

Cleveland County, OK Invests \$1 Million in Lake Thunderbird Mountain Bike Trails for Tourism and Economic Development

Investment Intended to Attract Both Tourists and Workforce Talent

NORMAN, OK, UNITED STATES, May 28, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- The Cleveland County Economic Development Coalition (CCEDC), in partnership with the Cleveland County Board of Commissioners, Visit Norman, the Oklahoma Department of Tourism and Recreation, and the Federal Bureau of Reclamation, announced the official grand opening of the newly redesigned mountain bike trail system at Lake Thunderbird State Park.

The project represents a \$1 million investment of American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds and delivers 13.78 miles of professionally designed sustainable multi-use trails in the park's Clear Bay area, transforming outdated, erosion-prone trails into a premier outdoor recreation asset for residents and visitors alike.

“

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Lawrence McKinney

The initiative reflects a broader strategy to strengthen Cleveland County's competitiveness by investing in quality-of-place infrastructure that supports workforce attraction, tourism, and long-term economic growth. “This is what modern economic development looks like,” said Lawrence McKinney, President and CEO of CCEDC. “We are investing in the kind of assets that attract talent, support tourism,

and make Cleveland County more competitive. CCEDC did not just support this project; we invested time, talent, and treasure because we know the quality of place is no longer optional; it



Entrance to Lake Thunderbird

is essential.” In fact, we submitted our five-year strategic plan to the International Economic Development Council, and this component, one of four workforce development initiatives, was awarded the Best Use of Federal Resources nationally.

The redesigned trail system was constructed by Rock Solid Trail Contracting, a nationally recognized trail builder based in Arkansas, the US capital of mountain bike trails, and incorporates modern, sustainable design standards to enhance rider experience while protecting the natural environment and Lake Thunderbird’s critical water resources.

Key features include:

- 13.78 miles of redesigned trails built to national sustainability standards
- Improved drainage and erosion control to protect water quality
- Progressive trail design for beginner to advanced users
- Enhanced trail features and flow for a modern riding experience
- Upgraded infrastructure and wayfinding for accessibility and navigation



Cleveland County Elected Officials



Oklahoma Senator Standridge

Ben Gabardi, Design Project Manager, shared that ‘working with the CCEDC, Oklahoma State Parks, VisitNorman, and other local champions to revamp the Lake Thunderbird trail system into a more accessible and community-centric recreation asset has been a fantastic experience. I cannot wait to see how the initiative taken by the stakeholders at Lake Thunderbird sets a precedent for surrounding communities to expand outdoor recreation access for their citizens.”

To ensure the long-term sustainability of the investment, CCEDC also secured approval to purchase approximately \$5,000 in specialized maintenance equipment, equipping local partners with the tools needed to properly maintain the system and protect the county’s investment over time.

"This project is about more than building trails; it is really about delivering and protecting a long-term community asset," McKinney added. "We made sure there was a plan not just to build it, but to sustain it."

Cleveland County Commissioners emphasized the importance of the project as a high-impact and responsible use of federal recovery funds. "We were intentional about how we invested these funds," said Cleveland County Commission Chairman Jacob McHughes. "This project delivers something our residents can use immediately, while creating long-term value for the county and the state. It's exactly the kind of investment these funds were meant to support."

The Lake Thunderbird trail project required a structured, compliant approach to ensure alignment with federal ARPA guidelines, including eligibility review, budgeting, procurement, contracting, and ongoing reporting. CCEDC led the coordination of these efforts in partnership with Cleveland County leadership, guiding the project through federal compliance, local approvals, and implementation to ensure funds were deployed efficiently and responsibly.

"This was a highly structured process with multiple layers of oversight, from federal compliance to local approvals and procurement," said Kenny Adams, SVP Community Affairs/ARPA Grants Manager. "Our focus was on making sure every step, from budgeting to contracting to execution, was done correctly and transparently. In the end, we delivered a project that not only meets those standards but creates a lasting asset that we all can be proud of."

"When you're investing public dollars, the expectation is clear: you deliver something meaningful and lasting. This project does exactly that," said Commissioner Rusty Grissom. "It is a high-quality amenity that benefits our residents and strengthens Cleveland County as a whole." Commissioner Rod Cleveland shared, "This is another example of how Cleveland County invests in its people, its places, and its opportunities, and we could not be any prouder."

As one of Oklahoma's most visited state parks, Lake Thunderbird plays a critical role in regional tourism. The enhanced trail system is expected to increase visitation, extend the length of stay, and support local businesses. "Outdoor recreation is one of the fastest-growing drivers of tourism, and this project positions Lake Thunderbird as a premier destination," said Dan Schemm, VisitNorman President. "It gives us a stronger story to tell and a reason for visitors to stay longer and come back." "This project demonstrates the power of partnership," said Oklahoma Tourism Executive Director Amy Blackburn. "By aligning local leadership, state resources, and federal investment, we are creating outdoor experiences that benefit both residents and visitors across Oklahoma."

Beyond recreation, the project supports broader economic development goals by enhancing livability, strengthening tourism, and reinforcing Cleveland County's position as a place where people want to live, work, and invest. "This is about building a county that competes," said Matt Clouse, Market President of Valliance Bank and Chairman of CCEDC. "When people choose

where to live, or businesses choose where to invest, quality of place matters, and this project delivers on that.”

Lawrence McKinney

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