

# Happy Trails: Greenways For Everyone

by Hannah Twaddell

Up until a few years ago, greenways were largely considered just a recreational amenity by transportation professionals and local residents. But a shift in thinking has started to happen. People begin by using the trails for recreation, but then start finding ways to access them from local streets. From there, it's not long before these interconnected networks are used for everyday transportation.

According to a recent *USA Today*/Gallup Poll, 84 percent of Americans are changing their travel habits in response to the gas crisis.<sup>1</sup> Where folks once thought nothing of hopping in the car for every trip, they are now consolidating errands, carpooling, taking transit, and yes, bicycling and walking whenever they can. Bike shop owners like Hervey Hawk at Cycle Cave in Albuquerque are doing a brisk business in repairs for people who are “dragging 30 and 40 year old bikes out of the garage” so they can ride them to work.<sup>2</sup>

Adding to people's desire for bike and pedestrian routes – particularly greenway trails – is the growing nationwide concern over the public health problems related to our sedentary lifestyles. According to Keith Laughlin, president of Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, “the more trails and greenways we can help create and connect in communities, the more opportunities people will have to be active in their transportation, burning calories instead of carbon.” Veteran greenways planner Charlie Denney of Alta Planning + Design says people at public workshops are no longer asking, “why should we spend money on trails?”

1 “Majority Now Cutting Back Elsewhere to Afford Gas” (May 8, 2008); available at: <www.gallup.com>.  
2 *USA Today* (May 9, 2008).

but “when can we get them under construction?”

## WHAT ARE GREENWAY TRAILS?

A greenway is any open space corridor that is managed for conservation, recreation, and/or transportation. A greenway trail is a linear corridor with protected status that provides public access for recreation or transportation.<sup>3</sup>

Greenway trails can be found within natural corridors, such as a riverfronts, stream valleys, or ridgelines, or within man-made routes, such as railroad or utility rights-of-way, canals, or scenic roads.<sup>4</sup> They provide a cost-effective, low-impact way of connecting people and places, linking parks, nature preserves, cultural features, and historic sites with each other and with neighbor-



Along the Baltimore-Annapolis Trail.

3 This definition is similar to the one set out in the influential 1990 report, *Trails for All Americans*, prepared by American Trails for the National Park Service.

4 As you embark upon a plan, be sure to clarify whether you are proposing a greenway, a trail, or both. A greenway can be created for the purpose of land preservation, not necessarily with a trail. A trail is a public pathway that may or may not traverse a greenway that is protected through purchase or easement. Some landowners are willing to donate, sell, or grant easements for a greenway but not a trail. Others are willing to support the trail but don't want restrictions on the land.

hoods. Greenway trails can be paved or unpaved, and designed to serve a variety of users, including hikers, walkers, joggers, bicyclists, skaters, horseback riders, cross-country skiers, and people with disabilities.

Communities of all sizes are designing greenways that tie into streets and sidewalks, forming one continuous bicycle/pedestrian network. For example, the East Coast Greenway plan for Philadelphia aims to connect major tourist destinations and city neighborhoods into Center City. The Louisville Loop will connect more than one hundred miles of trails and sidewalks throughout Kentucky's largest city, while rural Montgomery County, Virginia, recently completed a plan to link five villages within a 388-square mile area.

## CREATING GREENWAYS: A FOUR-STEP PATH

### 1. Organize: Cultivate a sustainable, citizen-led advocacy group with strong leadership and a clear vision.

Many of America's greenways and trails have resulted from the efforts of community members. The keys to long-term success are two-fold: leadership and support.

The most important element is a core leader or leaders who have a clearly articulated vision and the ability to recruit others to help realize it. The ideal candidate for project leader is someone who has strong communication skills and can foster teamwork; understands how government works; is sensitive to people's varying needs and desires; and has tenacity and patience.<sup>5</sup>

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5 *Virginia Greenways and Trails Toolbox* (Virginia Dept. of Conservation & Recreation and the Virginia Trails Association, Oct. 2000, Chpt. 2, p. 1; available to download at: <www.dcr.virginia.gov/recreational\_planning/documents/toolbox.pdf>).



RAILS-TO-TRAILS CONSERVANCY

Trails can be an attractive neighborhood amenity, as with this recreational trail being developed in Berkeley, California.

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The second key element is to sustain the effort over the long haul by forming an efficient, well-managed team. Citizen leaders should include people from communities along the proposed corridor as well as potential user groups, businesses, and civic organizations. The group should actively engage public and private planners, engineers, and administrators of preserves, parks, and transportation facilities.

**2. Plan: Create a plan that enjoys broad public support.**

Develop a simple conceptual plan and mission statement to share in one-on-one or small group meetings with public officials, community leaders, and, especially, landowners along the proposed corridor. Soliciting this early input is critical to success. This is not a time for negotiating easements or talking about

public funds, but a time to let people know about the group's vision and, most importantly, to listen to their ideas and concerns.

To write the full-fledged plan, engage professionals in landscape architecture, community and recreation planning, public participation techniques, civil engineering, and architecture. Public agency staff may be able to do this in-house, but the most effective approach is usually to hire consultants who specialize in greenway planning. Organizations such as Rails-to-Trails Conservancy and the American Planning Association, as well as public agencies such as state departments of transportation and parks/recreation, maintain consultant databases and can provide ideas for developing requests for proposals.

The plan should include a physical inventory of the proposed corridor, ideally produced in a series of GIS map layers that can be kept up to date. Key data includes:

- topography
- hydrology and flood plains
  - wildlife habitats
  - existing or residual environmental contamination
  - roadways and roadbeds, rail lines (active and abandoned), trails, and other engineered facilities
- public services and utilities
  - scenic resources
  - historic and cultural resources
  - demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the community and

potential trail users

- parks, open spaces, and community facilities
- current and planned land uses
- property ownership

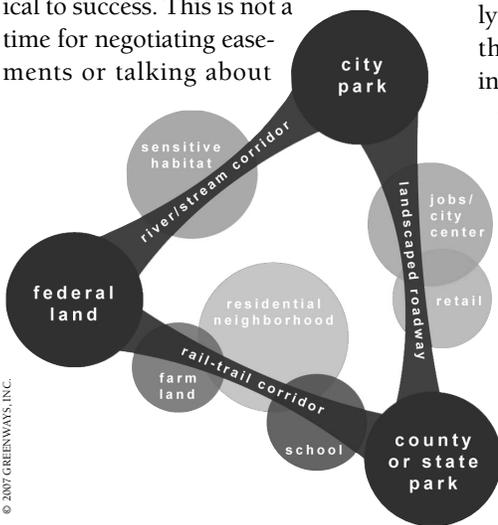
The plan should include an analysis of trail demand among community residents and visitors, displayed on a map of estimated trips at various points.<sup>6</sup> Another element is an assessment of potential economic benefits such as increased property values and business revenues; new jobs; increased corporate relocation and retention; and collateral development such as B&Bs and regional tourism.<sup>7</sup>

Next, the plan's feasibility must be considered. Consider the likelihood of acquiring the land and funding for construction and maintenance; gauge the level of public support; and determine which entities could own and operate the trail.

All of this information is assembled into a draft master plan that is ready to share with stakeholders and the larger community. Then a more detailed trail development plan can be prepared showing elements such as access points, road crossings and bridges, gates and culverts, and amenities such as information kiosks

<sup>6</sup> A standard reference for estimating trail demand is the U.S. Dept. of Transportation's *Compendium of Available Bicycle and Pedestrian Trip Generation Data in the United States*.

<sup>7</sup> The National Park Service publication *Economic Impacts of Protecting Rivers, Trails, and Greenway Corridors* is one of many useful resources on estimating economic benefits of potential trails.



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and rest rooms. The plan also provides an overall design theme that supports the intended trail users, and is consistent with the character of the surrounding community.<sup>8</sup> Finally, it identifies an implementation strategy with cost estimates and funding sources, as well as approaches for ongoing trail management and maintenance.

### 3. Build: Acquire right-of-way and construct well-designed paths.

The most challenging part of many greenway development projects is right-of-way acquisition. It helps to understand real estate law and negotiation tactics in order to acquire the necessary titles, leases, easements, and/ or access agreements.

In addition to the tedium of the legal process, this is the stage when misperceptions can stall enthusiasm. Landowners and municipal governments often worry about the liability of allowing public access to their land. Get familiar with state codes and municipal insurance policies – they often provide indemnification for greenways. Most state recreational use statutes provide a high degree of protection to landowners who allow public access.

Another misperception is that trails will reduce property values or invite crime. In fact, properties in the vicinity of trails tend to sell faster and for a higher price than neighboring lands.<sup>9</sup>

Trails can also help reduce crime by



Along the Baltimore-Annapolis Trail.

attracting people to formerly distressed areas. For instance, the Baltimore & Annapolis Rail Park runs through an area of Anne Arundel County that had been plagued by drug dealers. Within months of the trail opening, businesses were starting to move into the area. “Once it was re-created as a place people wanted to go,” says Charlie Denney, “the crime went away.”

The bottom line is that there is little evidence that trails lead to an increase in crime.<sup>10</sup>

Having said this, keep in mind that greenway trails – like all public spaces – can benefit from “Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design” (CPTED) techniques to reduce the likelihood of crime. This includes lighting, signage, call-boxes, and well-pruned shrubbery.<sup>11</sup> In Arlington, Virginia, and Louisville, Kentucky, trail markers are color-coded with a GPS location in the city’s emergency-911 database, allowing trail users with cell phones to tell police where they are. Many trails also are policed by volunteer or professional patrols.

When designing and building trails, it’s important to adhere to basic construction standards, from clearing foliage and establishing the foundation to managing runoff and water crossings.<sup>12</sup> Trails should also be designed to support all desired users. For example, while low-hanging branches don’t interfere much with hikers, they’re an obstacle for cyclists and equestrians. Kelly Pack, manager of trail development for Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, also notes that “designers should comply with suggested Americans with Disabilities Act guidelines to ensure safe access for users of all physical abilities.”

Funding sources for trail planning  
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<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., *Rails-Trails and Safe Communities: The Experience on 372 Trails* (Rails-to-Trails Conservancy in cooperation with the National Park Service, 1998); available to download through their online publications library <[www.railtrails.org](http://www.railtrails.org)>.

<sup>11</sup> *CPTED Guidelines, Safer By Design in Virginia* (VA Crime Prevention Association and VA CPTED Committee). See also: <[www.cpted-watch.com](http://www.cpted-watch.com)>.

<sup>12</sup> *Virginia Greenways and Trails Toolbox*, Chpt. 4.

<sup>8</sup> *Virginia Greenways and Trails Toolbox*, Chpt. 3, p. 11. See footnote 3 for full cite.

<sup>9</sup> See *Trails and Greenways: Advancing the Smart Growth Agenda* (Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, 2002), p. 19; available to download through their online publications library: <[www.railtrails.org](http://www.railtrails.org)>.

## Editor’s Note: Downtown Trails

There’s been growing interest in connecting trail systems to downtowns. It’s a great way of strengthening our downtowns, by providing access for bicycle commuters as well as more casual bicyclists and walkers. In Akron, Ohio, for example, the popular Ohio & Erie Canal Towpath trail will be connected to downtown this August with the opening of a 275-foot-long bridge for pedestrians and bicyclists over the Akron Innerbelt highway.

Sometimes dedicated bikeways or bike lanes (instead of greenway trails) can connect downtown to existing recreational trails. One recent example is a mile-long bike commuter bikeway, funded by the Federal Highway Administration, that links downtown Wichita, Kansas, to the Arkansas River Path, a 13-mile long recreational trail along the banks of the Big Arkansas River



In Wichita, Kansas, the Keeper of the Plains sculpture keeps watch over a newly built bike/pedestrian bridge.

Use of downtown bike connections will increase if bike storage facilities are provided. In Chicago, a downtown bicycle center provides easy access to bike routes along Lake Michigan. Besides offering secure, enclosed “parking” for 300 bikes, the facility provides showers, lockers, and bike repair services. For more details: <[www.chicago bikestation.com](http://www.chicago bikestation.com)>. On the West Coast, the non-profit Bikestation organization provides secure facilities in Seattle and five California cities. For more: <[www.bikestation.org](http://www.bikestation.org)>.



Trying out the new STAR Trail.



## The STAR Trail

The STAR (Supporting Therapeutic Access to Recreation) Trail, located in the Virginia Shenandoah Valley community of Fishersville, is an accessible, finely crushed and packed stone trail open to pedestrians, joggers, and wheelchair users.

Conceived by therapist Sharon Russo of the Woodrow Wilson Rehabilitation Center, the half mile trail starts at a picnic shelter behind the Center, crosses a lake onto a small island, continues across a bridge, and loops around the lake. Along the way, the trail features benches, resting areas, and pleasant landscaping, as well as a six-station outdoor fitness area, fishing platforms, and barbecue pits.

For more information, contact Bonnie Riedesel, Central Shenandoah Planning District Commission, 540-885-5174; [bonnie@cspdc.org](mailto:bonnie@cspdc.org).

See also "Trail Leads to Accessible Tranquility," in *The News Leader* (June 25, 2008); <[www.newsleader.com](http://www.newsleader.com)>.



Editor's Note:

## Building Connections

Trail systems build connections in two ways. One is the kind of connection we typically think of – connecting neighborhoods with parks, schools, downtowns, and so on. Those are the linkages so nicely represented in the hub and spoke diagram on page 4.

But trails can also build another kind of connection by bringing members of the community, young and old and from all walks of life, together to work on a project. Indeed, many trail systems are the result of citizens taking the lead and putting in countless hours of hard work.

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and construction include federal monies such as the U.S. Department of Transportation's "Transportation Enhancement" grants and the National Park Service's Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance program, as well as state and local transportation and parks/recreation programs, and private funds from foundations and donors.

Municipalities can also negotiate with or require developers to incorporate trails into their projects. When working with a developer, make sure the trail is properly engineered and built concurrent with the rest of the project. Smart developers are realizing that greenways are a fairly low-cost investment that can considerably raise the value of their project because they provide an amenity many people want.

### 4. Operate: Administer and maintain the greenway system.

It's very important to make sure trails are well maintained. Costs vary widely depending on the size and complexity of the system, but one should budget for tasks such as the following:<sup>13</sup>

#### Routine Maintenance

- Daily security patrol and cleaning of comfort stations.
- Weekly refuse removal and grass cutting.
- Monthly and post-storm maintenance inspections.
- Quarterly brush cutting.
- Seasonal and post-storm clearing of culverts and drains.
- Snow and debris removal and minor repairs.

<sup>13</sup> *Id.*, Chpt. 5.

#### Long-Term Maintenance

- Inspect bridges and tunnels yearly.
- Repaint blazes and repaint buildings every 5 years.
- Resurface trail every 10 years.
- Renovate buildings every 10-20 years.

Greenway managers also have to supervise professional and/or volunteer staff; raise operational funds and administer the budget; and deal with conflicts between users. At the same time, they need to implement trail policies; plan for future trail development; and maintain good relations with the community.

Municipalities should allocate annual funds for management and maintenance as well as capital improvement funds for major work. If the trail spans multiple municipalities, cost-sharing agreements can be established. Your state department of transportation may work out an agreement with a municipality for maintenance of trails in a state right-of-way. Privately-operated trails are usually maintained with donor dollars and volunteers.

#### SUMMING UP:

Residents in communities across the country are increasingly calling for more and better trail networks, to not just meet recreational needs, but provide transportation options. Developers are also recognizing the value that greenway trails can add to their projects. Trails can serve a broad spectrum of users, ranging from bicyclists and joggers to individuals with disabilities. But they need to be well-planned, well-designed, and well-maintained. ♦

Hannah Twaddell is a Senior Transportation Planner in the Charlottesville, Virginia, office of Renaissance Planning Group. Her articles on transportation planning topics appear regularly in the PCJ. For additional information on greenway trails: <[www.plannersweb.com/greenways.html](http://www.plannersweb.com/greenways.html)>.

