

Trailblazers set out to build state's 2nd longest footpath

By John Harmon

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BLUE RIDGE, Ga. — A small band of volunteers will push their way through the forests of the Cohutta Mountains west of here this summer in the hope of completing the second longest hiking trail in Georgia.

Not a dime of taxpayers' money will be spent building the footpath, the Benton MacKaye Trail, through the Chattahoochee National Forest. The only cost will be the backbreaking labor and sweat of the volunteers.

One volunteer, in fact, admits he likes the hard work of trailblazing. "I'd rather build a trail than walk one," said Edwin Dale, president of the Benton MacKaye Trail Association, an Atlanta-based club that is building and maintaining the trail.

The MacKaye trail, which was named for the originator of the Appalachian Trail, was first proposed in 1978 as a three-state, 250-mile alternate loop to the heavily used Appalachian Trail. The 2,100-mile Appalachian Trail runs from Springer Mountain in Georgia to Maine.

About 50 miles of the MacKaye trail are open in Georgia. Another 25 miles through the rugged Cohutta Mountains remain to the Tennessee line. When this section is completed, possibly this summer, the MacKaye's 75 miles will be second only to the Appalachian Trail's 80 miles in Georgia.

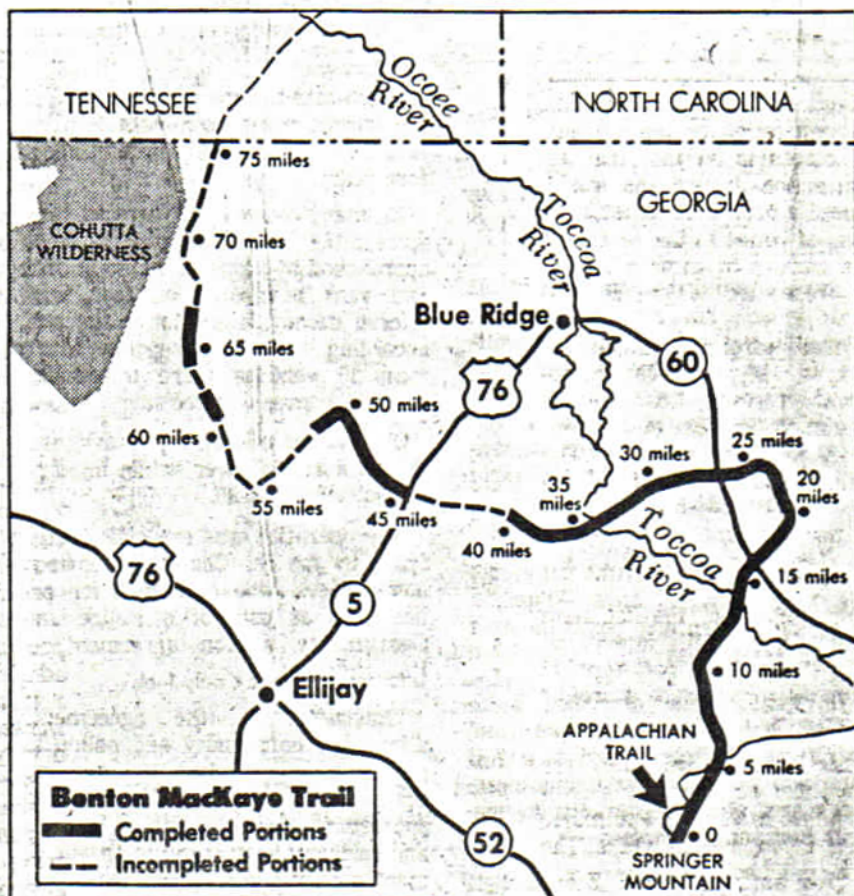
Both trails use Springer Mountain as their southern terminus, but the MacKaye quickly splits, heading northwest and then northeast along the Appalachian's western edge. The Appalachian Trail goes east and northeast, running along the Blue Ridge crest.

Dale says 40 of the club's 90 members are active in trail construction at least one weekend per summer. Almost all members are older than 30, with many 50-plus volunteers working on the construction crew.

"We're out here because we love the mountains and because Georgia needs more hiking trails," he said.

The association gets help from the Georgia Appalachian Trail Club and the Sierra Club's Atlanta chapter.

The club's long-range plans call for the trail to be extended into Tennes-



KATHY INSKEEP/Staff

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see and North Carolina, reconnecting with the Appalachian Trail in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. That would form a 400-mile southern Appalachian hiking loop.

Almost half the proposed route uses existing trails or abandoned jeep roads, and the club plans to tie those sections together with new construction. Almost all of it will be located on U.S. Forest Service land.

Despite the backing of the Chattahoochee National Forest for the Georgia section, officials of the Cherokee National Forest in Tennessee and the Nantahala National Forest in North Carolina have not agreed to allow the MacKaye Trail through their jurisdictions.

The U.S. Forest Service's Southeast regional office studied the proposal

last year and approved the Georgia route but turned thumbs down on going farther.

"It will be allowed in Tennessee and North Carolina when there is a clear need for the trail," said Pat Thomas, supervisor of the Chattahoochee forest.

Dale said the group will finish the Georgia section before attempting to find support for the project in the other two states.

"I told the supervisor of the Cherokee National Forest that when we finish in Georgia, we want him to come down and hike our trail. And if he likes it, we'll build him one in Tennessee," Dale said.

And if he doesn't like it?
"He'll like it," replied Dale.