

MECKLENBURG NEIGHBORS

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MARK B. SLUDER/Staff

Alone with his thoughts: A lone walker has just passed underneath the Monroe Road overpass on McAlpine Greenway. Area runners and cross-country coaches agree that the sprawling park is the place to practice and compete in Mecklenburg County but complain it is not being maintained adequately.

GOING DOWNHILL

McAlpine trail desperately needs repairs

By **STEPHANIE ERICKSON**
Special Correspondent

McAlpine Creek Greenway stretches from Sardis Road in southeast Charlotte to about a mile north of Independence Boulevard on the eastern edge of the city. It winds through neighborhoods and climbs into business parks, dipping under congested Independence and busy Monroe Road.

Area runners and cross-country coaches agree that the sprawling park is *the* place to practice and compete in Mecklenburg County — but many say the trails in the greenway, especially

the 5,000-meter running course near the Monroe Road entrance, are in desperate need of repair.

McAfee would know — since he helped build the running trail in 1978, hosts the state championships there each fall and lives in a house that backs up to the park. His team practices at the greenway each summer.

Roger Price, who runs along the trail twice a week, said, “I’m not sure what’s happening, but the course has been neglected.”

Runners say severe storms this summer have caused ruts and erosion along the trails. They say portions are

“I’ve noticed a lot of erosion that’s happening that is definitely going to have to be repaired, or soon there will be sections that are unusable.”

-- Larry Frederick

“I think (the trail) is in the worst shape it’s ever been in,” said Larry McAfee, cross-country coach at nearby East Mecklenburg High School.

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STEPHANIE ERICKSON

Kilroy was here: Graffiti covers this bridge support at McAlpine Greenway, and trash lines the trail.

Runners says trail's in desperate shape

McAlpine

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dangerous. And they worry that, if left untended, the problems will mount with the approach of the fall season, when thousands of high school runners will compete on the nationally known cross-country trail.

Runner Larry Frederick, owner of Fleet Feet Sports on East Boulevard, said big problems could arise if maintenance is delayed much longer. "I've noticed a lot of erosion that's happening that is definitely going to have to be repaired, or soon there will be sections that are unusable," he said.

Parks officials say budget cuts as well as summer storms have caused deterioration.

There just hasn't been enough money to keep up with maintenance. Officials have identified \$7,000 worth of work that must be completed before the large regional high school meets this fall, but admit repairs will be "patchwork." Major work will have to wait for a bond referendum or other source of money.

Most of McAlpine Greenway Park is on the floodplain of McAlpine Creek.



Maintenance problem?

Park officials say a shortage of money has meant little maintenance at McAlpine Greenway this year and will allow only "patchwork" maintenance in coming months.

"We've evaluated the whole trail system and we've got about \$7,000 worth of work to do, largely on the hill and the erosion there," said Lola Massad, supervisor of the park system's east district. "It's in the works. As soon as \$7,000 is freed up from somewhere, we're looking to get that repaired."

"We don't have a lot of money to do major trail work. We're mainly doing patchwork right now."

Money to repair the most heavily damaged sections of the trail should become available within the next two months, Massad said.

"I think there won't be a problem (getting the money), especially for the hill area," she said.

"They've got to get that done. That's definitely a high priority."

"There's some other

what began as a short running track at the park now extends more than 5 miles, McAfee said. The running trail begins near the Monroe Road entrance, climbs up a steep hill, winds through a patch of woods and loops around a man-made lake.

The fall flood of high school athletes will begin with the Wendy's Cross-Country Invitational in October, when 1,700 runners from five states will compete. And for the sixth time, in November, the Kinney Cross Championships will be held at the greenway's trail. The regional championship for runners from throughout the Southeast could attract more than 1,000 high school students. The season will conclude with the Foot Locker meet Thanksgiving, where 1,600 runners from 13 states will compete.

Area high schools also have cross-country meets at the park, including McAfee's East Mecklenburg team. And UNC Charlotte's cross-country team hosts meets at McAlpine.

Frederick said the greenway is not ready for that onslaught.

"Definitely not," he said. "There are sections back in the woods where we do the cross-country course that are constantly being washed out by rain. There are parts of it that would definitely have to be repaired just in that cross-country course — there are four or five sections that need to be addressed."

"When it rains hard there, the gravel just washes out and leaves big ruts. On the hill section back in the woods there's a real steep hill that the trail comes down, and that

More runners coming: Regional meets over the next few months will bring thousands of runners



“ I think it’s a shame, because it’s a real showcase facility. I go out to the Foot Locker national championships in San Diego and everybody just raves about the facility we have here in town. It has a national name. If you go anywhere in the country and talk to somebody in the running community, they know about McAlpine.”

— Larry McAfee, East Mecklenburg cross-country coach

thing is always washed out if you don't keep after it."

Price said the lack of maintenance has made McAlpine's running trail unsafe. "And there are about 100 kids out there every afternoon," he said.

Frederick agreed, saying twisted ankles could become more and more common.

"It's not bad if you're just out there working out," Frederick said. "You could probably pitter around those things. But if you're out there racing and there's a whole group of kids together, you can't always pick your footing. You kind of have to trust the fact that there's going to be a good trail underneath you."

Not all area runners agree on the severity of damage.

"I don't see things in terrible disrepair at McAlpine," said David Hall, track and cross-country coach at UNC Charlotte. "Usually

if things are just totally going downhill, they will be vandalized in addition to that, and I don't see that at this point."

Hall added, however, that there is a need for more maintenance, especially on the running course up hills. "They have to maintain the areas that typically would have drainage problems and wash out part of the trail," he said. "They have to periodically rebuild that, and that's probably the biggest thing you could see."

McAfee says there are many other problems, and thinks he knows why they are occurring.

"There's a lot of erosion damage all over the place, on the hill, out around the lake. . . . he said.

"There are boards that are missing on the bridge, railing and so forth. There's a lot of overgrowth along the sides of the trails."

to McAlpine Park greenway, and some runners say the course won't stand up to the heavy use.

MARK B. SLUDER/Staff

McAfee said bicyclists are causing some of the damage.

"They put in a bike path down the straightaway on the running trail," he said. "It was originally supposed to be off to the side and keep the bike traffic off of the starting area. Of course, the bikers get down in there and when it's muddy, they have the most fun. So they're out there on their mountain bikes tearing up the trail."

Finally, McAfee said, a decline in the number of park rangers over the years has added to McAlpine's troubles.

"When the park rangers were out there, there was much better control," he said. "I don't think we had near as many bikes out on the trail as we do now."

McAfee worries about his young runners — and he worries that Charlotte's national image might be tarnished by the decline at McAlpine.

"I think it's a shame, because it's a real showcase facility. I go out to the Foot Locker national championships in San Diego and everybody just raves about the facility we have here in town. It has a national name. If you go anywhere in the country and talk to somebody in the running community, they know about McAlpine.

"It's brought a lot of publicity to this community. It would be kind of like building a Charlotte Coliseum and then letting it run down. It doesn't make sense."

There's some other work to do on the trails, too, but our first priority is to hit the cross country course. We have some huge races coming up."

Massad said rain has been the main cause of this year's troubles at the greenway.

"We've had some major storms hit this year," she said. "Each storm that hits us hard, we keep getting more washout. Plus, it just accumulates each year and you get more and more damage if you don't get some major work done on it."

Lack of bond money has been the main reason for the absence of larger projects, Massad said.

Officials have proposed a \$41.3 million park bonds package for the November referendum and another \$10 million for park bonds that do not require a public vote. That won't fix all the problems in all the county's 150 parks — needs totaling \$88 million have been identified — but it would help.

"It would help a lot," Massad said. "We have a lot of projects to do and we can't do it all with operating budget money. It's just not in there."

— Stephanie Erickson