



DURHAM OPEN SPACE AND TRAILS COMMISSION

2021 ANNUAL REPORT

January 2021 to December 2021

Introduction and Mission

The Durham Open Space and Trails Commission (DOST) is an advisory board that advises the City Council and the Board of County Commissioners on matters relating to the preservation of open space and advocacy for trails. In order to provide recreational and environmental benefits for the citizens of Durham, the Commission promotes the preservation of valuable open spaces, natural vegetation and stream valleys within the urban and rural environment, and the development of trails and other appropriate recreational and transportation facilities for pedestrians and bicyclists. The Commission promotes the protection of the natural environment where appropriate to serve the public interest, with equal consideration for long-term care of the environment and the short-term pressures of growth. In doing so, the Commission fosters the wise, equitable use of the City's and County's natural resources and strives to involve all segments of the Durham community.

The Commission consists of eight members appointed by the City Council, eight by the Board of Commissioners, four elected or appointed officials, and up to 10 members appointed by the Commission. Membership for 2021 was 18.

2021 Accomplishments

2021 has been another year defined by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. DOST has maintained focus on three major goals in spite of this challenge:

1. Passed a resolution in support of declaring the City of Durham Ellerbe Creek Waterbird Colony a Dedicated Nature Preserve.
2. Requested budget for the creation of a City staff position to oversee implementation of open space plans.
3. Overseen annual matching grants applications and awards.

Matching Grants Program

In 2021, the Matching Grants Committee implemented a major initiative to recruit additional applicants in Durham's priority focus areas and recorded the largest financial request in the program's 30-year history.

2020-21 Grant Cycle

The Durham County Matching Grants Program for Open Space and Real Estate projects is now in its 30th year. The grant program provides matching funding for local non-profits to pursue projects that protect open space or provide recreational opportunities for citizens of Durham County. The projects must be open to the public. The program is annually funded from the County's operating budget, which for FY 20-21 totaled \$77,175. The program requires a 50% match from applicants, which can include a cash match as well the value of volunteer labor towards producing the project. Over the life of the program, the Durham County Matching Grants program has supported 116 wide ranging community projects with a total value of over 6 million dollars using \$1.9 million in county matching funds.

The 2020-21 cycle of the Matching Grants Program had the single largest amount of funding requested in the program's history. The Committee received 7 applications with \$190,000 in requested funds. The Committee recommended, and the Board of County Commissioners approved, four applications this cycle, for projects totaling \$77,175. The projects are wide ranging, and geographically spread across Durham.

ORGANIZATION	BRIEF PROJECT DESCRIPTION	PROPOSED FUNDING	APPLICANT'S MATCH	TOTAL PROJECT VALUE
Beth El Synagogue	Assist with Construction of Nature Based playground next to Beth El preschool.	\$20,000.00	\$20,000.00	\$352,000.00
El Futuro	Phase 3 of green space beautification to include hillside open space renovation, sensory garden, walking path and pollinator garden.	\$25,000.00	\$12,500.00	\$92,591.00
Urban Community AgriNomics (UCAN)	Open Space Project to restore historic trails and interpretative displays ant Catawba Trail Farm	\$30,175.00	\$15,087.50	\$85,675.00
Maureen Joy Charter School	Purchase of Soccer Goals and Benches for school field	\$2,000.00	\$656.25	\$2,656.25
	TOTAL	\$77,175.00		\$532,922.25

Open Space Committee Update

Two initiatives dominated the Committee in 2021: (1) the creation and adoption of a resolution supporting the designation of a large waterbird colony near the Glennstone development in northeast Durham as a Dedicated Nature Preserve; and (2) DOST's renewed request—for the 3rd consecutive year—for a staff person in city government to implement the Urban Open Space Plan, adopted in the spring of 2017. The Committee solicited and received the support of the entire commission for these actions. The waterbird colony resolution was drafted in the Open Space committee, then amended and revised by the Ellerbee Creek Watershed Association (ECWA) whose request to the OS Committee initiated DOST's action, with further input from the New Hope Audubon Society and the Environmental Affairs Board. This request is, as of this writing (January 2022), with the City Council for action.

The second major initiative was a re-imagined and more detailed expansion of DOST's previous requests for "an Open Space Implementer," as well as an open space budget for the City and several other procedural requests. The Committee drafted a proposal, approved by the full DOST commission in December of 2021, that presented an expanded argument for the necessity of such a position, presented a model case from Brookline, Mass., a community with a similar stock of stream corridors and wetlands that has an excellent open space program and a position in its City government that corresponds to the "implementer" position DOST is asking the City to create. The Committee's proposal furnished an initial list of properties bordering stream corridors (some of which also bordered inactive rail corridors), in accordance with the City's request that entities making budget requests provide a list of "shovel-ready projects"—in this case "investment-ready projects. The proposal was submitted early in January of 2022 and is being studied by the City as of this writing.

In other activity, the Committee endorsed the City's request for a Green Infrastructure Bond, while expressing some disappointment that the "green infrastructure" featured in the bond did not include any of the things DOST considers most significant for green infrastructure. The Committee endorsed DOST's interest in becoming again more active in the review of specific development proposals, namely those involving annexations and re-zonings, those that were next to parks and wildlife areas, and those that contained areas designated as natural heritage sites, and several other criteria. Two development proposals in particular concerned the Committee in 2021, both in East Durham: (1) a development "Olive Branch Reserve" in the Eastern Open Space Plan surprised the Committee and initiated inquiries into why DOST had been dropped from the list of those getting notice of developments under review, and (2) a development, Kemp Road, so far the largest development in Southeast Durham, containing a proposed 680 dwellings and in the heart of the East Durham Open Space Plan, where a failure of the City's lift station could be catastrophic in an area already prone to flooding and excess nutrients in Falls Lake. It was noted that other criticisms of specific features should be included in comments on this development.

Overall Commission Goals for 2022

The Commission will continue to promote, through an equitable lens, the preservation of valuable open spaces, the preservation of natural vegetation and stream valleys within the urban, suburban and rural environment, and the development of trails and other appropriate recreational and transportation facilities for pedestrians and bicyclists.

Staffing needs: Currently Durham has no department assigned to plan, design and construct Master Plan trails out in the County, including two rails-to-trails opportunities. Nor does the City have a

department tasked to implement the 2017 Urban Open Space Plan. DOST will ask community leaders to help identify ways to close these staffing gaps.

In addition, the Commission has identified the following priorities for 2022:

In 2022 DOST's goals are:

1. To re-establish an active development review committee.
2. Advocate increased implementation of the urban open space plans by continuing to advocate for a City urban open space implementer.
3. Advocate for increased funding to build out and maintain priority trails and open space.
4. Support the implementation of the Durham Belt Line Master Plan with a specific focus on equitable community engagement for the components of the plan that can still be addressed.
5. Support implementation of the Trails and Greenways Master Plan with a specific focus on equity.
6. Encourage implementation of the Urban Open Space Plan.
7. Pursue ongoing professional development on trends in equitable development of trails and open spaces.
8. Proactively research and implement open space and trails acquisition best practices for ordinance and policy.
9. To consult city initiatives such as EngageDurham and the current work with the Comprehensive Plan for observations to continue work towards an equitable Durham Beltline.
10. Work with vested organizations such as Friends of Geer Street Cemetery to explore a cemetery advisory task force.
11. Continued examination of the Matching Grant process to encourage applications that reflect the racial and economic diversity of Durham. Lobbying for increase of budget to grow awards granted.