

The Benefits of Greenways

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Trails and greenways provide a variety of benefits that ultimately affect the sustainability of a region's economic, environmental, and social health. These benefits include:

- Creating Value and Generating Economic Activity
- Improving Bicycle and Pedestrian Transportation
- Improving Health through Active Living
- Clear Skies, Clean Rivers, and Protected Wildlife
- Protecting People and Property from Flood Damage
- Enhancing Cultural Awareness and Community Identity

Numerous studies have made the positive link between trails and their benefits abundantly clear. The degree to which a particular type of benefit is realized depends largely upon the nature of the greenway and trail system being implemented.

Creating Value and Generating Economic Activity

There are many examples, both nationally and locally, that affirm the positive connection between greenspace and property values¹. Residential properties will realize a greater gain in value the closer they are located to trails and greenspace. According to a 2002 survey of recent homebuyers by the National Association of Home Realtors and the National Association of Home Builders, trails ranked as the second most important community amenity out of a list of 18 choices².

Additionally, the study found that “trail availability” outranked 16 other options including security, ball fields, golf courses, parks, and access to shopping or business centers. Findings from the Trust for Public Land's Economic Benefits of Parks and Open Space, and the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy's Economic Benefits of Trails and Greenways (listed below) illustrate how this value is realized in property value across the country.

Trails and Greenways Increase Real Property Values

- Apex, NC: The Shepard's Vineyard housing development added \$5,000 to the price of 40 homes adjacent to the regional greenway – and those homes were still the first to sell³.
- Front Royal, VA: A developer who donated a 50-foot-wide, seven-mile-long easement along a popular trail sold all 50 parcels bordering the trail in only four months.
- Salem, OR: land adjacent to a greenbelt was found to be worth about \$1,200 and acre more than land only 1000 feet away.
- Oakland, CA: A three-mile greenbelt around Lake Merritt, near the city center, was found to add \$41 million to surrounding property values.
- Seattle, WA: Homes bordering the 12-mile Burke-Gilman trail sold for 6 percent more than other houses of comparable size.
- Brown County, WI: Lots adjacent to the Mountain Bay Trail sold faster for an average of 9 percent more than similar property not located next to the trail.
- Dayton, OH: Five percent of the selling price of homes near the Cox Arboretum and park was attributable to the proximity of that open space.

Trail Tourism Creates Economic Impacts

Tourism and recreation-related revenues from trails and greenways come in several forms. Trails and greenways create opportunities in construction and maintenance, recreation rentals (such as bicycles, kayaks, and canoes), recreation services (such as shuttle buses and guided tours), historic preservation, restaurants and lodging.

- The Outer Banks, NC: Bicycling is estimated to have an annual economic impact of \$60 million and 1,407 jobs supported from the 40,800 visitors for whom bicycling was an important reason for choosing to vacation in the area. The annual return on bicycle facility development in the Outer Banks is approximately nine times higher than the initial investment⁴.
- Damascus, VA: At the Virginia Creeper Trail, a 34-mile trail in southwestern Virginia, locals and non-locals spend approximately \$2.5 million annually related to their recreation visits. Of this amount, non-local visitors spend about \$1.2 million directly in the Washington and Grayson County economies⁵.
- Morgantown, WV: The 45-mile Mon River trail system is credited by the Convention and Visitors Bureau for revitalizing an entire district of the city, with a reported \$200 million in private investment as a direct result of the trail⁶.
- Tallahassee, FL: The Florida Department of Environmental Protection Office of Greenways & Trails estimate an economic benefit of \$2.2 million annually from the 16-mile St. Marks Trail⁷.
- San Antonio, TX: Riverwalk Park, created for \$425,000, has surpassed the Alamo as the most popular attraction for the city's \$3.5-billion tourism industry⁸.
- Pittsburgh, PA: Mayor Tom Murphy credits trail construction for contributing significantly to a dramatic downtown revitalization.
- Allegheny Passage, PA: The direct economic impact of the trail exceeded \$14 million a year, encouraging the development of several new businesses and a rise in property values in the first trailhead town.
- Leadville, CO: In the months following the opening of the Mineral Belt Trail, the city reported a 19 percent increase in sales tax revenues.
- Dallas, TX: The 20-mile Mineral Wells to Weatherford Trail attracts 300,000 people annually and generates local revenues of \$2 million.

Improving Bicycle and Pedestrian Transportation

The sprawling nature of many land development patterns often leaves residents and visitors with no choice but to drive, even for short trips. In fact, two-thirds of all trips we make are for a distance of five miles or less. Surveys by the Federal Highway Administration show that Americans are willing to walk as far as two miles to a destination and bicycle as far as five miles. A complete trail network, as part of the local transportation system, will offer effective transportation alternatives by connecting homes, workplaces, schools, parks, downtown, and cultural attractions.

Trail networks can provide alternative transportation links that are currently unavailable. Residents who live in subdivisions outside of downtown areas are able to walk or bike downtown for work, or simply for recreation. Residents are able to circulate through urban areas in a safe, efficient, and fun way: walking or biking. Residents are able to move freely along trail

corridors without paying increasingly high gas prices and sitting in ever-growing automobile traffic. Last but not least, regional connectivity through alternative transportation could be achieved once adjacent trail networks are completed and combined.

Improving Health through Active Living

A region's trail network will contribute to the overall health of residents by offering people attractive, safe, accessible places to bike, walk, hike, jog, skate, and possibly places to enjoy water-based trails. In short, trail networks create better opportunities for active lifestyles. The design of our communities—including towns, subdivisions, transportation systems, parks, trails and other public recreational facilities—affects people's ability to reach the recommended 30 minutes each day of moderately intense physical activity (60 minutes for youth). According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), "Physical inactivity causes numerous physical and mental health problems, is responsible for an estimated 200,000 deaths per year, and contributes to the obesity epidemic"⁹.

In identifying a solution, the CDC determined that by creating and improving places in our communities to be physically active, there could be a 25 percent increase in the percentage of people who exercise at least three times a week¹⁰. This is significant considering that for people who are inactive, even small increases in physical activity can bring measurable health benefits¹¹. Additionally, as people become more physically active outdoors, they make connections with their neighbors that contribute to the health of their community.

Many public agencies are teaming up with foundations, universities, and private companies to launch a new kind of health campaign that focuses on improving people's options instead of reforming their behavior. A 2005 Newsweek Magazine feature, *Designing Heart-Healthy Communities*, cites the goals of such programs (italics added): "The goals range from updating restaurant menus to restoring mass transit, but the most visible efforts focus on making the built environment more conducive to walking and cycling."¹² Clearly, the connection between health and trails is becoming common knowledge. The Rails-to-Trails Conservancy puts it simply: "Individuals must choose to exercise, but communities can make that choice easier."

Clear Skies, Clean Rivers, and Protected Wildlife

There are a multitude of environmental benefits from trails, greenways, and open spaces that help to protect the essential functions performed by natural ecosystems. Greenways protect and link fragmented habitat and provide opportunities for protecting plant and animal species. Trails and greenways reduce air pollution by two significant means: first, they provide enjoyable and safe alternatives to the automobile, which reduces the burning of fossil fuels; second, they protect large areas of plants that create oxygen and filter air pollutants such as ozone, sulfur dioxide, carbon monoxide and airborne particles of heavy metal. Greenways improve water quality by creating a natural buffer zone that protects streams, rivers and lakes, preventing soil erosion and filtering pollution caused by agricultural and road runoff.

As an educational tool, trail signage can be designed to inform trail-users about water quality issues particular to each watershed. Such signs could also include tips on how to improve water quality. Similarly, a greenway can serve as a hands-on environmental classroom for people of all ages to experience natural landscapes, furthering environmental awareness.

Protecting People and Property from Flood Damage

The protection of open spaces associated with trail and greenway development often also protects natural floodplains along rivers and streams. According to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the implementation of floodplain ordinances is estimated to prevent \$1.1 billion in flood damages annually. By restoring developed floodplains to their natural state and protecting them as greenways, many riverside communities are preventing potential flood damages and related costs¹³.

Enhancing Cultural Awareness and Community Identity

Trails, greenways, and open space can serve as connections to local heritage by preserving historic places and by providing access to them. They provide a sense of place and an understanding of past events by drawing greater public attention to historic and cultural locations and events. Trails often provide access to historic sites such as battlegrounds, bridges, buildings, and canals that otherwise would be difficult to access or interpret. Each community and region has its own unique history, its own features and destinations, and its own landscapes. By recognizing, honoring, and connecting these features, the combined results serve to enhance cultural awareness and community identity, potentially attracting tourism. Being aware of the historical and cultural context when naming parks and trails and designing features will further enhance the overall trail- and park-user experience.

¹ American Planning Association. (2002). How Cities Use Parks for Economic Development.

² National Association of Realtors and National Association of Home Builders. (2002). Consumer's Survey on Smart Choices for Home Buyers.

³ Rails to Trails Conservancy. (2005). Economic Benefits of Trails and Greenways.

⁴ NCDOT and ITRE. (2006). Bikeways to Prosperity: Assessing the Economic Impact of Bicycle Facilities.

⁵ Virginia Department of Conservation. (2004). The Virginia Creeper Trail: An Assessment of User Demographics, Preferences, and Economics.

⁶ Rails to Trails. (Danzer, 2006). Trails and Tourism.

⁷ Rails to Trails. (Danzer, 2006). Trails and Tourism.

⁸ American Planning Association. (2002). How Cities Use Parks for Economic Development.

⁹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (1996). Physical Activity and Health: A Report of the Surgeon General.

¹⁰ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2002). Guide to Community Preventive Services.

¹¹ Rails-to-Trails Conservancy. (2006) Health and Wellness Benefits.

¹² Newsweek Magazine. (10/3/2005). Designing Heart-Healthy Communities.

¹³ Federal Emergency Management Agency. (2005) Building Stronger: State and Local Mitigation Planning.