

Handshake partnership brings haven for biking enthusiasts

To many, a handshake symbolizes an introduction between two people. For others, it may represent a deal or an agreement. But for bike enthusiasts in the Hartwell Lake community, a handshake is the foundation for a new outdoor recreation haven.

Thanks to a Handshake Partnership agreement between the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Savannah District, and the Southern Off-Road Bicycle Association (SORBA), Hartwell Lake is now home to a professionally-designed, 7.2-mile mountain biking and multi-purpose trail.

Located at the Paynes Creek Camping area on the Tugaloo River arm of Hartwell Lake, the trail officially opened to the public during a ribbon cutting ceremony April 29. Representatives from the Corps, SORBA, and the contractor, Long Cane Trails, spoke about their involvement with the trail before cutting the ribbon together.

"The Corps' Handshake Partnership is a way for the Corps to plant the seed for community projects like this multi-purpose trail," said Ryan Hartwig, natural resources program manager at the district's headquarters in Savannah. "We drew on the expertise of groups like SORBA, who designed and mapped the trail, and along the way we developed long-lasting relationships."

The Hartwell office partnered with SORBA in 2009 to design the trail and apply for the Handshake Partnership funding. The Corps' national headquarters judged applications from all across the country based on six key factors: sustainability, partnership value, environmental stewardship value, communication and education value, recreational benefit and innovativeness.

The proposed multi-purpose trail exceeded all criteria. In January 2010, the Corps headquarters awarded Hartwell Lake \$25,000 in federal funds as a source of seed money to install the trail. SORBA matched the grant by donating an additional \$20,000 in volunteer efforts and labor toward the project.

"Under our Partnership Agreement, SORBA will help us maintain the trail and volunteer their time to ensure the project continues to benefit the Hartwell community," said Scott Kelley, Corps natural resources specialist.

Open to bikers, hikers, or walkers, the trail is nestled within the Paynes Creek 190-acre day-use area, owned and operated by the Corps.

"The trail will enhance mountain biking and recreational activities on the upper portion of Hartwell Lake and increase opportunities for bank fishing, hiking and bird watching," said Zach Harkness, natural resources program manager, Hartwell Dam and Lake.



Representatives from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Savannah District, the Southern Off-Road Bicycle Association, and Long Cane Trails cut the ribbon on a new 7.2-mile multi-purpose trail at Hartwell Lake, April 29. *USACE Photo.*



Riders enjoy the newly-constructed 7.2 mile biking and multi-purpose trail at the Paynes Creek Campground area on Hartwell Lake. The trail has received positive feedback from bikers in the Hartwell community for being fast, fluid and fun. *Photo by Tracy Robillard.*

"About 75 percent of the trail runs along the shoreline, so hikers get to enjoy a beautiful lakeside view while they exercise."

Volunteers make it happen

Volunteers like Jud Turpin, a Georgia National Guardsman, Hartwell-area resident, and member of the SORBA Athens chapter, helped with construction since December.

"I don't know how we would have finished the trail if it weren't for all the volunteers," said Turpin, who also serves as the trail custodian for a group of 35 volunteers. "Once the trail was cut out, we had to work on each section to finish clearing out debris, raking, and making it rideable."

Georgia SORBA groups from Gainesville, Columbus and Athens, as well as groups based in upstate South Carolina, came from hours away to volunteer their time.

"Kudos to the Corps—they've been great to work with and they've given us everything we needed," Turpin said. "They allowed us to come in and camp at the campground before it was even open, which was especially beneficial for the folks who lived far away."

Turpin said the trail is one of a kind for the Hartwell community. Before the trail was built, riders had to drive several hours away to Clemson, S.C., or Augusta, Ga., for a similar route.

"It's very fast, it flows well, and there are no dead spots," he said of the trail design. "If I had to rate it for difficulty, this would be between intermediate to advanced, but a beginner could ride the trail if they are careful going up the hills," he said, adding that his 11-year old son rode the trail three times with him.

Since it began in 2004, the Corps' Handshake Partnership Program aims to initiate new (or enhance existing) recreation and natural resources management opportunities. It encourages community engagement and promotes mutually beneficial activities between the Corps and partner organizations. The program allows the Corps to accept money, materials and volunteer services following the approval of a partnership agreement to accomplish work programs.

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— Ryan Hartwig, natural resources program manager, Savannah district

"It's great to get involved with the parks and with the Corps," Turpin said. "We want to build on our partnership and host some events to raise funds that we can put back into the trail. If we can make money with the resources we already have and use those funds to keep up the maintenance—all while providing outdoor recreation—it's a win-win for everyone."

For more information on the Corps Handshake Partnership Program, visit <http://corpslakes.usace.army.mil/employees/challenge/handshake.cfm> 

By Tracy Robillard, Corporate Communications Office