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News

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Posted on Tue, Aug. 09, 2005

EcoCharlotte: An opportunity in the making

We're on our way to being one of nation's leading ecological cities

BOB PERKOWITZ
Special to the Observer

When you think of environmentally sensitive cities, Charlotte may not be the first that comes to mind. Perhaps it should. Let's take a little tour.

Driving west from uptown, just minutes away on the banks of the Catawba River, we make our first stop and watch construction of the U.S. National Whitewater Center. Located on 300 acres of woodlands, it aims to be the world's premier outdoor recreation and environmental learning center.

Let's hop in a canoe here and paddle downstream. A few miles away we arrive at the Daniel Stowe Botanical Garden. This 450-acre natural area, magnificent already, is working hard on its 40-year master plan to become one of the world's most beautiful gardens.

Back in the canoe, another dozen miles down the Catawba, we find ourselves amid another tract of undeveloped land. Jane McColl donated these 400 acres to the emerging Museum of Life and the Environment. The York County Cultural and Heritage Commission is developing the museum as a national and international center of learning about ecology, environmentalism and sustainability.

Raptors and nature preserves

Now let's bike back north on country roads to Latta Plantation. Here in its 1,300 acres we can visit the Carolina Raptor Center, dedicated to environmental education and the conservation of birds of prey. We can see one of America's most extensive collections of eagles, falcons, owls and other birds. Along the way north, we passed community lands managed by the Mecklenburg County Park and Recreation Department. The department manages more than 16,500 acres of park and natural land including Latta Plantation, McDowell and Reedy Creek Nature Centers, and the Cowan's Ford Wildlife Refuge. These four large nature preserves provide access to and information about the Piedmont's natural flora and fauna.

The Charlotte region embraces many more special places. Crowders Mountain, Morrow Mountain, Lake Norman, Kings Mountain and Andrew Jackson State Parks all preserve our valuable natural heritage while providing cultural and recreational opportunities.

Regional land conservancies have preserved another 40,000 acres of natural land. In addition, the Catawba

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Lands Conservancy and the Trust for the Public Land are developing an ambitious regional trail plan to link the 14-county metro area together with green spaces. This effort, likely to be sponsored by the Foundation for the Carolinas and the Knight Foundation, will bring us closer together with nature and with each other.

All these nature-based assets enhance the Charlotte region's economy and quality of life. Urban development, though, is equally important to our community's environment. The Charlotte metropolitan area ranks among the fastest growing regions in America, which presents significant challenges.

Mecklenburg County has a comprehensive network of public bus transportation. Let's take one back uptown and see how well Charlotte's doing in urban development.

We disembark at the Transportation Center, the hub of Charlotte's bus network. We are now just a couple of blocks from the city center, the new Bobcats arena, the Convention Center, the Historic Trolley and the forthcoming South Corridor Light Rail System. We can get around anywhere in minutes.

Walk through neighborhoods

We could continue our tour on bicycles, using Charlotte's nascent but growing network of bike lanes, but it's just as easy to just walk though First and Fourth Wards. Here we find well-designed urban neighborhoods that provide walking access to work, restaurants, entertainment and other amenities. We can also walk through the Elizabeth and Myers Park neighborhoods and see how Charlotte has preserved its historic residential areas.

Have you noticed the trees yet? Mayor Pat McCrory calls them Charlotte's signature, and often uses the word "beautiful" to describe our city. With his support, Charlotte enacted ordinances to protect the trees. The city also offers our comprehensive recycling and composting programs, and just started replacing its fleet with hybrid cars. What else would you expect from the guy who is chair of the U.S. Conference of Mayors Environment Committee?

What you can take away from this grand tour is that Charlotte could become one of the leading ecological cities in America. Our strong natural values and community pride are coalescing around the protection of our valuable environmental assets and wise development of our urban spaces.

This ecoCharlotte can happen. We can build on our environmental base and improve our quality of life year by year. Each of us can make a difference. Support the politicians who support our natural assets and wise development. Encourage our business leaders to incorporate Charlotte's environment into their vision and plans. Support the Catawba Riverkeeper, the Sierra Club, Carolinas Clean Air Coalition, Foundation for the Carolinas and other organizations that work selflessly for your best interests.

And of course, if you haven't visited the many places covered on this narrative tour, grab the family and get out there. The natural beauty of the central Piedmont will enrich you.

Bob

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