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The Waccamaw Neck Bikeway has half its crown jewel, a winding, shaded path from Litchfield Beach to the entrance of Huntington Beach State Park.

On Saturday morning, Bike the Neck organizer Linda Ketron and County Councilman Jerry Oakley opened the first part of a three-mile paved path that winds through the park's forest safely away from the traffic on U.S. 17.

"Georgetown County is held up as a model of cooperation between the county, state and private citizens," Ketron said before a ribbon-cutting ceremony at the northern end of the new segment and a day-long bike rodeo and picnic to mark National Trails Day.

Oakley saved a surprise for the ceremony.

He said Ketron has been selected to receive a National Recreation and Park Association Volunteer Services Award.

"It exemplifies the very best in parks and recreation," Oakley said. Ketron has been invited to go to Seattle on Oct. 11 for the presentation.

"When you think of volunteers, you think of Linda Ketron," Oakley said. "She is just remarkable, the best possible example."

Ketron spread the credit for the 10-year bike path effort to numerous volunteers and cited Debbie Mann of the USDA for making sure the path's asphalt was thick enough and trees were spared. That has resulted in a "noodling road" through the forest for bikers," Ketron said. She said the Huntington Beach State Park segment is the crown jewel of the Bike the Neck path, part of the East Coast Greenway.

Work on the next segment through Huntington Beach State Park has already started. The county has cleared the path and will begin building a bridge and boardwalk that crosses wetlands and links to the Murrells Inlet segment. Bids will soon be let for the paving.

Ketron said the two paved portions of the path through Huntington Beach State Park cost around \$200,000 each and the 400-foot bridge at the north end to link with Murrells Inlet will cost \$250,000. Money came from many sources, including the Grand Strand Area Transit System, S.C. Department of Transportation and county accommodations taxes.

"This is a fantastic thing to have," said Huntington Beach State Park ranger Mark Davies. "It will open the park to local bike traffic from Pawleys Island to Murrells Inlet." He said he uses the trail every day as he walks his dogs.

The park's new manager, Brenda Magers, likes the fact that the path is paved. It opens opportunities for the handicapped to enjoy nature along with bikers, walkers and joggers.

"What's not to love?" she said at the ceremony. "It's a safer alternative to riding on the road. Visitors to the park staying for a week will have a new activity now."