

Southern Pines Public Hearing on Whitehall Master Plan

The Southern Pines Town Council will host a public hearing on the Whitehall master plan on Tuesday, May 9th at 6pm in the E.S. Douglass Community Center, 1185 W. Pennsylvania Ave. Town staff will present the recommended master plan for enhancing Whitehall to provide public passive recreation.

The Town worked with CPL and Creech & Associates on this project. The plan accomplishes three key goals on Whitehall's 157 acres: 1) protects the longleaf pine forest and red-cockaded woodpecker habitats; 2) provides passive recreation opportunities; and 3) enhances the property so it can be safely accessed and enjoyed by all community members.

Based on public input, walking trails emerged as the highest priority for passive recreation. The resulting plan includes over 5 miles of various trails, including a 2-mile loop trail that will be ADA-accessible. The trails will connect to Reservoir Park, which provides multiple connections to existing trails and greenways. Whitehall's open fields will be preserved, allowing for activities like picnics, kite flying, and open play. The plan recommends renovating the existing carriage house for expanded programming by the Town's library and parks & recreation departments.

The plan is sensitive to the natural features and ecology at Whitehall, preserving all of the existing longleaf pine forest and red-cockaded woodpecker habitats. The trail system serves a dual role by creating zones to safely carry out controlled burns, which are critical for the longleaf pine forest to thrive. Where feasible, the plan takes advantage of existing infrastructure at Reservoir Park and Elizabeth Rounds Park in order to limit disturbance on the Whitehall property.

"The Town, community, and design team have been committed since the very beginning to protecting Whitehall's natural beauty and habitats," says Assistant Town Manager, Jessica Roth. "The master plan achieves the perfect balance of providing the functional facilities needed and requested by the community while still protecting - and even enhancing - Whitehall's ecological features. We have reviewed the master plan with the Three Rivers Land Trust, who holds a conservation easement protecting the longleaf pine forest and red-cockaded woodpecker habitats. They have given us the green light to proceed, based on the thoughtful design and construction techniques identified in the plan."

Initial work on the master plan began last August and has included multiple opportunities for public input along the way. Over 100 community members attended the two public meetings. 800 provided feedback through online surveys, in addition to numerous people who shared thoughts via e-mail and phone calls.

Following the May 9th public hearing, the Town Council will formally vote on the master plan. The FY 23-24 proposed budget includes \$260,000 to develop construction drawings for phase 1 and to carry out critical land management tasks, including plans to manage and protect the longleaf pines and red-cockaded woodpecker habitats, develop wildflower meadows to reduce mowing, remove underbrush and carry out controlled burns, and improve the vitality of the existing pecan grove.

"Whitehall has certainly come alive with the community's voices," shares Parks & Recreation Director, Cindi King. "I am extremely excited about the resulting plan and hope our citizens see that we truly listened. The plan not only preserves the land, but also has accessible, passive recreation elements which promotes inclusivity by providing something for everyone. Southern Pines is so lucky to have such a gem of a property and we hope our citizens will enjoy it for years to come."

Jessica Roth, Assistant Town Manager



910.697.7021



southernpines.net



jroth@southernpines.net



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