

# regional brief

No. 37

## RALEIGH'S NEUSE RIVER GREENWAY

Nice place to visit, but you wouldn't want to live next to it

**KEY FACTS:** • Greenways are linear parks that benefit users with opportunities for exercise and enjoying nature.

- Raleigh is constructing the Neuse River Greenway from Falls Lake Dam to the Johnston County line.
- Since greenways are commonly owned public property, they are more susceptible to crime, litter, and degradation than privately owned property.
- Public-opinion surveys about greenways do not ask the opinions of residents who will live with a greenway essentially in their own backyards.
- The John Locke Foundation's Neuse River Greenway survey asked homeowners who live directly adjacent to the proposed Neuse River Greenway for their views about this new greenway.
- The survey found that most of these homeowners believed that the new greenway would not be an asset to their neighborhoods, would increase crime, and would lower their property values. A large majority was unwilling to pay higher property taxes to pay for the greenway.
- These negative consequences (costs) would be forced on homeowners by the City of Raleigh without any countervailing compensation. Users of the greenway, on the other hand, would receive benefits without incurring costs commensurate with the benefits received.

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**m**ost people like parks. They are great places to play catch with your kids, have a family picnic, or just relax in the fresh air. A greenway is a linear park, so most people should like them, also. But what is it like to live near one? Parks and greenways are common property owned by government. Raleigh is constructing a new greenway along the bank of the Neuse River from Falls Lake Dam to the Johnston County line. This greenway is common property owned and managed by city government. In theory, common property is more susceptible to litter, crime, and degradation over time. For example, a section of a Jordan Lake nature trail was closed in January be-

cause park officials could not control public nudity and sex acts along this trail.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, common property provides users with a free benefit. Users gain the benefit of a stroll through a natural environment, improved fitness by walking, running, cycling, etc.

For a greenway, the question becomes who benefits and who pays. Economic theory argues that those who live next to the greenway pay more in costs (litter, crime, lack of privacy, etc.) than they gain in benefits. On the other hand, those who use the greenway and live farther away, are receiving more benefits than costs. This *Regional Brief* is based on a survey of homeowners who live directly adjacent to a section of the proposed Neuse River Greenway. The survey solicited their opinions in order to find out if they thought the greenway would provide them with more benefits than costs.

### **Other Greenway Surveys**

Many government, academic, and civic organizations have conducted public-attitude surveys about greenways. Those surveys fail to address the question addressed by this research. They do not distinguish between those living directly adjacent to a greenway and those who live elsewhere in the community. Thus, these surveys do not tell us anything about the costs and benefits born by those who live next to a greenway.

For example, the Vancouver City Council conducted a survey in 1995 on possible greenway projects at city-sponsored open houses held in local community centers. This survey found that the majority of those attending the open houses were supportive of the greenway projects. Unfortunately, the survey did not distinguish between attendees who live next to the greenway and those who do not. Thus, this result tells us little about the views of *residents* who would be affected by a greenway next to their backyard.<sup>2</sup>

Other surveys conducted on the issue have similar problems. In 1998, North Carolina State University's Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Management surveyed a random sample of North Carolina residents to assess their views on greenways.<sup>3</sup> This survey used standard survey research methodology and even asked respondents for their views about living next to a greenway. The survey asked: "How would you feel about living immediately adjacent to a trail or greenway?" While this question is noteworthy, it assesses a hypothetical situation. The question does not survey people who are confronted with the reality of a greenway being build right next to their backyard.

Respondents' written comments related to this question are important because respondents could imagine some of the potential problems (costs) associated with living directly adjacent to a greenway. One wrote, "I have mixed emotions about trail [greenway] development. I enjoy hiking and bicycling in natural settings yet I also enjoy privacy. I would not like trails near my property because of trespassing and littering concerns." Another said, "I hope 'off highway vehicle' trails are not a priority! I don't think most of those people would stay on a trail and besides that they're too loud — pity the people who would live close by!" Respondents could see that people living directly next to a greenway would pay a host of costs not paid by users of the greenway or the governments that build them.

### **Neuse River Greenway Survey**

The John Locke Foundation conducted the Neuse River Greenway Survey because other greenway surveys have not reflected the views of residents who would incur costs and receive benefits from a greenway directly adjacent to their properties. Anonymous questionnaires were mailed to 121 residents in the Bedford Falls and Falls River Community neighborhoods who own property directly adjacent to the proposed Neuse River Greenway. Surveys went to residents whose homes back up to the proposed greenway on Mt. Prospect Circle, Edmundson Avenue, Canoe Brook Parkway, Settle In Lane, Kinlawton Place, Charensen Place, and Grassy Creek Place. Surveys were also sent to residents along the proposed public access path connecting the Bedford Falls Community to the proposed greenway. They

included residents of Snowy Meadow Court, Mt. Prospect Circle, Edmundson Avenue, Falls River Avenue, and Van Hessen Drive whose backyards would be directly adjacent to the public access path (see maps in Appendices A and B).

Residents received an anonymous survey, a letter explaining the survey, information about the John Locke Foundation, a self-addressed stamped envelope, and a one-dollar bill to encourage responses. Two weeks later a second survey was sent to those residents who had not yet responded to the first mailing. Of the 121 surveys sent, 61 surveys were completed and returned, giving a response rate of 50 percent.

## Results

The results of the survey showed most residents with homes directly adjacent to the greenway in the Bedford Falls and Falls River Communities thought that the Neuse River Greenway would affect them in negative ways. In other words, the greenway would impose unwanted and uncompensated costs on them. For example, 97 percent of the residents agreed that their neighborhoods are currently safe. A 61 percent majority of residents believed that after the greenway was constructed, it would make their neighborhoods “less safe.” Only 11 percent of the residents disagreed with this statement.

Many of the residents thought that the positive effects of the greenway would not counteract the negative impacts. A plurality of 40 to 35 percent believed that the greenway would not be an asset to the community.

In addition, a large majority of 85 percent would not want to pay for the greenway project with an increase in property taxes. Only 8 percent of the residents were willing to pay higher taxes to pay for the greenway. A plurality of 46 to 23 percent thought that the greenway would decrease their property values.

## Public Access Path

A public access path would connect the Bedford Falls community with the proposed greenway. It would be approximately 25 yards wide with small backyards on each side and would have little or no vegetation to block the views of

<i>Survey Statement</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>
My neighborhood is currently a safe neighborhood.	97%	0%
This greenway will make my neighborhood less safe.	61%	11%
This greenway will be an asset to my neighborhood.	35%	40%
I am willing to pay a higher property tax rate for this greenway.	8%	85%
This greenway will decrease the value of my property.	46%	23%

*Note: “Agree” and “disagree” numbers do not add to 100% because “Neutral” responses were not included. “Agree” and “disagree” are totals of “agree strongly” and “agree,” and “disagree strongly” and “disagree” responses. See Appendix C for more information.*

<i>Survey Statement</i>	<i>Access Path Residents Only</i>		<i>All Residents</i>	
	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>
The public access path will be an asset to my community.	28%	50%	25%	44%
This greenway will be an asset to my neighborhood.	28%	57%	35%	40%
The greenway will make my neighborhood less safe.	79%	7%	61%	11%
I am willing to pay a higher property tax rate for this greenway.	0%	93%	8%	85%
This greenway will decrease the value of my property.	57%	21%	46%	23%

*Note: “Agree” and “disagree” numbers do not add to 100% because “Neutral” responses were not included. “Agree” and “disagree” are totals of “agree strongly” and “agree,” and “disagree strongly” and “disagree” responses. See Appendix D for more information.*

backyards and homes. Survey respondents who live directly adjacent to the access path opposed the access path and the greenway more strongly than all of the residents in the survey.

None of the respondents who wrote favorable comments on the questionnaire live near the future access path. One of the access path residents commented by saying, “We strongly oppose the proposed location of the public access path — it is far too intrusive.”

While the greenway itself would impose costs on all of the property owners, the access path is an even greater invasion of privacy. Access path residents would have to bear a greater cost because their privacy would be more directly invaded than the privacy of those who lived near the greenway.<sup>4</sup>

### **Written comments**

Many residents responded to the opportunity to provide written comments. They provided reasons for their support and opposition to the greenway. Of the total of 33 written comments, five were favorable, 21 were negative, and seven were neutral.

Some were enthusiastic about the project, saying, “We look forward to using this greenway!” Another commented with, “The greenway will be an asset to this community and to Raleigh.”

Other survey respondents raised serious safety concerns about the proposed greenway. One resident wrote, “The proposed green space behind our residential area is an open invitation to dangerous and disturbed persons. This process will leave us extremely vulnerable to the percentage of any population that is dangerous.” The issue of safety is a major concern for neighborhoods that would be directly affected by the new greenway.

The invasion of homeowner privacy was another theme in the written comments. One resident wrote that the greenway would be “far too intrusive.” Another agreed, saying, “We do not want the greenway because it takes away our privacy and makes our property like public property.” One respondent feared the greenway would be a nuisance for the neighborhood. This person commented, “We already have issues every year with illegal hunting and dirt bikes on currently unpaved future greenway paths. I have strong reservations that the project will help to decrease these issues and instead make these activities easier and more appealing.”

Finally, the proposed greenway caused one family to move out of the neighborhood. They wrote,

We have since moved from this house and one of the big reasons was the greenway. The path was going to be too close to our home. Also, there was a proposed ‘[Public] Access Point’ right beside our house. I am not opposed to greenways in general, but they should not be so close to existing homes. I was very concerned about safety. The area would be unlit and not patrolled as much as we would have liked. Thus — we moved.

The comments of this individual serve as a good example of why many think a public project of this nature does not belong in the backyards of private citizens.

### **Conclusion**

The fact that many people who live directly next to the proposed Neuse River Greenway do not see it as an asset is not surprising. It confirms one of the central principles of economics: people take better care of their own property than they do of property owned in common. This survey was conducted before the greenway was constructed. A survey after construction is likely to show similar results.

The City of Raleigh would be forcing homeowners who lived directly next to the greenway to pay higher costs in terms of lack of privacy and an increase in crime, litter and noise than they would receive in benefits. Those conse-

quences are consistent with a concept in resource economics known as the “Tragedy of the Commons,” which is that public property is likely to be mistreated and used in a non-sustainable way.

These survey results also imply that greenway users who would not live next to the greenway would receive more in benefits than they would pay in costs. Such results could not happen if the greenway were to be constructed on private property. A private greenway operator would have to pay the property owners for their land, and to recover those costs, the operator would need to charge those who use the greenway. A system based on property rights and the rule of law would produce a more equitable result.

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## **End Notes**

1. Cheryl Johnston Sadgrove, “Nudity, sex acts prompt trail closing: Bird-watchers seek a new spot for loft,” *The News & Observer* (Raleigh), January 31, 2008. While the affected area was not an urban greenway, the offending acts illustrate the problems with commonly owned property.
2. Memorandum on the Vancouver Greenways Plan from the Associate Director of Planning–Community Planning and the General Manager of Engineering Services to the Vancouver City Council, June 30, 1995, [www.city.vancouver.bc.ca/ctyclerk/cclerk/950718/p2.htm](http://www.city.vancouver.bc.ca/ctyclerk/cclerk/950718/p2.htm).
3. 1998 North Carolina Statewide Trail and Greenway Survey, Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Management, North Carolina State University, March 31, 1999.
4. After the survey was administered, city officials agreed with the complaints of local residents and moved the public access path to a new location under a nearby power line. This change does not influence the results of the survey.

**Appendix C. Neuse Greenway Survey Results**

	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>
<b><i>The majority of respondents do not want the greenway or access path.</i></b>					
The public access path will be an asset to my community.	23%	21%	31%	15%	10%
This greenway will be an asset to my neighborhood.	20%	20%	25%	25%	10%
<b><i>The greenway and access path will increase strangers and crime.</i></b>					
This greenway will increase the number of strangers walking in and around my neighborhood.	2%	2%	8%	39%	49%
My neighborhood is currently a safe neighborhood.	0%	0%	3%	61%	36%
This greenway will make my neighborhood less safe.	0%	11%	28%	31%	30%
<b><i>Respondents are unwilling to pay for the greenway.</i></b>					
I am willing to pay a higher property tax rate for this greenway.	57%	28%	7%	3%	5%
<b><i>The greenway will decrease property values.</i></b>					
This greenway will decrease the value of my property.	8%	15%	31%	21%	25%



**Appendix D. Neuse Greenway Survey Results from Access Path Residents**

	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>
<b><i>The majority of respondents do not want the greenway or access path.</i></b>					
The public access path will be an asset to my community.	43%	7%	21%	21%	7%
This greenway will be an asset to my neighborhood.	43%	14%	14%	21%	7%
<b><i>The greenway and access path will increase strangers and crime.</i></b>					
This greenway will increase the number of strangers walking in and around my neighborhood.	0%	0%	7%	36%	57%
My neighborhood is currently a safe neighborhood.	0%	0%	0%	71%	29%
This greenway will make my neighborhood less safe.	0%	7%	14%	43%	36%
<b><i>Respondents are unwilling to pay for the greenway.</i></b>					
I am willing to pay a higher property tax rate for this greenway.	64%	29%	7%	0%	0%
<b><i>The greenway will decrease property values.</i></b>					
This greenway will decrease the value of my property.	7%	14%	21%	7%	50%