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## The right wing attacks public greenways

Posted By [Rob Schofield](#) On 4/4/2008 @ 7:00 am In [Radical Right Reality Check](#) | [Comments Disabled](#)

### Unfortunately, it's not an April Fools joke

Ever wondered if Raleigh's market fundamentalist "think" tanks had too much time and money on their hands? Well, if you had any doubts, you probably ought to check out the John Locke Foundation's recent attacks on that most pernicious of socialist conspiracies, the public greenway.

Yes, that kind of greenway - the one that Webster's defines as:

"a protected natural area that connects developed, esp. urban, areas, often providing trails for bicycling, hiking, etc."

For the last week, the group has been flogging [1] [a policy report](#) (or "regional brief" - whatever the heck that means) entitled "Raleigh's Neuse River Greenway: Nice place to visit, but you wouldn't want to live next to it." According to this rather odd little document, greenways like [2] [the one that's been under construction on Raleigh's eastern edge along the Neuse River](#) are an enormous imposition on the homeowners who live nearby and a threat to the sacred glue that makes life on earth worth living: private property.

How the group ever decided to go off on this strange tangent is a bit of a mystery, but it appears that it may have been undertaken initially in hopes of influencing last October's bond vote ([3] [in which voters overwhelmingly approved new greenway spending](#)). Whatever the reason, Locke staffers went to the trouble of preparing and mailing (at least twice) a cover letter and a "survey" to a handful of homeowners who live, according to the report, "directly adjacent to the proposed Neuse River Greenway."

### (Push) polling results

The surveys were mailed during the late summer of last year. The original mailing, dated August 22, 2007, also included a dollar bill and self-addressed stamped envelope. The cover letter explained that "The John Locke Foundation is conducting a study of greenways being built in Raleigh and we are very interested in your opinions." (It's not clear whether Locke ever actually surveyed about any other greenways.) It also includes **bolded** statements like:

**"A portion of the Neuse River Greenway will be built on the south bank of the Neuse River behind your home."**

**"It is not for the exclusive use of residents of your neighborhood."**

As with the cover letter, the survey itself includes several questions that are clearly designed to produce a desired result. For instance, after asking in one question "did you know that there will be a public access path to the greenway [running behind homes on certain streets]?" the survey asks respondents to agree or disagree with such statements as:

- "The public access path will be an asset to my community."
- "The greenway will **increase** the number of strangers walking in and around my neighborhood."
- "The greenway will make my neighborhood **less** safe."

After compiling the results (the report claims Locke received 61 surveys back), Locke folks concluded that respondents were skeptical and attacked the project:

"While the greenway itself would impose costs on all of the property owners, the access path is an even greater invasion of privacy. Access path residents would have to bear a greater cost because their privacy would be more directly invaded than the privacy of those who lived near the greenway."

This statement is links to the following rather remarkable footnote:

"After the survey was administered, city officials agreed with the complaints of local residents and moved the public access path to a new location under a nearby power line. This change does not influence the results of the survey."

Huh? Why not?

The report goes on:

"The fact that many people who live directly next to the proposed Neuse River Greenway do not see it as an asset is not surprising. It confirms one of the central principles of economics: people take better care of their own property than they do of property owned in common. This survey was conducted before the greenway was constructed. A survey after construction is likely to show similar results."

Oh really?

It concludes:

"The City of Raleigh would be forcing homeowners who lived directly next to the greenway to pay higher costs in terms of lack of privacy and an increase in crime, litter and noise than they would receive in benefits. Those consequences are consistent with a concept in resource economics known as the 'Tragedy of the Commons,' which is that public property is likely to be mistreated and used in a non-sustainable way.

These survey results also imply that greenway users who would not live next to the greenway would receive more in benefits than they would pay in costs. Such results could not happen if the greenway were to be constructed on private property. A private greenway operator would have to pay the property owners for their land, and to recover those costs, the operator would need to charge those who use the greenway. A system based on property rights and the rule of law would produce a more equitable result."

### **Reality Check**

Though promoted as genuine research, the anti-greenway report is actually a humorous combination of push polling and unsubstantiated ideological assertions. Not only was the survey clearly designed to produce certain results, it appears to have misled respondents in a manner that's somewhat ironic for an organization so concerned with "privacy." For while the cover letter assures respondents that the results will be "confidential" - a statement that implies anonymity - each survey appears to have been individually numbered so as to identify the respondent. Indeed, a follow-up letter sent on September 4 appears to have been sent only to those who didn't respond to the first.

Laying aside the somewhat slippery quality of the survey, itself, what's more troubling and annoying, of course, are the absurd and extreme claims and conclusions of the report. For instance:

- Who says it's a "central principle of economics" that private property is cared for better than public property? Whoever it is ought to take a look at some of the nation's toxic waste sites and privately owned slums.
- What actual evidence is there that the Neuse River Greenway will produce a problematic increase in invasions of privacy and "crime, litter and noise"?
- *Private* greenways and parks? Are they really serious?
- And how exactly is it that a public greenway is not based on "the rule of law"?

Interestingly, one of the homeowners in the neighborhood of the greenway is one of the Triangle's leading greenway champions, environmental advocates and [4] [chair of the Triangle Transit Authority, Sig Hutchinson](#). Hutchinson finds the whole anti-greenway campaign absurd. He reports that he has gathered a petition signed by 18 of his neighbors who heartily endorse the greenway and could easily gather more. He also points out the neighborhood (all of which is newly developed) was sold as a "greenway community." According to Hutchinson,

"To now say you don't want it in is like living in a golf course community and then complaining when the developer puts in a golf course. It's just plain silly."

### The bottom line

While the anti-greenway campaign is sure to have zero impact in the near term, it is worth taking note of for one important reason, namely the window it offers into the extreme, some might say downright bizarre, brand of libertarian-conservatism that afflicts Raleigh's right wing. Deep down, these folks don't believe in public institutions. Whether it's public transportation, roads, schools, or even parks, North Carolina's best known right wing think tanks are committed to a radical deconstruction of public institutions and the emergence of a very different North Carolina - a dog-eat-dog world in which profit and property are king and intentional and collective problem solving is opposed at every turn. It is a strange and cynical worldview that deserves constant exposure and confrontation.

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- [5] [A "back of the envelope budget"](#) - March 21st, 2008
- [6] [Revisionist propaganda](#) - March 7th, 2008
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URLs in this post:

[1] a policy report: [http://www.johnlocke.org/policy\\_reports/display\\_story.html?id=148](http://www.johnlocke.org/policy_reports/display_story.html?id=148)

[2] the one that's been under construction on Raleigh's eastern edge along the Neuse River:

[http://www.raleighnc.gov/portal/server.pt/gateway/PTARGS\\_0\\_2\\_306\\_209\\_0\\_43/http%3B/pt03/DIG\\_Web\\_Content/category/Leisure/Park\\_and\\_Greenway\\_Planning/Park\\_Bond\\_Projects/Cat-MCH-2007620-103940-2007\\_Parks\\_Bond\\_Referend.html](http://www.raleighnc.gov/portal/server.pt/gateway/PTARGS_0_2_306_209_0_43/http%3B/pt03/DIG_Web_Content/category/Leisure/Park_and_Greenway_Planning/Park_Bond_Projects/Cat-MCH-2007620-103940-2007_Parks_Bond_Referend.html)

[3] in which voters overwhelmingly approved new greenway spending:

<http://www.ncpolicywatch.com/2007/10/10/rejecting-the-right-on-growth-and-planning>

[4] chair of the Triangle Transit Authority, Sig Hutchinson:

[http://www.ridetta.org/Inside\\_TTA/Board\\_Of\\_Trustees/boardMembers.html](http://www.ridetta.org/Inside_TTA/Board_Of_Trustees/boardMembers.html)

[5] A "back of the envelope budget": <http://www.ncpolicywatch.com/cms/2008/03/21/a-%e2%80%9cback-of-the-envelope-budget%e2%80%9d/>

[6] Revisionist propaganda: <http://www.ncpolicywatch.com/cms/2008/03/07/revisionist-propaganda/>

[7] Going to extremes: <http://www.ncpolicywatch.com/cms/2008/03/01/going-to-extremes/>

[8] Conservatism at its worst:

<http://www.ncpolicywatch.com/cms/2008/02/23/conservatism-at-its-worst/>

[9] Using tragedy for political purposes:

<http://www.ncpolicywatch.com/cms/2008/01/18/using-tragedy-for-political-purposes/>

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