

Outdoors: Group to build Ride Center at Pocahontas State Park

Andy Thompson outdoors@timesdispatch.com | Posted: Sunday, April 7, 2013 12:00 am

Among the many budget amendments Gov. Bob McDonnell put forward in December that survived the recent General Assembly is one that could help change the face of mountain biking in Central Virginia.

The impetus for the amendment grew out of a chance meeting at a September 2012 fundraiser for Richmond 2015, the group bringing the world cycling championships here to the River City.

Greg Rollins, Jasen Eige and Jim Beamer were sitting around enjoying the bluegrass and barbecue, talking about cycling.

“Jasen asked me what would be a legacy cycling project for 2015?” said Rollins, president of the local mountain bike advocacy group, Richmond MORE. “I said a 35-mile mountain bike-optimized trail in a state park.”

Eige is a cyclist and a trail runner and the senior policy adviser to the governor. Beamer is an avid cyclist, a board member for Richmond 2015 and a senior lobbyist with Dominion Resources. They started talking more about the idea and it quickly grew legs.

A month later, Eige arranged a meeting with folks from state parks, the Department of Conservation and Recreation, the Department of Commerce and Trade, the International Mountain Bicycling Association and others.

Pocahontas State Park would work, they decided, because it’s huge (8,000 acres) and near Richmond. Everyone was on board. It wouldn’t be cheap, costing possibly as much as \$2 million, IMBA estimated. But the payoff would be equally large: Richmond, with its unique downtown trails, and now this would qualify as an official IMBA “Ride Center,” making it a must-see destination for bike tourists, not to mention a tremendous resource for locals.

“The goal,” Eige said, was to “have this thing that stays here in Richmond after the event comes and goes and helps promote cycling.”

They decided the best way to tackle it would be through a public/private partnership.

Eige and the governor’s office did their part by shepherding \$50,000 of general fund money through the budget-amendment process. Earlier this week, Beamer said he’s “very optimistic” that in the next week or two, the Dominion Foundation will make a matching \$50,000 grant.

“Then we’ll start reaching out to (large businesses),” Beamer said. “There are a lot of smaller companies in the area, too, that have some really active CEOs. We’re waiting to get the seed money planted, and then what I’d like to do is start pounding the turf and getting investments going and building enthusiasm for it.”

One hundred thousand dollars may seem like a long way from \$2 million, but Rollins said that was for the bells-and-whistles version — trailheads with restrooms, for instance. And Beamer added that he doesn’t think it will cost nearly that much because state parks employees will be able to suggest adjustments to get some economies of scale that will bring the cost down.

“With the \$2 million, it was better to go ahead and put the whole ball of wax out there and then work down,” Beamer said. “I think it will be significantly less to get the singletrack in, and then once people see what’s going on, there’ll be a lot of people that want to sponsor this or that.”

One intriguing aspect of the project is a proposed section of trail that would be open only to riders with disabilities. The trail would be specially tailored for riders on hand cycles and other adaptive-use bikes, whether they’re wounded veterans from the V.A. hospital or kids with physical challenges.

“This would be something that would be very unique to Virginia, maybe on the East Coast,” Eige said.

The next step, he said, is to get all the interested parties back to the table to come up with a strategy going forward. There’s still much to be decided, including how much trail can be put in and where, exactly, it will go, but Beamer said an aggressive timetable is necessary to get the work done in time.

“The goal is to have a significant trail in the ground by the spring of 2015 when people start coming here for the races.”