

FINAL DRAFT  
December 10, 2012

Don Kosetelec  
c/o Southwestern Commission  
125 Bonnie Lane  
Sylva, NC 28779

Dear Don:

I am writing to share FMST's thoughts about the route of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail (MST) as you prepare the draft report for the seven-county trail plan that the Southwestern Commission is developing for the NC Division of Parks and Recreation. As the citizen-support group for the MST, we have appreciated this opportunity to help engage people in a discussion about the trail route in this area which is the only remaining gap in the MST in the mountains.

Based on the comments we have heard to date, the FMST Board of Directors:

1. **Recommends that State Parks establish a loop trail of two primary routes – a “*Great Smoky route*” following trails through the Great Smoky Mountain National Park (GSMNP) and a “*river valley route*” past mountain farms and small towns.**
2. **Supports the “*Great Smoky route*” proposed by GSMNP staff that follows existing trails and roads in the GSMNP to Heintooga Road (see attachment to this letter for the specific route).**
3. **Proposes, for discussion, that the “*river valley route*” follow the Tuckaseegee River from Bryson City to Sylva and then head north into Pinnacle Park to converge with the “*Great Smoky route*” at Waterrock Knob.** We propose this route because we believe that it is the one, of all the suggested routes, that can most quickly be built as an all-trail route. However, we believe that each of the other suggested river valley routes could be a great MST route if the community is behind it. We look forward to being part of the continued discussion as the trail plan is finalized, and we expect to support whichever route is selected by the community.

#### The Loop Trail of Two Primary Routes

State Parks has established a precedent for a two-route/loop option in the Winston-Salem area where one route goes north from Pilot Mountain State Park through the Sauratown Trail and Hanging Rock State Park and the other more urban route heads south through the historic Moravian town of Bethania and then follows Winston-Salem greenways to converge with the rural route on the Greensboro watershed trails.

We believe a two-route option of a *Great Smoky route* and a *river valley route* makes sense in Swain and Jackson counties for several reasons:

1. It provides a diversity of hiking experiences and respects the hiking interests and endurance of people who are seeking to complete or explore multiple sections of the MST. For hikers seeking physical challenge and the experience of solitude with

- nature, the *Great Smoky route* will provide the most challenging hiking experience on the entire MST. For those seeking a less extreme hike, the *river valley route* provides a shorter hike with less elevation gain and easy resupply. Camp sites are available now on both routes with other lodging options also available on the *river valley route*.
2. Both routes showcase beautiful parts of North Carolina:
    - a. The *Great Smoky route* will allow hikers to experience some of the most remote, beautiful parts of the GSMNP.
    - b. Hikers on the *river valley route* will experience 20 miles of trail in the GSMNP as well as a rural mountain valley with farms and small towns. Hikers who have completed the entire MST report how much they enjoy experiencing the people and landscapes in rural Piedmont and Coastal Plain sections of the trail. This river valley will be the only one MST hikers experience in the mountains because the trail follows the Blue River Parkway and other ridgelines through the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forest.
  3. Selecting routes that people in Swain and Jackson counties are excited about will help involve the volunteers needed to build and maintain the *Great Smoky* and *river valley* routes.
  4. Establishing two routes will ensure that all of the trail constructed by the Carolina Mountain Club will continue to be an important part of the MST.

#### Selecting Specific Routes for the *Great Smoky Route* and the *River Valley Route*

Over the last few months, people have shared many exciting ideas for possible trail routes with us. Each has features that would make it a great route for the MST. The suggested trail routes fall into four general categories, each with several variations:

1. Routes entirely within the GSMNP all of which converge with the existing MST at Heintooga Road.
2. Routes that leave the GSMNP at Deep Creek Campground near Bryson City and follow the Tuckaseegee River to Dillsboro and Sylva. Two main variations of this route exist:
  - a. From Sylva the route heads north through Pinnacle Park to reconnect to the MST at Waterrock Knob
  - b. From Sylva the route follows the planned Jackson County greenway to Cullowhee and then heads into the Nantahala National Forest to converge with the MST at Old Bald or Wet Camp Gap
3. A route through the Needmore tract on the Little Tennessee River to the Alarka/Cowee section of the Nantahala National Forest and then to Dillsboro and Sylva. From Sylva, this route can then follow any of the options for the Tuckaseegee River route above.
4. Routes that cross the Qualla Boundary using Bureau of Indian Affairs roads. Many of these options are intriguing, but none have been suggested by anyone from the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (EBCI). FMST would welcome the EBCI to propose an MST route, but we believe no routes on the Boundary should be considered unless they are officially recommended by the EBCI.

Based on what we have learned to date, we believe that the Tuckaseegee River route #2a above may be the most viable option to create an all-trail *river valley route* quickly. The

GSMNP staff have proposed a route following existing trails (exact routing is attached) that can serve as the *Great Smoky route*.

However, each of the routes described above could be a great MST route if the community is behind it. FMST looks forward to the continuing discussion about the trail route and expects to support whatever options the community ultimately decides to support.

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this planning process. Please let me know if you have questions.

Sincerely,

Kate Dixon  
Executive Director