

Wheelchair accessible trail a 'thundering' success



Meg Mitchell, left, Pam Underhill, second from left, Ben Rose and Jody Carton stand at the end of a newly constructed trail leading to Thundering Falls, Saturday in Killington. The first wheelchair-accessible section of the Appalachian Trail in Vermont, a 900-foot boardwalk and path through floodplain and forest, opened to the public Saturday after three years of construction.

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KILLINGTON — The first wheelchair-accessible section of the Appalachian Trail in Vermont, a 900-foot boardwalk and path through flood plain and forest, opened to the public Saturday after three years of construction.

The boardwalk off River Road extends over a wide expanse of the Ottauquechee River floodplain. Then a gravel path slopes up through the woods to a platform at the base of Thundering Falls, a sheer rock face with water pouring over it.

It's the fourth wheelchair accessible section of the 2,175-mile Appalachian Trail from Maine to Georgia to be built in the country.

There's a consciousness to do it," said Brian King, an Appalachian Trail Conservancy spokesman. "It's a public trail, it's public land, everybody that can ought to be able to get out on some part of it."

The project was part of the relocation of a section of the Appalachian Trail that was formerly on Thundering Brook Road.

"It moves the entire trail off roads and puts it through the forest and across a universal accessible path that provides access to Thundering Falls, which is Thundering today," said Dave Hardy, director of field programs for the Green Mountain Club, who oversaw the project.

The project, which cost about \$400,000, involved drilling piers 80 feet into the floodplain for the boardwalk, said Ben Rose, GMC's executive director. The Green Mountain Club and Vermont Youth Conservation Corp. worked for three seasons to build the wheelchair-accessible section and relocate the rest of trail up a rugged hill.

"This was a huge effort," Rose said.

And it's been years in the making, dating back at least 20 years to when the floodplain was purchased with plans to put the trail across it, Hardy said.

Since then the project has gone through many iterations, he said.

It took faith, perseverance, hard work and good will, said Pam Underhill, a U.S. National Park Service manager for the Appalachian National Scenic Trail.

"The good will comes from the fact that people involved in this decided and chose to make this an accessible section of the trail," said Underhill, whose mother was confined to a wheelchair after contracting polio in the early 1950s.

"As a nation we have come a long ways in terms of recognizing our responsibility to all of our citizens," she said. "The Appalachian Trail is not a resource, as a ridgetop trail from Maine to Georgia, it's not a resource that lends itself to being wheelchair accessible."

Other wheelchair-accessible sections have been built in Falls Village, Conn., Pochuck Creek in Vernon, N.J., and Osborne farm near Shady Valley, Tenn., King said. A fifth is under construction in Bear Mountain State Park near West Point, N.Y., he said.

In Vermont, officials hope the trail will be enjoyed by walkers, photographers and wildlife viewers as well as the disabled and trail hikers.

"We think that ultimately the community is going to be the greatest beneficiary of this," Rose said.

"Runners and hikers and dog walkers and people who want to go out for a walk are going to have this great amenity."