



**BURKE**  
RIVER TRAIL  
ASSOCIATION

## A PATHWAY TO

Glen Alpine Ribbon Cutting



PLACE

PURPOSE

POSSIBILITY



2025 Report

# DIRECTOR

BETH HEILE

Dear Friends and Partners,

In 2025, our **More Than a Trail** theme expanded into a clearer understanding of what the Burke River Trail truly is: **a pathway**. Not only a physical route for walking and biking, but a **Pathway to Place, Purpose, and Possibility** for every town in our corridor.



**A Pathway to Place** as communities invested in trailhead parks, public art, riverfront planning, and greenway connections. **PLACE**

**A Pathway to Purpose** as volunteers, civic groups, and partners embraced stewardship and community involvement across Burke County. **PURPOSE**

**A Pathway to Possibility** as towns leaned in, recognizing how the trail supports walkability, revitalization, housing opportunities, and long-term economic vitality. **POSSIBILITY**

Thank you for imagining a connected future with us. The path forward is clear—and we are gaining ground.

With Gratitude,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Beth". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, stylized "B" at the beginning.



# 2025 BY THE NUMBERS

Behind every number is a person, a partnership, or a place becoming part of the Burke River Trail story. You will read those stories through this annual report.

## PLACE — Building Trail Towns & Shared Spaces



Ribbon Cuttings



Trailhead Sign Kiosks Prepared for 2026



Trail & Trailhead Workdays



New Interpretive Sign Types Designed

## PURPOSE — People Stepping Up for Their Trail



Volunteer Hours



Unique Volunteers



Community Event Attendees



Litter Gitter Events



Community Events

## POSSIBILITY — Opening Doors to Opportunity & Growth



Key to the Town



Presentations to Towns & Partners



Trail Town Tours



Grants Awarded



**BRTA**

### Western Trail Terminus Open

- **Restroom**
- **Picnic Shelter**
- **Tables & Benches**
- **Open Green**
- **Walking Loop**
- **Paved parking**



During the November Ribbon Cutting, **Heron Awards** were presented to individuals who made significant contributions to the park's development.

- **Alderman Reid Scott** – for his tireless on-the-ground efforts throughout the project
- **Mayor Michelle Lewis** – for her steady leadership and unwavering support
- **Representative Hugh Blackwell** – for securing \$125,000 in state funding and supporting Burke County's small towns
- **Stanley Benedict** – for daily volunteer work, video updates and behind-the-scenes coordination
- **Ethan Benedict** – for early contributions to site prep and seeding
- **Pat Cobb** – for donating grading services and equipment support
- **Jonathan Holden** – for exceptional service as general contractor



Stanely, Beth & Ethan



Rep Blackwell & Alderman Scott



Mayor Lewis & Jody



# GLEN ALPINE

## Park Funding

\$125,000 - State of North Carolina  
\$55,000 - Town of Glen Alpine  
\$50,000 - Burke River Trail Association  
\$6,370 - Local Community Donations  
\$10,000 - Community Foundation of BC Grant  
\$9,800 - Mull Foundation Grant

BRTA assisted with park design, facilitated public input, and secured funding. Throughout the process, the Town of Glen Alpine provided leadership and final approval, ensuring the project reflected the community's vision and needs.



Burke Commissioner Stroud &  
BRTA Board Member Carroll



Ribbon Cutting - Free Community  
Picnic with Live Music



Superior Court Judge  
Rooks (and park donor)



BRTA Treasurer Christa, President  
Val & Member Roy

Patsy & Reid Scott \$2000  
Case Farms \$1000  
GA United Methodist Church \$1000  
Molded Fiber Glass \$500  
Mark Buff \$250  
Tea Tree \$200  
Jim & Jill Bonkowske \$200  
Tim & Jeri Rooks \$200  
Glen Alpine Ruritan Club \$120

Gary & Debbie Meise \$100  
Table Rock Family Medicine \$100  
Mimi Phifer \$100  
Waiting for the Train \$100  
WNC Real Estate Inc \$100  
Graham Anderson \$100  
Cook Appraisal, Inc \$100  
Kathryn Dechicio \$100  
Beth Heile \$100

## Local Donors

# PLACE

Great Trails Start with Great Places



## Eastern Trail Terminus Open

- **Covered Stage**
- **Splash Pad**
- **Walking Loop**
- **Benches**
- **Open Green**
- **Restroom**
- **Concession Building**
- **Play Equipment**
- **Paved Parking**

BRTA was honored that Town of Hildebran trusted us to collect and track over **\$30,000 in donations from the community**. Sponsorships:

Amphitheater \$15,000 - **Wayne Davis - The Legend (DDI)**

Walking Trail \$5000 - **Burke River Trail Association**

Inclusive Playground \$3600 - **Tex's Fish Camp**

Playground Features \$2000 - In memory of **Brian F Miller & Randy L Smith**

\$2500 - **Pepsi Bottling Company of Hickory**

June 20 Ribbon Cutting  
Attendees



# HILDEBRAN



## Park Funding

### NC PARTF

\$289,700

### State Capital & Infrastructure

\$146,000

### State/Local Recovery Funds

\$640,000

### Community Donations

\$31,330



### SynergyLabs

In Memory of Jerry & Judy Martin

J.C. Keller & Madeline Howard Keller Family

Bob & Bonnie Townsend

In memory of John Calvin Deaton & Irene Berry Deaton

In honor of Bobbie Honeycutt & in memory of Bernard Honeycutt

In remembrance of Mayor Albert L. Parkhurst

Hildebran High School Class of 1944

### Bench Donors

Burke Commissioner Stroud  
trying out the Splash Pad



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Beth Heile and Rep Blackwell accepted the Key to the Town on behalf of BRTA

### \$100

### Donors

Daniel & Anna Reeves  
Beth & Eric Heile  
Kristen & Logan Shook  
Logan Shook's Father

### In Memory

Calvin & Irene Deaton  
Calvin Dennis Deaton

Vangie & Earnest Lindsay

Wayne Young



**BRTA**

# PLACE

Great Trails Start with Great Places



## A Community of Hands

**Public art helps Trail Towns tell their stories—**

**and makes every stop along the Burke River Trail a place worth exploring.**

In Drexel, art, history, and community pride came together in a remarkable way this year through A Community of Hands, a public art installation designed by local artisan and retired school principal Dan Hoyle. Through seven stained-glass panels set in live-edge hardwood, the installation, coming in 2026, honors the people who built Drexel and shaped its identity across generations.

BRTA was proud to support this effort by partnering with Dan and the Town of Drexel on custom interpretive signage to accompany the artwork. These signs—among the first interpretive art signs in our Trail Towns—helped establish a design framework that will be used for future art and history interpretation along the Burke River Trail.

More than an art project, A Community of Hands reflects what Trail Towns can become: welcoming places where stories are celebrated, visitors linger, and community identity shines. With more than 30 local donors and strong collaboration among town leadership, this project represents the best of Drexel—and a model for how public art can enrich the trail experience.





BRTA is deeply grateful to Dan Hoyle for his vision, craftsmanship, and dedication. His work demonstrates how the Burke River Trail connects not only places, but people and their shared histories. Each panel tells a story worth experiencing in person.

Visit Drexel's Downtown Park later in 2026 to explore the completed installation, learn about the individuals and trades honored, and celebrate this milestone with the community at a future ribbon cutting.



# PURPOSE

Trails Bring People Together



19  
Events

320  
Hours

Litter  
Gitters



# VOLUNTEERS



**BRTA**

# PURPOSE

Trails Bring People Together



# VOLUNTEERS



This year, volunteers embraced stewardship and community involvement.

From the Litter Gitters' award-winning efforts to trail & trailhead workdays, 2025 highlighted the pride residents take in their shared spaces. The trail gives people purpose—an invitation to care for something that belongs to all of us.



# PURPOSE

## Trails Bring People Together



*Rhodhiss, Drexel, Hildebran, Rutherford College, Glen Alpine*

BRTA hosted **Trail Town Tours** in five Burke towns, inviting participants from across Burke County and the region to experience each community through a fresh lens. Tours featured **insights from mayors and town managers** on local history, amenities, and future plans, followed by guided walks through downtowns, parks, and current or planned Burke River Trail routes. By pairing local storytelling with on-the-ground exploration—and lunch from local restaurants—the tours helped spread awareness, spark visitation, and **showcase each town as a destination**. Free and open to all, Trail Town Tours strengthened regional understanding and **encouraged people to explore beyond their own hometowns**.



# EVENTS



BRTA supported or hosted 11 community events that invited people of all ages to explore, learn, and connect along the Burke River Trail corridor. Activities included guided hikes, festival booths, educational programs, Great Trails State Day, and seasonal events held in partnership with Friends of the Valdese Rec, Burke County Public Library, NC State Parks, and municipal governments. Together, these events strengthened community awareness, encouraged outdoor recreation, and highlighted the trail's role as a shared community asset.

# POSSIBILITY

Trails Open Doors

## Old Glory Mill Plans



- 100 apartments
- 6 businesses
- 54 jobs
- Trail on Water

In 2025, the **Town of Rhodhiss** took a major step toward revitalization by selecting **Adaptive Properties** to redevelop the historic Old Glory Mill into a vibrant town center. With BRTA presenting the project to funders through the Opportunity Appalachia grant and the mill moving toward listing on the National Register of Historic Places, the vision includes approximately 100 market-rate apartments, six new businesses, and 54 new jobs—all anchored by the Burke River Trail along the water. Plans feature restaurants and gathering spaces, small retail, an outfitter for bike and kayak rentals, co-working and civic space, enhanced river access, and a rooftop event venue overlooking the Rhodhiss Dam.

Designed as a place to live, work, gather, and celebrate, the Old Glory Mill is poised to become the downtown for Rhodhiss—boosting tax revenue, improving quality of life, and creating a walkable, bikeable destination that connects residents to jobs, schools, recreation, and community life.

**OLD GLORY MILL**  
RHODHISS: RURAL MEETS REMARKABLE



State Historic Preservation Office  
NC NATURAL AND CULTURAL RESOURCES

**HICKORY**  
North Carolina  
Life. Well Crafted.



**APPALACHIAN**  
COMMUNITY CAPITAL



Rep Blackwell  
Sen Daniel

RHODHISS: RURAL MEETS REMARKABLE



# POSSIBILITY

Possibility is where vision meets preparation. In 2025, our Trail Towns moved from interest to readiness.



BRTA supported Glen Alpine as it prepared for the opportunities that come with becoming a Trail Town. Executive Director Beth Heile invited NC Main Street & Rural Planning Center economic development planner Phil Boggan to tour downtown with town leaders, exploring pedestrian connectivity, small-business support, and how the Burke River Trail can strengthen the emerging downtown park. These on-the-ground conversations helped align local vision with statewide resources, positioning Glen Alpine to welcome visitors, support local businesses, and build long-term economic vitality.



As a member of the Steering Committee for the Western Piedmont Bicycle & Pedestrian Plan, BRTA helped shape the regional vision—and made sure the public had a voice in the process. For the Burke County input session, BRTA promoted the event, invited members, and encouraged Trail Town partners to attend, resulting in the largest turnout from any community group. This strong presence ensured that local priorities—walkability, trail connections, and everyday transportation needs—were clearly represented as the plan moves forward across the region.



# PARTNERSHIPS



## **Burke County Trails Summit — Stronger Together**

With more than 290 miles of trails and waterways across Burke County, coordination and collaboration are essential. Now in its fourth year, the Burke County Trails Summit brings together the planners, builders, partners, and advocates behind the trails to share updates, align priorities, and strengthen connections across organizations and jurisdictions. By creating space for conversation—rather than a rigid agenda—the Summit builds the relationships and momentum that turn ideas into projects and ensure Burke County’s trail system continues to grow stronger, safer, and more connected.



## **From Litter Gitters to Leaders: Inspiring the Exceptional Clean-Up Crew**

BRTA’s Litter Gitters program sparked a powerful ripple effect when Walkin’ Roll launched its new Exceptional Clean-Up Crew—a volunteer team of individuals with special needs eager to give back to their community. Inspired directly by the Litter Gitters model, the group secured the same Thrivent Action Team grant to equip more than 35 participants with vests, grabbers, and gloves. This peer-to-peer inspiration shows how shared resources and inclusive leadership can expand stewardship, build confidence, and invite everyone to take pride in caring for Burke County’s outdoor spaces.



## TRAINS & TRAILS

Still Waiting on the Train - but we can be patient because passenger train service is worth it! We want all of our Trail Towns to be Train Stations

Pic: WFTT Founder Mimi Phifer and BRTA Founder Beth Heile

## ONE VOICE

BRTA does not support the GTSC just because Beth Heile is on the Executive Committee! We believe in the Coalition's work to speak to legislators & state agencies with one voice to move trails forward for all of NC.



## EXPLORE

Many thanks to Black Diamond Trail Designs - Joseph Litaker for consulting with us on a new section below the Rhodhiss Dam. Really grateful for his expertise -- and he is a Lifetime Member of BRTA!!!



# PARTNERSHIPS

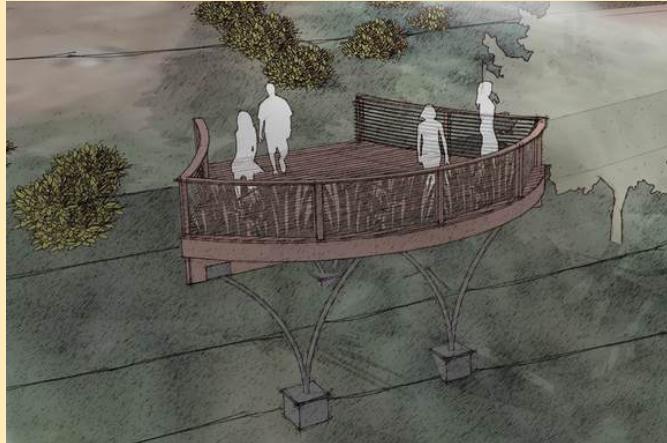


**BRTA Board:** President: Val Scott, Treasurer: Christa Pearson, Shelly Gref, Michael Lowther, Margaret Bumgarner, Carroll Hoyle, Melinda Wallrichs, Rick Justice, Diane Speigle



## Metawood Design in Drexel

We have thoroughly enjoyed working with Josh and Amanda Singleton, owners of Metawood in Drexel. Based on our logo, they created the Heron Awards we presented to Glen Alpine Supporters. We have been working with them on the signage for “A Community of Hands” art installation to carry our sign brand to all opportunities for art, history or general information kiosks.



## ARCHITECT

**David Harmon Architecture** has been a great asset for renderings for BRTA from trail boardwalks to overlooks to lookout towers. He helps people "vision" what we are trying to explain.

## RHODHIS GRANT

The Opportunity Appalachia Grant awarded to BRTA on 2024 continues to deliver with a 3 minute video on the project (check youtube) and the opportunity for Beth to present to investors.



## TRAIL GRANT

City of Morganton received a \$374,000 Great Trails State Program grant. The new Burke River Trail section will start at Rocky Ford Access on Lenoir Rd and extend east for almost a mile toward Riverview Apartments.



# PARTNERSHIPS

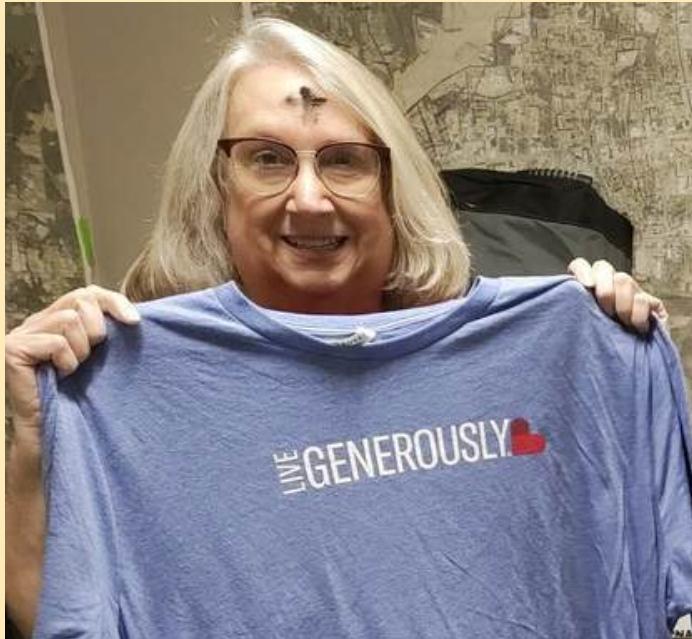


## FCNC

Burke River Trail and Wilderness Gateway State Trail are co-located along the Valdese Greenway and at a future trailhead around Henry River Mill Village. BRTA works with Foothills Conservancy of NC as the nonprofit for WGST and other trail connections in Burke County.

## RC2

Grant workshop in Raleigh with other small NC communities as part of the Rural Community Capacity (RC2) training by NC Commerce Rural Planning Program. Rhodhiss Manager Rick Justice and Beth worked on the narrative for a potential grant for the outdoor recreation district at Old Glory Mill.



## LITTER GRANT

Thanks to BRTA Board Member Melinda Wallrichs for submitting a Thrivent Action Team Grant to supply waters, snacks, gloves, grabbers, and vests for our Litter Gitter Program. The grant came with t-shirts!



## GLEN ALPINE

BRTA was awarded two grants to support the Glen Alpine Downtown Park. \$10,000 from the **Community Foundation of Burke County** for the Picnic Shelter and \$9,000 from the **Mull Foundation** for picnic tables, benches and trash can.

## NC DOT

BRTA has a great relationship with NC DOT. They came out to paint the crosswalk from the Glen Alpine Downtown Park to the town shops. They painted new lines on the Rhodhiss Bridge. And, we connect with them on any new bridge projects to make sure they are bike-ped friendly.



## BIKE WALK SUMMIT

BRTA President Val Scott and ED Beth Heile attended the two day summit that was held in Hickory for 2025. They heard economic impact stories of trails, greenways and sidewalks; lessons from NCDOT and inspirational stories by new friends and old.



# PARTNERSHIPS



## HICKORY PATHS

From trail systems to park projects, Beth met with PATHS share both the wins and the lessons. Bob Post and Jacob Beaver are part of a passionate group of neighbors working to make their community safer and more accessible for everyone, whether walking, biking, or driving.

## WALKN' ROLL

Sharon Elliott, Director of Walkin' Roll Activities League always asks the question - "How much of this trail (or whatever) will be ADA accessible?" BRTA has learned so much from Sharon about what true access means for her "kids" — and how we can design public spaces that welcome everyone.



## RIVERKEEPER

Burke River Trail for hiking and biking co-locates with many Upper Catawba River Paddle Trail access points. BRTA regularly meets with Catawba Riverkeeper's Ryan Carter in Raleigh or in Burke County to discuss the paddle trails, dams and other policy issues we have in common.



## CORE

Carolina Outdoor Recreation & Education—partnered with BRTA for trail building. Through hands-on work and shared enthusiasm, these youth helped strengthen the Burke River Trail while gaining confidence and skills through CORE's outdoor leadership programs.

## DISCOVER BURKE

We're grateful to Discover Burke County Tourism for helping share the Burke River Trail with residents and visitors alike. Being part of what people discover when they explore Burke County strengthens awareness, encourages exploration, and connects more people to the places that make our communities special.



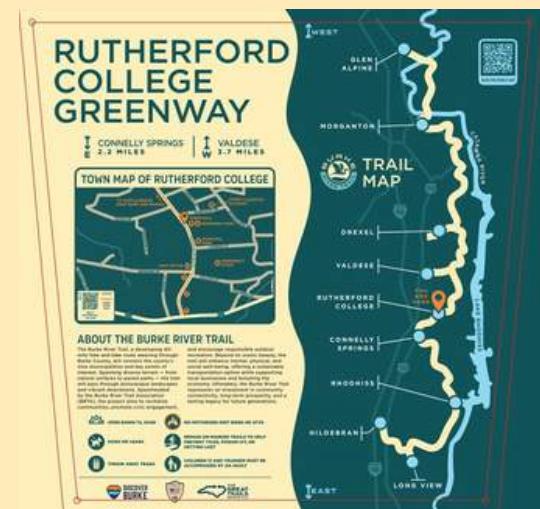
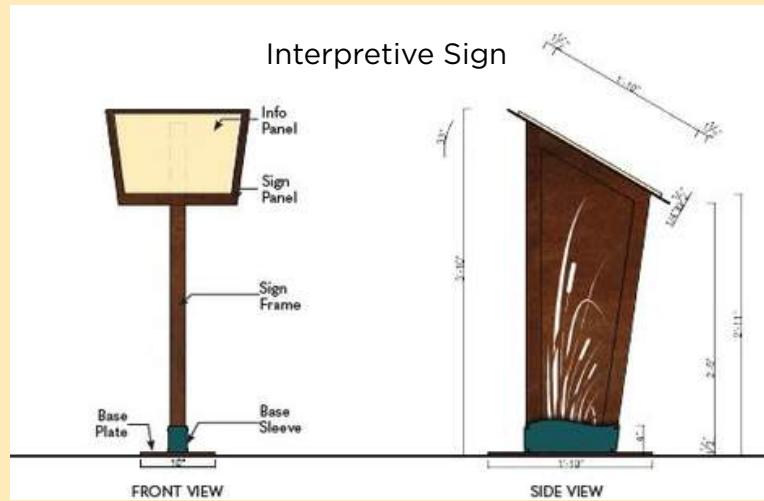
## SPEAKER

BRTA Executive Director Beth Heile spoke to the Morganton Rotary Club about the Burke River Trail and its role as a pathway to place, purpose, and possibility. We welcome opportunities to share this vision with other civic organizations and community groups across Burke County.

# BRANDING



BRTA expanded the Burke River Trail sign family while supporting Drexel's A Community of Hands art installation. What began as a need to interpret a single exhibit grew into a broader vision for how art, history, education, and wayfinding can be shared consistently along the entire trail corridor. These two new interpretive sign types complement our existing trail signage and will be used throughout the Burke River Trail to help tell local stories and guide visitors. In 2026, five Trail Towns will receive new BRT kiosks, each featuring a downtown or park —creating a familiar, welcoming experience wherever the trail connects to town centers.



# MEMBERS

Many thanks to our members. Annual fees cover postage, office supplies, tax filings and all that boring stuff that has to be done to keep a nonprofit legal!

[rivertrail.betterburke.com/join](http://rivertrail.betterburke.com/join)

## LIFETIME \$500

**Black Diamond Trail Designs – Joseph Litaker  
Mark Buff**

## CORPORATE/CIVIC \$120



**Friends of the Valdese Rec  
Waiting For the Train**

## INDIVIDUAL \$20

- Beth Heile
- Val Scott
- Wes Presnell
- Melinda Wallrichs
- Christa Pearson
- John Connelly
- Nancy Connelly
- Jean McMullin
- Carroll Hoyle
- Leslie Ramseur
- Barb & Jerry Ryan
- Thomas Miller
- Ashley Bunner
- Scott Bruner
- Ron Wyant
- Jennifer Wood
- Tim Tunstill
- Aaron Smith
- James Glick
- Linda Glick
- April Nelson
- Mary Charlotte Safford
- Rob Lynam
- Barbara Lynam
- Sheri Watts
- Grayson Barnette
- Tim Johnson
- Stanley Benedict
- Patricia Zimmerman
- Melissa Darling
- Mike Darling
- Evija Kleshnika
- Dr. Shawn Hamm
- Linda Grandle
- Dori Barron
- Roy Ashkenaz
- Margaret Sundell
- Helen Jolanta
- Palmer McIntyre
- Dorothy Nurminen
- Nancy Tucker
- Lou Arasi
- David J Cook
- Cessy Smith
- Nancy Sullivent
- Michel Deckard
- Angie Benson
- Lisa Miller
- Richard Ericson
- Mimi Phifer
- Brian P Brown
- Kate Brown
- David Andersen
- Ken Riddick



## JOIN

Annual membership dues pay boring stuff like insurance and stamps. But this is critical to help keep the organization running so we can fulfill our mission.

**Individual** \$20

**Corporate/Civic** \$120

**Lifetime** \$500

## DONATE

**Mail check to:**

Burke River Trail Association  
204 E Main Street  
Valdese, NC 28690

<https://burkerivertrail.net/donate/>

BurkeTrails@gmail.com

*BRTA is a 501c3, donations are tax deductible.*



**A Pathway to  
Place, Purpose,  
and Possibility**

