

REPORT OF THE
MORGAN CREEK TRAIL
CONCEPTUAL PLAN COMMITTEE

Submitted for Council Consideration on June 26, 2006

Morgan Creek Trail Conceptual Plan Committee:

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LIST OF MAPS

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HISTORY

The Town has long contemplated a trail along Morgan Creek. The Greenways Commission studied the possibility of such a trail during the early years of the Commission in the late 1980's. Although the Commission concluded that a trail was not feasible east of Merritt Pasture, they did support the acquisition of land for an improved trail from Merritt Pasture westward to Carrboro.

On May 26, 1998, the Council adopted the *Chapel Hill Greenways Comprehensive Master Plan* which recommended development of a Morgan Creek Trail from Culbreth Road to the Carrboro Town line at Smith Level Road. The master plan recommended that this trail be a paved bicycle and pedestrian multiple-use facility.

In 1998, the Council accepted a payment of \$113,000 from Southern Village to be used for a future greenway trail along Morgan Creek.

In 1999, the general public discovered Merritt Pasture and began to use it as a recreation amenity, especially for exercising and socializing dogs. The lack of a legal access complicated the issue. Users would park on the US 15-501 access ramp to Fordham Boulevard, which created serious safety issues. The Council took action to restrict parking because of the danger to both humans and dogs. That action effectively eliminated public access to Merritt Pasture for most citizens. The Council then appointed a Committee to study access options. On November 27, 2000, the Council adopted the *Report of the Merritt Pasture Access Committee to the Town Council*. This Report recommends that the Town build a first phase of the Morgan Creek Trail in order to achieve public access to Merritt Pasture.

On May 29, 2002, the Council authorized the Town Manager to accept \$71,500 from NCDOT to prepare a conceptual plan for the Morgan Creek Trail and provided \$17,875 for the required Town match. The Council also appointed a Morgan Creek Trail Concept Plan Committee.

The Morgan Creek Trail Concept Plan Committee met from November 2002 until June 2003. The June 2003 meeting was a public hearing held at Frank Porter Graham School. The Committee then recessed while waiting for the State to complete flood plain modeling and mapping of the Morgan Creek corridor. The study was needed to determine if the Committee's proposed bridge locations were feasible. We discovered in mid-2005 that although the State planned on printing new flood maps, the State would not develop new flood models for the section of the Morgan Creek proposed for the trail. In the fall of 2005, we started our own flood modeling study and analysis of bridge locations. This study was completed in late 2005. The State's revised mapping was completed in early 2006. We were then able to use our own data and the State's new maps to make preliminary determinations on the feasibility of the bridge locations selected by the Committee.

In January 2006, the Council adopted an updated version of the *Chapel Hill Greenways Comprehensive Master Plan* which continued to recommend development of a paved bicycle

and pedestrian multiple-use Morgan Creek Trail from Culbreth Road to the Carrboro Town line at Smith Level Road.

On May 22, 2006, the Council agreed to grant a conservation easement to the Botanical Garden Foundation over the entire Town owned properties along this section of Morgan Creek. The easement contains language that allows the Town to build trails, including a paved greenway trail through the properties.

The Morgan Creek Trail Concept Plan Committee was reactivated in April 2006. On June 14, 2006 the Committee voted (10 to 1) to recommend that the Council adopt this Concept Plan.

SITE DESCRIPTION

The Morgan Creek Trail Concept Plan Committee studied the section of Morgan Creek that is bounded by Merritt Pasture to the east, Culbreth Road to the south, Smith Level Road to the west, and Fordham Boulevard to the north.

The Town owns most of the properties that would be required for a trail from Merritt Pasture to the eastern edge of the Kingswood Apartments property. From that point, easements would be required across the properties of Kingswood Apartments, Frank Porter Graham School, and the University of North Carolina's Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center. Please see the section on page 15 that fully describes anticipated easement requirements.

The creek in this area flows through a generally broad floodplain, although in some areas one or more of the stream's banks are very steep. The creek makes one large bend just downstream from Kingswood Apartments.

The creek's floodplain is crossed by many cleared utility corridors including power, natural gas, water, and sewer.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The Morgan Creek Trail is proposed to be a 10-foot wide asphalt and/or concrete trail that would allow pedestrian and bicycle traffic to continue for almost one mile from the current terminus of the Fan Branch Trail at Culbreth Road, west to the Carrboro Town line near Frank Porter Graham School. The Town of Carrboro could then extend the trail further upstream if it so desires. A smaller natural surface trail would provide access east to Merritt Pasture.

In 2003 the Committee developed a preliminary recommended route. Please see the map on page 5. The Committee understood that the preliminary recommended alignment would work only if

MAP A

2003

PLAN

PREFERRED

MAP B

2006

PLAN

PREFERRED

the various bridge locations could be shown to create little or no rises in the calculated 100 year flood events. After a significant delay in the State's preparation and release of flood maps, the bridge locations were finally tested in 2006. Those tests indicated that all of the selected bridge locations are feasible with two exceptions:

- The proposed bridge over Wilson Creek would create a rise in the flood of almost 1 foot. We believe that this makes the bridge location unfeasible. This determination eliminated one of the Committee's main options for routing the trail near the Culbreth Road/US 15-501 intersection.
- The proposed bridge over the tributary west of Merritt Pasture was not feasible in the Committee's original preferred location. The study did reveal that a bridge would work in a location further north, although that location would require an additional easement from Duke Energy.

After consideration of the information derived from the recent flood mapping and modeling of Morgan Creek the Committee amended its recommends to the following:

1. Terminus of the Fan Branch Trail to a Crossing of Morgan Creek

The failure of the selected Wilson Creek bridge location to meet floodway standards created the need to look at other solutions. The Committee believes that the following solution (Option 1.1) should be pursued:

Option 1.1 – Pedestrian/Bicycle Underpass of Culbreth Road

This option would require a bridge crossing of Wilson Creek upstream of Culbreth Road and an underpass of Culbreth Road. A large lighted box culvert could be designed to allow pedestrian and bicycle traffic under the road. The upstream bridge when combined with a new culvert would meet floodway regulations. A sidewalk could connect the trail to the existing sidewalk on the south side of Culbreth Road. This would provide direct access to the trail from Culbreth School and neighborhoods on the south side of the road.

The Committee wants to emphasize its support of this option. The Committee understands that there would be additional financial costs and greater technical problems related to construction of an underpass. However, the Committee also believes in the strongest possible terms that the benefits would outweigh the costs. The first and main issue is that of pedestrian safety. The Committee believes that any option that would force trail users to cross Culbreth Road at grade is too dangerous given the current level of traffic. Second, an underpass would be more aesthetic because it would stay close to the stream over its entire length instead of being next to a busy road.

The main drawback would be that of cost. According to 2006 estimates this solution would cost \$338,000 or about \$175,000 more than the option 1.2 below.

Option 1.2 – Ramp the Trail along Culbreth Road

With this option we would realign the existing trail to a point further east to provide a safer crossing at the Culbreth Road/US 15-501 intersection. We recommend that if this option is used the Town should ask the NCDOT to improve the pedestrian signalization to enhance safety. The trail would then be extended to the west, parallel to Culbreth Road. As Culbreth Road rises the trail would gradually descend until it meets grade. The trail would avoid the need for a bridge by crossing over the Wilson Creek culvert at its outflow on the south side of Culbreth Road. As soon as the trail meets grade it would be routed to the Morgan Creek bridge crossing originally identified by the Committee. Please see the map on page 9.

The main benefit of this option would be its lower cost. Cost estimates produced in May 2006 indicated that this option would cost about \$163,000, or \$175,000 less than the cost of a bridge and an underpass of Culbreth Road.

The main drawback would be that pedestrian safety would be compromised at the Culbreth Road/US 15-501 intersection. We believe that the amount of turning traffic on these roads would create unacceptable safety problems even with pedestrian activated signals.

2. First Crossing of Morgan Creek East to Merritt Pasture

Flood modeling indicates that the Committee's preferred trail routing in this location is feasible with one modification. Please see the map on page 10. This section of trail would provide direct public access to Merritt Pasture. The Committee recommends that the access to Merritt's Pasture be constructed as a natural surface trail, enhanced where needed with gravel. The trail would follow closely along the south side of Fordham Boulevard until it crossed under the US 15-501 bridge over Morgan Creek (James Taylor Bridge). The bridge deck is at least 20 feet overhead at this point. The portion under the bridge may require a concrete section to avoid erosion and protect the bridge. A small tributary is encountered about 700 feet east of the James Taylor Bridge. Another bridge would be required to cross this tributary. Our flood study indicates that we would require an additional easement from Duke Energy in order to install the bridge in a location that would not create a rise in the flood.

3. First Crossing of Morgan Creek West to the Proposed Parking Area

Please see maps on pages 9 and 10. This section of trail would be relatively easy to build. The Town owns all of the property. The land is relatively flat and for the most part is already cleared because of utility easements. This section of trail could meander in and out of the easements and wooded areas to provide a mix of experiences.

The western portion of this segment is the only feasible location for a new parking lot. This area was also identified by the Merritt Pasture Access Committee as its recommended parking area. See the section on page 18 that further describes issues related to the proposed parking area.

MAP C

WILSON
OPTIONS

CREEK

MAP D

EASTERN END

4. Proposed Parking Area to Kingswood Apartments

Please see the map on page 13. At this point Morgan Creek makes a very dramatic bend to the north. The north end of the bend is a near vertical bank that ends at the guardrail at the southern edge of NC 54. The steep slopes on the north bank and the proximity of private homes on the south bank reduce options. The Committee selected a two-bridge solution for crossing the horseshoe bend in Morgan Creek. Flood modeling has shown that both of the proposed bridge crossings are feasible.

5. Kingswood Apartments to Smith Level Road

Please see the map on page 14. The Committee strongly recommends that the trail continue on the north bank of Morgan Creek to the west side of Smith Level Road (Option 5.1). However, the Committee also recognizes that there are substantial landowner issues that could potentially make this option difficult to achieve. We offer another possibility (Option 5.2) although we recommend that Option 5.2 be used only as a last resort.

Option 5.1 – North Bank of Morgan Creek on Property owned by Kingswood Apartments, Chapel Hill/Carrboro City Schools, and University of North Carolina

This section is mostly a very flat cleared lawn area and sewer easement. The trail in this location would require very little clearing and would generally be easy to build. Once the road bridge is reached at Smith Level Road the trail could be built under the bridge deck to the west side of Smith Level Road. We recommend that the Town's project include a short section of trail within Carrboro's jurisdiction. This would include the short section under the Smith Level Road bridge and then up to the sidewalk on the west side of Smith Level Road. From there the Town of Carrboro could extend the trail upstream. Representatives of the Town of Carrboro and the Chapel Hill/Carrboro City Schools have indicated that the best short-term benefit could be a sidewalk link along the west side of Smith Level Road southward to the Berryhill neighborhood. Although that neighborhood is only about 1,200 feet from Frank Porter Graham School it is currently considered to be in a no-walk zone. The Town of Carrboro would be responsible for building the sidewalk.

Although in general this section would likely pose few challenges, there are three specific major obstacles that would have to be addressed.

The first of these identified obstacles is the swimming pool for Kingswood Apartments. The pool is built very close to Morgan Creek and lies over the ideal location for the trail. Although the trail could probably be built in the narrow gap between the pool and the creek bank it may be better for both the Apartments and the Town if the Town were to demolish and rebuild a portion of the pool deck. This would result in a smaller pool deck but with a larger buffer between the trail and the pool. Please see the section concerning landowner issues on page 15.

The second problem in this section is a sudden slope that rises just east of Smith Level Road on property owned by the University of North Carolina. This relatively small area would likely require a substantial amount of grading to bring the slopes to a reasonable grade.

The third problem also relates to the property owned by the University of North Carolina. The university has given a preliminary indication that it would grant an easement, but only if there were no net loss of parking. The only feasible location for a trail would result in the loss of parking. Please see the section concerning landowner issues below.

Option 5.2 – South Bank of Morgan Creek to Smith Level Road

We recommend this option only if easements cannot be acquired on the north bank of the trail. The trail might be sited by bridging to the south and then grading out a trail along the south bank of Morgan Creek to Smith Level Road. A portion of the corridor would be located in Carrboro's jurisdiction. We did not test the feasibility of a bridge in this area and such a bridge may be problematic from a regulatory flood plain perspective. We also believe that the amount of grading along the steep southern banks would cause an undesirable amount of damage to the Morgan Creek corridor and would likely cost a great deal more than a trail on the north bank.

MAP E

CENTRAL PORTION

MAP F

WESTERN END

LANDOWNER ISSUES

The Committee has identified two types of landowner issues: the need for additional land and /or easement acquisition and the need to address the concerns of nearby residents.

Proposed Land/Easement Acquisition: The Town of Chapel Hill owns over 90 acres of land along the portion of Morgan Creek that would be affected by the proposed trail. However, much of the committee's recommended alignment lies on property not owned by the Town. We have identified the following land acquisition needs that would have to be met prior to building the proposed trail:

Duke Energy – In 2003, Duke Energy donated 1.9 acres of land along Morgan Creek to the Town for the eventual construction of a trail to access Merritt Pasture. However, the flood study performed by the Town in 2005 has shown that the bridge needed to access the Pasture must be located farther north of the current property line. If the Council adopts this plan we would approach Duke Energy and request that they provide sufficient easements to allow us to build a bridge in a location that would satisfy agencies dealing with regulatory floodplain issues.

Kingswood Apartments – A representative of Kingswood Apartment has been a member of the Committee since it was established by the Town Council. In addition we have met on the site to discuss options for locating the trail on their property. The owner of Kingswood Apartments has not promised that he would grant an easement. However, he has indicated that such an easement might be granted under certain conditions.

The first issue is related to the swimming pool located on the property. As currently configured, the trail would have to be built immediately adjacent to the swimming pool because of the narrow space between the pool and the top of the bank of Morgan Creek. We have discussed the possibility of demolishing a portion of the pool deck in order to allow a larger buffer between the pool and the trail. Although probably more costly, we believe that this is the better option because there would be fewer conflicts between trail and pool users, the danger of streambank erosion would be lessened, and few if any trees would have to be removed.

The second issue is related to fencing. The owner's representative has indicated that he would consider dedication of an easement only if the trail were separated from the remainder of his property by a fence. He noted that crime in the area has increased. He also related experiences with persons camping in nearby wooded areas who have created problems on his property. If we erect a fence we could provide gates that he could choose to control as he desires. Based on similar experiences in other cities we believe that the gates would be left open, but in the event that problems occur the owner could secure the fences and enforce separation from the trail.

Frank Porter Graham School – The Chapel Hill/Carrboro City School Board has voted to grant an easement to allow construction of the trail. During discussions it was clear that the school board also desired to maintain a fence between its play area and the trail. We would hope that the schools would allow access through a gate so that children from nearby neighborhoods could walk to school.

UNC’s Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center – The UNC Property Committee has addressed the issue of a trail easement and has recommended that the University support the request with several conditions. The conditions include a visual screen, a one-to-one replacement for any lost parking spaces (estimated to be 6-8), support by the Chapel Hill/Carrboro City School Board, and the right to review and approve detailed plans as they are developed.

Concerns of Nearby Residents: We have also heard from some residents who live near the proposed trail corridor:

Sigmund Property - The Sigmund family owns a house near the intersection of Culbreth Road and US 15-501. They are represented on the Committee. The Sigmunds have reported that people frequently trespass on their property and believe that such trespass would increase with the construction of the trail. The Committee recommends that the Town work on three different possible solutions to address the Sigmunds’ concerns including:

- Install a section of fence between the point where the proposed trail corridor comes closest to the Sigmunds’ property and their house.
- Install some type of visual barrier such as planting landscape materials to provide some degree of privacy.
- Work with the Sigmunds and OWASA to possibly replace the OWASA controlled bollards on the Sigmund property with a fence.

Glenmere Subdivision - The Town owns a strip of land that could be used as a neighborhood access point from the trail to the Glenmere neighborhood. The neighborhood has opposed any such connection from Channing Lane to the trail. Because of the neighborhood opposition, this report does not recommend such a connection. Please see the following section on neighborhood connections.

ACCESS AND NEIGHBORHOOD CONNECTIONS

The existing Fan Branch Trail has numerous connections to various streets within Southern Village. We believe the trail will soon be extended south to the planned Southern Community Park. The proposed Morgan Creek Trail also has some opportunities for direct connections to neighborhoods.

Culbreth Road west of US 15-501 Intersection: This would be the major entrance point for many residents living in Southern Village, east of US 15-501 and south of Culbreth Road. Access

could be gained to the main trail by using either the existing Fan Branch Trail or a new sidewalk from the south side of Culbreth Road to the entrance of the proposed underpass.

Glenmere Subdivision: The potential exists for a connection; however, the neighborhood has consistently argued against such a link. We believe that any such link should be postponed until such time as the neighborhood is prepared to support the construction of a side trail.

Southbridge Neighborhood: The Town owns a narrow strip of land that lies between Harrington Point and the proposed trail corridor. This land is currently used by neighborhood residents to access the open space along Morgan Creek. We propose that the connector remain open but that it not be improved at this time. If the neighborhood expresses a desire to improve the connection the Town could do so as part of some future phase.

Kingswood Apartments: The proposed trail would provide direct access to the apartment complex. As proposed, the apartments would be separated by a fence. However, we believe that the apartment managers would likely leave the gates open unless they experience problems associated with the trail. Our experiences with other Town trails indicate that problems tend to be minor while trails are generally considered to be a major positive amenity.

Frank Porter Graham School and UNC Child Development Center: The trail would directly access these properties. However, it would be up to the leadership of the school to manage access by control of the gates in the fence.

Western Culbreth Road Neighborhoods: Neighbors living along the west end of Culbreth Road would best access the trail through the Harrington Point connector in Southbridge or from the trail's proposed western end on the west side of Smith Level Road. Additional connectors are proposed in the Proposed Future Phases section on page 19.

Town of Carrboro: It is the Committee's hope that the Town of Carrboro would continue the trail further west to connect with additional neighborhoods and build a sidewalk south to the Berryhill subdivision. The main access point would be on the west side of Smith Level Road.

Access for Citizens not Living in the Southern Portion of Chapel Hill and Carrboro: We believe that the trail will become a major recreation amenity for citizens living throughout southern Orange County. Because of this, people will drive to use the trail for walking, exercise, nature study, and to access Merritt Pasture. We believe that the main access points for these users will be as follows:

- The Committee recommends that the Town approach Hillsong Church for a possible arrangement for parking. If that approach is unsuccessful the Town could build a parking lot south of NC 54 and east of Kingswood Apartments. Either of these options would likely be one of the two major access points for persons not living adjacent to the trail corridor.
- Parking lots in Southern Community Park would likely provide the other major access point. Park access from the park would serve trail users interested in making their hike or bike ride as long as possible. The park end of the trail will also have restroom facilities, play areas, and other amenities.

- On street parking in Southern Village is possible, but is unlikely to attract large numbers of trail users.

TRAIL AMENITIES

Parking Lot: The Committee recommends that the Town approach Hillsong Church to determine if the church may be interested in leasing a portion of its parking lot for trail use. The church is in a good location and would have a relatively short approach to the proposed underpass of Culbreth Road. This would allow the Town to save substantial amounts of money by avoiding the need to build the parking lot south of NC 54.

If an arrangement with Hillsong Church is not possible the Committee recommends building a parking lot capable of parking approximately 20 -30 vehicles south of NC 54. The location of this proposed parking lot is consistent with the recommendations of the Merritt Pasture Access Committee. We believe that it is the only feasible site near the northwest end of the proposed trail. NCDOT has preliminarily indicated that the parking lot could be permitted if an acceleration lane is constructed to the east of the proposed driveway location.

Fences and Visual Barriers: Two of the property owners that would be affected have indicated that they would grant easements only if separation is achieved. In the case of Kingswood Apartments, the owner has indicated that he would consider granting an easement only if the Town agrees to erect a fence. In the case of the Child Development Center property the preliminary indications are that the Town would have to provide visual separation. Because of the proximity of the proposed trail to the Sigmund property the Committee believes that some combination of fence and visual barriers would be appropriate to indicate to trail users that the adjacent property is not public.

Benches: Based on experience with other Town trails we recommend that benches be added along the entire length of the trail.

Traffic Control Devices: The Committee recommends that the use of bollards, large rocks, and other traffic control devices be used to prevent, to the greatest degree possible, use of the trail by unauthorized vehicles.

Other Amenities: Because of the remoteness of the trail as well as the extensive flood plain in this section, we believe that other amenities such as picnic areas or restrooms should not be constructed.

FUTURE PHASES

We believe that the recommended trail alignment would allow the Town to build a trail from the intersection of Culbreth Road and US 15/501 with the least amount of environmental damage, the highest level of aesthetic consideration, and the greatest provision for pedestrian safety. However, we believe that the trail’s positive impact on surrounding neighborhoods could be further enhanced in the future. We believe that the Council should indicate its support for both the Committee’s proposed main trail alignment and these suggested future phases:

Underpass of Culbreth Road: If phase one of the trail construction does not include an underpass of Culbreth Road, we recommend that the Council make the underpass a future priority. We believe that the intersection of Culbreth Road and US 15/501 is too dangerous for an at-grade crossing of Culbreth Road due to the high volume of traffic. Automobiles at the intersection execute a number of different turning movements that create difficulties for pedestrians attempting to cross the road. We believe that even with a pedestrian controlled signal, pedestrians would be safer crossing under Culbreth Road via a specially built culvert. Such an underpass would especially make it easier for children to cross Culbreth Road

Additional Bridge near Frank Porter Graham School: The Town owns about 25 acres of property south of Morgan Creek and across from Frank Porter Graham School. The recommended first phase of this project does not include access between the north and south banks in this area. This effectively means that people living in the northwest portion of Culbreth Road would not have direct access to the Morgan Creek Trail. In addition, people using the trail or residents living north of Morgan Creek would not have access to the Town’s open space. The Committee believes a bridge should be built over Morgan Creek in the vicinity of Frank Porter Graham School as part of a future phase.

Budget

Currently the budget for this project is \$244,000 for the concept plan, flood modeling, and design.

We believe that the following additional budget may be possible:

2003 Town Parks Bond	\$2,000,000
Metropolitan Planning Organization Direct Allocation Funding	\$640,000
Payment in Lieu from Southern Village	\$102,000
Total Potential Additional Funding	\$2,742,000

SUMMARY

We believe that the Morgan Creek Trail is technically feasible as recommended by the committee. The project would consist of about one mile of trail and five bridges. The project would also involve dealing with several difficult areas that would require special construction techniques.

The project would require additional easements from at least four landowners. We believe that at least three of the landowners would place some conditions on the granting of easements to the Town.

In addition there are several property owners who would be affected by the trail because of the proximity of the trail. We believe that the Town should consider their needs on a case-by-case basis.

If the Council decides to proceed with this project the Town would have to take the following steps:

- Complete detailed design based on a Council approved concept plan
- Complete land and easement acquisition
- Develop detailed cost estimates based on a Council approved concept plan to better identify a feasible phase one project.

The Morgan Creek Trail Conceptual Plan Committee appreciates the opportunity to participate in this exciting project.

MINORITY OPINIONS

Committee member Bobbie Sigmund voted against the proposal to forward the recommendations to the Council. She offered these reasons.

1. The tunnel under Culbreth Road that the Morgan Creek Trail Committee recommends would put the public closer to our property and give them additional access to our property.
2. Another concern about the tunnel is that no one would use it once it is built. There are concerns about cleanliness, concerns that it would most likely not be maintained. It's hard to keep out the smell of urine once it is there inside.
3. The Committee recommends a "fence" to keep the public from our property, but since the area is on a "flood plain" no fence can be built.
4. Also OWASA will not put a gate on the OWASA easement access lane on our property. I recently spoke with their representative and a gate is not an option. What is already there, the bollard, is what will stay. This will mean that OWASA will not be able to help out with preventing public access to our property as was mentioned at the most recent Morgan Creek Trail Meeting last week as an option.
5. We feel that there has not been enough dialog with the NCDOT about the Culbreth Road and 15/501 intersection to make it safer. Instead, the "tunnel" is being pushed to be the

answer for the safety of the public to gain access to the Morgan Creek Trail and the Merritt Pasture from the Southern Village area. I walk home every day from UNC Dental School, south on Columbia Road, and I view this intersection quite a bit. Improvements can be made to this intersection to make it safer. But nothing has been done yet to discuss this between NCDOT and the Town of Chapel Hill.

6. We believe that the first concern of the Town of Chapel Hill should be to grant the suggestion of the Morgan Creek Trail Committee to connect the trail from Smith Level Road to 15/501 - Merritt Pasture, by staying on the North side of Morgan Creek. This plan is already on the recommendation. This plan is the quickest and less costly to connect the trail.