



Great Trails State Program

INITIAL REPORT

February 2024



NC DEPARTMENT
OF NATURAL AND
CULTURAL RESOURCES

NORTH CAROLINA DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL AND CULTURAL RESOURCES
Roy Cooper, Governor | D. Reid Wilson, Secretary

DIVISION OF PARKS AND RECREATION
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Elk Knob State Park

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South Mountains State Park

The Great Trails State Program legislation, passed in 2023, represents a historic investment in North Carolina (NC) Trails. This funding investment came during 2023's North Carolina Year of the Trail celebration, and it demonstrates the need for and importance of trails in NC. This funding is an important step in advancing the trails and greenways infrastructure in NC.

This legislation created the Great Trails State Program (GTSP) within the Department of Natural and Cultural Resources (Department). The GTSP is administered by the Division of Parks and Recreation (Division) for the planning, construction, and maintenance of trails throughout the state. This program will offer matching grants for local governments, public authorities, regional councils of government, and nonprofit organizations.

Interpretation of Great Trails State Program Legislation



Occonechee Mountain State Natural Area



Mount Jefferson State Natural Area

The Department interpreted the Great Trails State Program legislation, Session Law 2023-134, House Bill 259, in consultation with the Great Trails State Coalition. The Great Trails Coalition is a broad-based group of diverse organizations, agencies and supporters advocating for increased state investment in all types of trails statewide – hiking, paddle, mountain bike, equestrian, paved. The interpretation, discussed below, will allow the Department to establish selection criteria and distribute the matching grants.

Section 14.6.(a) creates the GTSP, which will be administered by the Department. The fund will allow for new trail development and extension of existing trails with two matching grant cycles, \$12,500,000 in nonrecurring funds in each year of the 2023-2025 fiscal biennium.

Section 14.6.(b) establishes the eligible grant applicants for GTSP, which include: a municipality or county, a regional council of government created pursuant to Part 2 of Article 20 of Chapter 160A of the NC General Statutes, a public authority (as defined in N.C.G.S. 159-7), or a nonprofit entity, provided the entity demonstrates in a manner acceptable to the Department that the unit or units of local government where the eligible trail project will be conducted have been notified of and support the trail project.

It also describes eligible trail projects, which include:

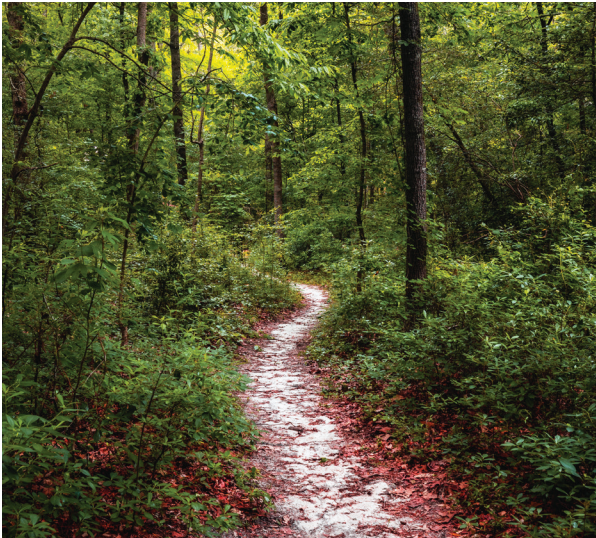
- a. Planning, design, and related environmental assessment or permitting activities for trails.
- b. Land and easement acquisition for trails.
- c. Construction of trails and trail structures.
- d. Trail amenities.
- e. Maintenance activities, which include rehabilitation of trails and trail structures, the installation of water bars, the relocation of eroded trail segments, and other activities that will mitigate erosion or deterioration of trails or prevent future erosion or deterioration of trails.

This section also establishes that GTSP can be used as matching funds for grants awarded by the federal government or any other non-state source or entity to an eligible entity.

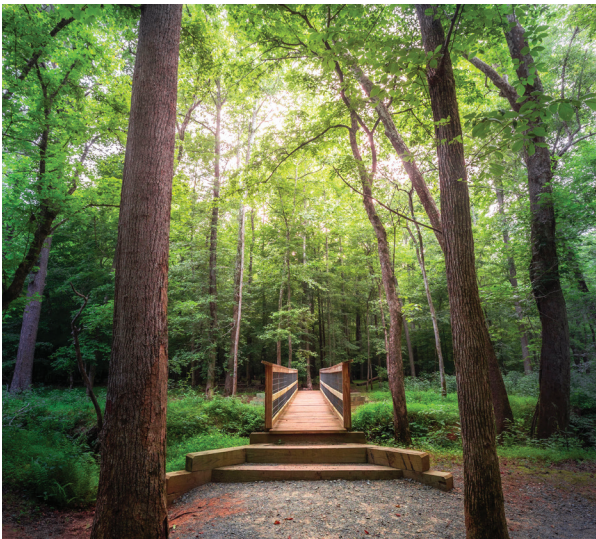
Trails are defined by the legislation as paved trails or greenways, natural surface trails, biking trails, equestrian trails, and any other type of trail recognized by the Department. Therefore, eligible projects do not include a series of tourism attractions related to a particular theme that are jointly marketed based on that theme and are interconnected only by vehicular roadways.

Trail amenities are defined as markers, signage, benches, water fountains, restroom facilities, bathhouses, campsites, docks, boat ramps, parking facilities, picnic facilities, equipment rental facilities, and other improvements or structures intended to enhance visitor experience for trail users.

2.0 Interpretation of Great Trails State Program Legislation



Cliffs of the Neuse State Park



Eno River State Park



South Mountains State Park

Trail structures are defined as bridges, boardwalks, retaining walls, and other structures that are necessary for visitors to use the trail to travel from one location to another. For paddle trails, trail structures include waterway access points and watercraft launch structures.

Section 14.6.(c) establishes GTSP as a special fund within the Department and states that these funds shall be used by the Department to provide grants to an eligible entity for eligible trail projects with the following requirements and limitations:

- a. The Department is authorized to accept applications for grants and evaluate them based on criteria that includes: the amount of additional funding being provided from other sources for the proposed project, current access to trails and other outdoor recreational facilities in the proposed project, and the size and demographics of the population served by the proposed project.
- b. Grants made under this subsection shall not exceed \$500,000 per project.
- c. An eligible entity receiving a grant from the Department shall provide a match:
 - i. The Department shall determine the amount of match based on the wealth of the county where the trail project is located. In the case of trail projects in more than one county, the match shall be based on the lowest wealth county.
 - ii. The match shall be no greater than one non-state dollar (\$1) for every one dollar (\$1) from the fund and no less than one non-state dollar (\$1) for every four dollars (\$4) from the fund.
 - iii. The match may include cash, fee waivers, in-kind services, the donation of assets, the provision of infrastructure, or a combination of these. Non-cash matches must be quantifiable and documented in a manner as the Department may specify.

Section 14.6.(d) requires that the Department provide this initial report to the Joint Legislative Oversight Committee on Agriculture and Natural and Economic Resources and the Fiscal Research Division regarding the process for awarding grants and the metrics the Department intends to use in evaluating grant applications. Thereafter, the Department shall report annually no later than October 1 regarding the use of funds allocated by GTSP. The annual report will include a list of grant recipients and amounts, a description of trail projects funded, and a summary of non-state funds leveraged with grant funding. The Department may discontinue annual reporting upon providing a final summary report after it awards all funds allocated.

Section 14.6.(e) It should be noted that the Department has chosen to take the one percent administrative expenses as allowed under this section, which means the fund will be reduced by 1%, or \$250,000 total.

3.0 Great Trails State Program (GTSP) Overview



Lake James State Park

The mission of GTSP is to provide matching grant funds to support the expansion of trails throughout North Carolina. The program timeline for fiscal year 23-24 is:

- October 2023 – February 2024: Program Development
- March 1, 2024: Notification of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) Released
- September 3, 2024: Applications Due
- Early 2025: Tentative Award Selection

There are eight (8) application types:

1. Planning and Feasibility
2. Planning and Feasibility with Acquisition
3. Design and Engineering
4. Design and Engineering with Acquisition
5. Construction
6. Construction with Acquisition
7. Acquisition
8. Maintenance

Minimum grant requests have been established for the different project types.

\$100,000
Planning and Design
Acquisition
Construction of Natural Surface Trails
Maintenance of Natural Surface Trails
\$250,000
Maintenance of a Paved Trail
\$300,000
Construction of Paved Trails

3.0 Great Trails State Program (GTSP) Overview



Mount Mitchell State Park



Medoc Mountain State Park

The applicant must demonstrate, in a manner acceptable to the Department, that the unit or units of local government where the eligible trail project will be conducted have/has been notified of and supports the trail project. Applications should be restricted to one contiguous linear site per application. Applicants may submit for multiple trail projects.

Eligible applicants receiving a grant under this program shall provide matching funds based on the tier ranking of the county where the project is located. In the case of trail projects in more than one county, the match shall be based on the lowest county tier. The required match is as follows:

- **Tier 1:** \$1 of matching funds for every \$4.00 of state funds.
- **Tier 2:** \$1 of matching funds for every \$2.00 of state funds.
- **Tier 3:** \$1 of matching funds for every \$1.00 of state funds.

Grants made under this program shall not exceed five hundred thousand dollars (\$500,000) per project. The match may include cash, fee waivers, in-kind services, the donation of assets, the provision of infrastructure, or a combination of these. Non-cash matches must be quantifiable and documented.

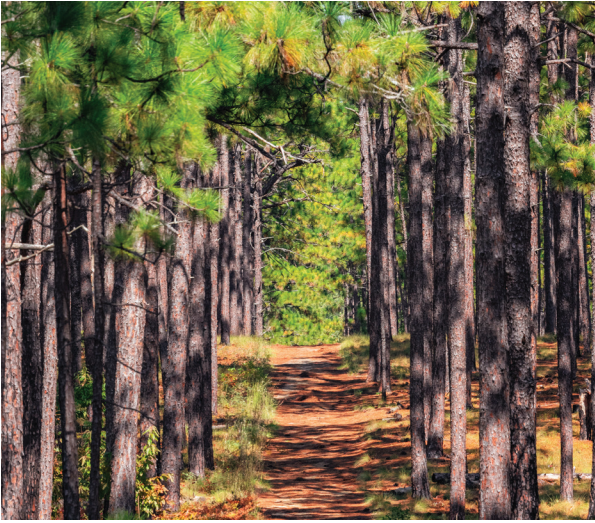
Trails funded through GTSP must be open and accessible to the public with no restrictions such as membership. Trails and trail structures built or renovated with a GTSP grant are to be used for public recreation for at least 25 years. These facilities are not eligible for additional GTSP assistance during this time.

Example projects include:

- New trail or trailhead construction. (Construction)
- New waterway access points and watercraft launch structures. (Construction)
- Reroute or reconstruction of existing trails or paddle accesses. (Maintenance)
- Enhancements or upgrades to existing trailheads. (Maintenance)
- Rehabilitation of trails and trail structures, the installation of water bars, the relocation of eroded trail segments, and other activities that will mitigate erosion or deterioration of trails or prevent future erosion or deterioration of trails. (Maintenance)
- Trail layout, design, engineering, feasibility or use studies, analysis of existing and proposed trail and master plans (Planning)
- Trail amenities: Markers, signage, benches, water fountains, restroom facilities, bathhouses, campsites, docks, boat ramps, parking facilities, picnic facilities, equipment rental facilities, and other improvements or structures intended to enhance visitor experience for trail users. These items would be eligible expenses in a construction or maintenance application.
- Trail structures: Bridges, boardwalks, retaining walls, and other structures that are necessary for visitors to use the trail to travel from one location to another. These items would be eligible expenses in a construction or maintenance application.

4.0

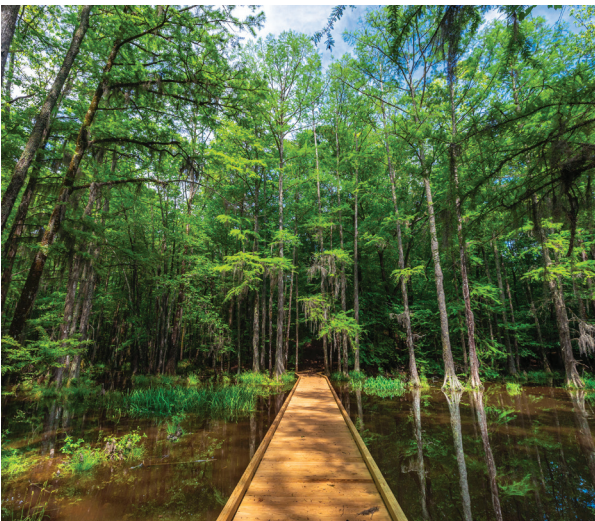
Great Trails State Program Selection Criteria



Weymouth Woods Sandhills Nature Preserve



Grandfather Mountain State Park



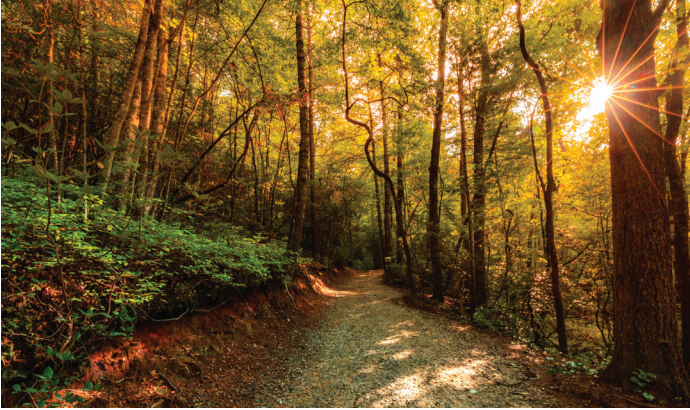
Merchants Millpond State Park

Projects will be evaluated using the following criteria:

- readiness (ready to begin project)
- sustainable design (considers environmental impacts, design standards, expectations)
- impact (connects people to daily destinations and creates trail networks, provide trail access for everyone)
- partners and community support
- management and maintenance

In addition to the numeric ranking based on a scoring system developed by Division staff, the following elements will be considered for final funding decisions:

- geographic distribution
- distribution of funds among trail stages (planning/feasibility, design/engineering, acquisition, construction, and maintenance)
- Social Vulnerability Index – as listed on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention/Agency for Toxic Substances and Diseases Registry's Social Vulnerability Index (https://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/placeandhealth/svi/interactive_map.html)
- source and amount of additional match.

*Gorges State Park**Goose Creek State Park*

The Great Trails State Program legislation provides essential support for trails in North Carolina. This critical investment in trails in NC shows the need for and importance of trails to the state and will enable NC to truly become the “Great Trails State.” The program will advance the development of local trail networks, contribute to local economies, and help improve the lives of North Carolinians across the state.