but categorized lower on the slide under "Level 3 Gateway Features" rather than being excluded. L. Watkins advised that grant funds likely cannot cover short utility line extensions to the bathroom area since they would run outside project boundaries. However, L. Rice shared a verification from H. Marks confirming that restroom construction is legally permitted under the trail's rail-banking agreement.

P. Ray noted that if utilities are successfully extended to the trail corridor boundary, running the service lines directly inside the corridor would likely be a grant-eligible expense.

Responding to W. Hooper's inquiry about alternative restroom sites, L. Watkins and T. Buckwalter stated that locations outside the right-of-way are off the table due to advanced NEPA environmental documentation. Regarding logistics, M. Tooley emphasized that all restroom sites require vehicular pumping access. D. Miller confirmed that while Crab Creek and Pisgah Labs offer sufficient intermediate coverage alongside existing urban amenities, a dedicated facility is vital for the remote stretch past Oskar Blues to mitigate private property trespassing.

T. Buckwalter identified a restroom location that serves as the strategic midpoint between the county line and Oskar Blues. A. Baker backed this site over the Everett

Road layout, noting its superior spatial distribution provides better utility for trail users.

A. Baker noted that Blantyre property owners will likely embrace the trail to drive local commerce and private amenity growth. He also highlighted a major opportunity to connect the trail with local river access points, allowing river users to "self-shuttle" by bicycle between nodes like Hap Simpson, Wilson Road, Penrose, and Etowah, and requested this multi-modal connection be promoted in trail signage.
T. Buckwalter recommended planning trail counters as an integrated network rather than isolated units, citing successful infrastructure scaling in Philadelphia and on the Swamp Rabbit Trail to evaluate long-term traffic patterns. Addressing a query from D. Miller, M. Tooley confirmed Henderson County currently relies on temporary counters and highlighted that accurate user counts are vital inputs for an economic impact model being developed in partnership with NC State University.

B. Scope of Watermark

A. Baker introduced a proposal to extend Watermark's scope of work, utilizing the firm to assist with planning and amenities for the existing city trail section as it officially integrates into the Ecusta Trail.

P. Ray announced a proposed scope of work from Watermark for amenity and signage design along the Ecusta Trail extension between Oskar Blues and City Hall. Ray clarified that the review focuses strictly on scope completeness and adjustments rather than cost; staff will negotiate pricing and secure funding once the scope is approved before returning to the board with a final service agreement.

D. Elder detailed that Watermark's adjustable scope encompasses site analysis, conceptual design through final construction documents, and DOT/McAdams coordination for upcoming roundabout work, while bidding and construction administration remain optional add-ons. Addressing branding, Elder noted that because the Estatoe Trail lacks established branding, co-branding with the Ecusta Trail requires a separate design phase. Additionally, future itemized amenity pricing will strictly reflect capital construction costs and exclude long-term maintenance burdens.

M. Tooley suggested breaking the Watermark contract into two phases—starting with conceptual design—to let the board pick exact amenity types and quantities before scoping the remaining development and construction document work, preventing over-payment on cut features. In response to A. Baker's question on costs, D. Elder clarified that the design development phase deals with sign content rather than physical units, requiring substantial GIS mapping and graphic design to completely update maps with new mileages and locations.

D. Perkins requested that a high level of safety awareness be built into trail crossings. H. Marks and D. Elder explained that traffic engineering falls outside Watermark's

wayfinding scope but can be coordinated as a separate task through McAdams, who P. Ray confirmed is actively reviewing intersection concerns. T. Buckwalter clarified that regulatory safety signage is funded and handled via the main trail construction contract rather than this way-finding project, though the final intersections will match top safety standards.

M. Tooley noted that NCDOT's R-5800 project will cover safety features at most intersections except for locations like McLean Road, requiring the team to coordinate amenity placement with DOT plans. D. Miller and A. Baker supported phasing the contract into two parts to complete conceptual work first, which Miller noted could trim down subsequently design costs once sign quantities are known. D. Elder clarified that because this is an hourly contract rather than a lump-sum fee, the total cost remains similar either way. W. Hooper confirmed staff will renegotiate the contract into a two-part agreement and noted that while currently unfunded, staff are discussing underwriting options with FOET and the TDA, with City Council as a backup.

The project focus remains on integrating the final two-mile stretch from Oskar Blues to downtown into the larger, cohesive trail system to provide a seamless user experience. Co-branding strategies with the Estatoe Trail remain under evaluation, and D. Elder emphasized that the committee should establish a definitive direction on this branding partnership in the near future.

A debate emerged over trail naming conventions for the segment past Main Street. D. Miller advocated for exclusive Ecusta Trail branding, citing a past City Council resolution and warning that dual names confuse trail users; he proposed honoring the Estatoe Trail strictly through interpretive signage. A. Baker and H. Marks defended co-branding options, emphasizing the deep historical value of the Estatoe name and suggesting a joint designation. While Miller asserted that implementing co-branding legally requires a return to City Council to amend the existing resolution, Baker countered that the council's baseline terminus decision never formally dissolved the historical Estatoe designation.

P. Ray then cleared up the confusion by explaining how the co-branding would actually look to a trail user, mapping a route where you ride on the Estatoe Trail, connect onto the Ecusta Trail, and then transition right back onto the Estatoe Trail.

A. Baker agreed with D. Miller on preserving the historically significant Estatoe Trail name but noted limited public awareness. To avoid visitor confusion, Baker recommended establishing a clear boundary at the Oskar Blues T-intersection: the branch toward the sports complex should remain the Estatoe Trail, while the branch toward downtown should be the Ecusta Trail, adding that the upcoming segment from Main Street to the high school will eventually need its own name. D. Perkins observed that the public will likely naturally default to call the corridor the Ecusta Trail anyway. M. Tooley suggested delegating the naming decision to the Parks and

Trails Committee to avoid group bias, prompting W. Hooper to state he would look into asking City Council for a formal committee referral.

A discussion arose regarding whether an established trail corridor requires immediate buffering. D. Elder and A. Baker noted existing paths minimize new property owner friction, but D. Perkins and H. Marks successfully advocated for a proactive screening review, citing historical neighbor pushback on a prior trail segment. Addressing route adjustments, W. Hooper confirmed to D. Miller that Watermark's planning scope will include the official realignment of the Estatoe Trail behind a cluster of local gas stations.

D. Elder concluded the presentation and thanked the committee for their input. He noted that the project team is fully prepared to adjust the contract scope based on the group's feedback and invited the board to submit any subsequent questions.

VIII. Remarks / Future Agenda

A. Baker opened the floor for final committee remarks.

Addressing L. Chapman's concerns over broader government budget cuts, W. Hooper and L. Watkins confirmed that the project's grant funding is entirely secure and currently held by the State of North Carolina. For long-term operations, Hooper updated the board that maintenance discussions are pushed to the final 35% design phase after the 65% cost estimates are delivered in September. This delay ensures the project is financially viable first and allows the team to incorporate actual annual maintenance metrics from the neighboring Henderson County trail segment.

Highlighting that Brevard lacks the municipal personnel infrastructure of Henderson County to sustain independent trail upkeep, D. Miller proposed a codified public-private partnership. He pointed to the Bracken Trail Extension as a successful precedent and urged the city to secure a formal, written agreement. This structural approach is intended to secure a dependable maintenance framework, maximize private fundraising and external grant opportunities, and efficiently scale volunteer labor.

Anticipating public friction, M. Tooley urged a proactive update to Brevard's e-bike ordinance to regulate high-powered "e-motos" and mitigate severe congestion risks along this narrow urban trail segment. P. Ray confirmed that municipal staff are already addressing the concern, with Aaron Bland's team researching successful e-bike regulatory frameworks from other regional trail networks.

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IX. Next Meeting

A. Baker confirmed that the committee will reconvene for its next monthly regular meeting on Wednesday, August 26th, 2026, at 3:30 p.m.

X. Adjourn

On a motion by D. Lytle, seconded by M. Tooley and carried unanimously, A. Baker adjourned the meeting at 5:20 p.m.

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Aaron Baker, Chair

Minutes Approved Date-_____

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Edievith Gass, Board Secretary