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Unlocking a hidden gem

Rock Hill's Riverwalk project to transform scenic stretch of Catawba River

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Take Cherry Road to the edge of town, turn right at the used car lot and follow a gravel road into the woods.

In two minutes, your trip takes you from the land of strip malls and quick-cash loan stores to what might be the most picturesque setting in York County: a place where bald eagles fly overhead, otters bob from the water and the tree canopy gives cool respite from the heat

This stretch of the Catawba River has been locked away from Rock Hill for a half-century, hidden behind barbed wire fences that surround the Celanese Celriver plant.

The fences are about to come down.

A massive redevelopment project called Riverwalk is transforming the Celanese site into an outdoor shopping village, a business park and hundreds of homes.

The first step will be to unlock a section of the Catawba that few people have seen since the days when Catawba Indians trapped fish in the shallows.

“This is like we're in a national park,” said Dave Williams, the developer in charge of Riverwalk. “We're a quarter-mile from Cherry Road, and the landscape has completely changed.”

A 10-foot-wide paved trail is slated to open along the shoreline in the first half of next year, creating a linear city-owned public park that will run past an eclectic group of landmarks: an Indian trading path called Nation Ford, a Civil War-era gun battery and the stone remnants of a summer house built in the 1900s by textile magnate Hamilton Carhartt.

Shops and restaurants overlooking the water are planned later as part of a riverfront district.

The trail represents the first phase of a plan to make Riverwalk a haven for sports and outdoor play. A bicycle racing track called a velodrome will anchor what organizers call the Cycling and Outdoor Center of the Carolinas.

Supporters say the features finally will take advantage of York County's most underused and underappreciated asset.

“Most people don't have a clue,” said kayaker Chris Webb, a social studies teacher from Fort Mill. “You drive over I-77, and you see it there. But not a lot of people know it's a pretty cool river.”

Project gets public dollars

There's a reason why the developers are quick to point out Riverwalk's public attractions. Put simply, the public is helping to pay for them.

The city of Rock Hill agreed last month to provide up to \$50 million in public financing to pay for streets, utilities and other public amenities planned on the 1,000-acre development. Special tax districts will use revenues generated at the site to pay for the improvements.

Completion will take an estimated 20 years, but the project could wind up generating enough jobs and commerce to account for 12 percent of tax and utility revenues in the city's general fund. With a total investment tagged at \$600 million, it's the largest development plan in Rock Hill's history.

In helping to plan Riverwalk, Rock Hill leaders are banking on success similar to that of other cities that have opened riverfront districts.

West Columbia opened a three-mile greenway — also called Riverwalk — at the convergence of the Congaree and Saluda rivers, with walking paths and an amphitheater that hosts an annual music festival.

Hundreds flock to the park on many weekends, said city administrator Jenny Cunningham.

“In our wildest imagination, we didn't realize how popular it would be,” Cunningham said. “The concept and building of the Riverwalk has really put us on the map.”

Rock Hill officials started putting together plans in 2005, when an ownership group called the Greens of Rock Hill bought Celanese and began a clean-up that would cost \$40 million in private money. The group is an offshoot of Pollution Risk Services, a Cincinnati-based company that specializes in brownfield redevelopment.

More than 1,600 people worked at Celanese at its peak, making materials used in home furnishings, suit linings and cigarette filters. Competition from overseas markets forced a series of job cuts, and the plant closed for good in April 2005.

Now, plans for Riverwalk symbolize Rock Hill's shift from the textile industry toward a new economy centered on retail stores and company offices.

Incorporating a natural resource is an ideal way to do it, said Councilwoman Kathy Pender.

“The Catawba River hasn't had the prominence in our minds as a place to go,” Pender said. The thinking behind the plans is to “bring the river closer to people,” she said.

Changing perceptions

The irony is that while Celanese accumulated a poor environmental record, its presence also served to protect the land by keeping it out of the hands of developers.

Celanese owned 1,000 acres but only used 250 to 300 for its operations. The plant sat just east of Interstate 77 off Cherry Road.

During the 1980s and early 1990s, the plant was ranked among the top three polluters in South Carolina, annually releasing about 4.5 million pounds of toxic chemicals, The Herald has reported.

Other sections along the Catawba have been developed for private use. The gated Sun City retirement community, for example, runs up to the water's edge in northern Lancaster County.

“At Riverwalk, the whole idea is public access,” said Dave Shook, owner of Old Town Outfitters outdoor store. “Most people only see the Catawba River when they pass over it on I-77.”

The vision resembles what has happened along the Reedy River in downtown Greenville. Once mocked for being polluted and overgrown with kudzu, the Reedy is now home to a burgeoning riverfront district with shops and restaurants.

The impetus came from Falls Park, a \$13 million publicly-funded complex with a pedestrian suspension bridge overlooking a waterfall. The park allowed people in Greenville to discover what they were missing, said Mayor Knox White.

If the goal is to create a destination, piecemeal development won't work, warned White.

“You've got to do it in a big way to change perceptions,” he said. “It can't be done halfway. We had folks for years who had nice beautification projects. But none of that was sticking.

“It took something as large as Falls Park to dramatically change people's attitudes.”

Reclaiming a jewel

On a recent afternoon, Dave Williams bounced his Chevy Suburban along a gravel road leading to the river. He stopped near a group of stone columns standing in the woods, covered in brush.

This was once the summer home of Hamilton Carhartt, who used it as a place for summer parties and weekend getaways.

Workers will soon clear away brush to open a view to the water for the first time since Carhartt's day. Looking down toward the shore, Williams talked about unlocking the Catawba after 50 years of seclusion from Rock Hill.

“Without this,” he said, “we're just another development.”

Five cool things about the plan

The old Celanese pump house, built like a ship so that it could withstand a major flood, is envisioned as a restaurant or office.

Stone remnants of an early 1900s summer home built by textile magnate Hamilton Carhartt will become part of a park.

The water tower, at right, will be repainted to become a landmark for Riverwalk.

A locomotive used by Celanese since 1946 will be re-painted and put in a park.

Ball fields will be built atop landfills that were capped years ago.