

## 25 Marketing Ideas You Can Steal

*From Talent Attraction to Branding and Websites, Tactics That Move the Needle*

## Repurposing the Giant

*The Rise and Fall (and Rise Again) of the Suburban Office Campus with the Metroburbs*

## Small Cities That Thrive by Applying Livability Principles

*A Tale of Two Small Cities, or When New Haven, Connecticut Met Surprise, Arizona*

## All In

*Developing Inclusive Workforce Strategies*

## Is It/Was It a Good Deal

*Making the Case for Economic Development Incentive Evaluation*

## Multi-Use Trails and Greenways as Economic Development Engines

*Capitalizing on Trail Oriented Development*



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# multi-use trails and

## GREENWAYS AS ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ENGINES

By Laura E. Brown, CEcD

### UNDERSTANDING MULTI-USE TRAILS

Across the country, the vestiges of historic main streets along paths, and train and streetcar routes provide evidence of how human scaled travel once served us. These routes served as a lifeline through the countryside connecting nodes of homes and small businesses and providing clusters of needed services to travelers and local residents. Many of these routes ran along rivers or other natural areas. As communities look for new ways to improve quality of life and business leaders consider ways to attract talented workers, it is no surprise that communities are rethinking how these passages might be reinvigorated as trails, rail-trails, or greenways.

While the realm of trail development is vast, this article focuses on “multi-use,” “shared-use” paths (SUPs), trails, or greenways. These types of trails typically support multiple forms of recreation and transportation such as walking, bicycling, equestrians and users with a diverse range of abilities, prohibit motorized vehicles; and are physically separated from motor vehicular traffic with an

As communities look for new ways to improve quality of life and business leaders consider ways to attract talented workers, it is no surprise that communities are rethinking how these passages might be reinvigorated as trails, rail-trails, or greenways.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

“Multi-use,” “shared-use” paths (SUPs), trails, or greenways can provide a variety of community and economic benefits including increased business, improved health, increased property tax and property valuation, reduced health care costs, congestion reduction, ecosystem services, and climate mitigation or safety benefits.

Trail amenity benefits are best realized if local residents embrace them and communities engage them as assets in broader development efforts. Communities should engage local residents, organizations, and institutions in clarifying goals for trail development and promoting local and unique cultural history.

Connectivity of trails to other amenities such as downtowns, business districts, and other transportation routes is important. Communities should collect data about who is using and not using trails and use this information to make informed decisions. Community leaders and decision makers should be attentive to factors and forces that may make trail amenities inaccessible to some populations.

open space or barrier. They may be surfaced with asphalt, concrete or packed crushed aggregate and are designed to include pedestrians even if the primary anticipated users are cyclists. Characterizing the users on these trails often involves collecting primary data via an intercept survey collected in-person on trails by surveyors. While these users vary significantly, from predominantly local users to tourists depending on trail location and amenities, bicycling and walking are the primary modes of movement and users cite health, fitness, and recreation as their primary purpose.<sup>1</sup>

Whether bike-share services, separated paths, or connectivity to greenspaces, visitors to almost any major metropolitan area will note the increasing investment in trail amenities as active transportation routes. Attendees at the IEDC 2019 Annual Conference in Indianapolis, Indiana, heard Gover-

Laura E. Brown, CEcD, Community & Economic Development Educator, Associate Extension Professor, University of Connecticut Extension (laura.brown@uconn.edu)

### CAPITALIZING ON TRAIL ORIENTED DEVELOPMENT

Towns and cities across the country are capitalizing on trails to stimulate the local economy, meet transportation demands, improve quality of life, and increase community connectivity and engagement. Community and economic developers, planners, and community organizations have a growing interest in using trails, greenways and greenspaces as tools to improve quality of life, conserve greenspaces, reduce traffic congestion, improve community health, support economic revitalization, and highlight historic and cultural resources. This article provides an overview of various types of trails, trends, and impacts that communities can experience as a result of trail-based development and highlights best practices for communities interested in capitalizing on trail amenities.

nor Eric Holcomb describe his state's Next Level Trails program, part of the \$1 billion Next Level Connections infrastructure initiative<sup>2</sup> announced in September 2019. Billed as "the largest infusion of trail funding in state history" the program provides \$90 million for regional and local trail projects aimed at improving quality of life and health in the state. The US Department of Transportation additionally notes that "almost every medium-sized and large urban area in the United States has some shared-use paths and has plans for more...There is no sign that the pace of construction of shared use paths is slowing."<sup>3</sup>

Interest in trails and greenways emerged out of the 1800s greenbelt and parkway planning movements led by Frederick Law Olmsted, but it is only in the past several decades that they have proliferated.<sup>4</sup> Advocacy for trail building has traditionally been promoted by recreation, conservation, and environmental advocates.<sup>5</sup> However, economic and community development stakeholders, including builders and planners, are taking notice of the unique opportunities trails offer for redevelopment and investment as well as a myriad of other community benefits.<sup>6</sup> This renewed interest is likely due to the convergence of increasing public awareness of health and diet related disease prevention and economic and demographic shifts that favor active transportation and quality of life amenities.

### GROWING INTEREST IN MULTI-USE TRAILS

The statistics about health related crises in our country are neither new or shocking to those who work at the community level, and the impacts are real. Physical inactivity and sedentary behavior contribute significantly to the risk for obesity and chronic diseases, such as cardiovascular disease and diabetes<sup>7</sup> and most Americans do not meet the recommendation of 150 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous intensity exercise per week. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) reported that in 2014, two in three adults 50+ had at least one chronic disease and inactivity is 30 percent higher in those with a chronic disease.<sup>8</sup> The rising incidence of chronic diseases burdens the national and local economies. The "estimated annual medical cost of obesity in the U.S. was \$147 billion in 2008 U.S. dollars and the medical costs for people who are obese were \$1,429 higher than those of normal weight."<sup>9</sup>

Because many trail users primarily use these facilities for exercise and given the grave consequences of obesity and other chronic illnesses, planners, public health and medical professionals have considered how changes in the built environment, such as greater access or connectivity to parks and trails, might improve health outcomes.



Trails provide multiple community and economic benefits. Trail users gather for a Riverfront Recapture event along the Connecticut River in Hartford, Connecticut. Photo credit: Riverfront Recapture.

National awareness campaigns such as *Step It Up! The Surgeon General's Call to Action to Promote Walking and Walkable Communities*<sup>10</sup> aim to increase public awareness and physical activity by promoting accessible, low cost physical activity options. Walking is the most common form of aerobic exercise for people in the United States and is considered a "powerful" public health strategy due to its accessibility for people of all ages and incomes. Because many trail users primarily use these facilities for exercise and given the grave consequences of obesity and other chronic illnesses, planners, public health and medical professionals have considered how changes in the built environment, such as greater access or connectivity to parks and trails, might improve health outcomes.

Demographic changes and lifestyle preferences that favor shifts in quality of life preferences may also play a role in the growing interest in trails. A common narrative in the analysis of generational differences, and particularly in talent attraction, posits that Millennials bike more, use public transit more often, and want to live in more urban, walkable neighborhoods.

An analysis of multiple studies finds that while Gen-Xers and Millennials bicycle slightly more than older generations, walking is their preferred mode of transportation. The surprise is that these preferences seem to be affecting housing preferences not just for Millennials, but across generations. Having sidewalks and places to take walks was overwhelmingly preferred across generational cohorts as a factor in choosing where to live (compared to other factors like short commute, highway access).<sup>11</sup> In many parts of the country, housing and development trends are shifting to accommodate this.

A 2016 study from the National Association of Homebuilders compared 4,300 prospective home buyers by age including Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964), seniors (born before 1946), Gen-Xers (born 1965 to 1979), and Millennials (born after 1979). The study found that close proximity to a park and access to walk-

From a purely economic perspective, a significant and growing body of literature documents the value of trails and greenways which includes economic benefits through increased business spending and expenditures for capital projects and operations and individual benefits such as improved health, increased property tax and property valuation. The value also includes larger society benefits like reduced health care costs, congestion reduction, ecosystem services, and climate mitigation or safety benefits.

ing and jogging trails were two most desired amenities ranked in the top four for every age cohort.<sup>12</sup>

### BENEFITS OF MULTI-USE TRAILS

From a purely economic perspective, a significant and growing body of literature documents the value of trails and greenways which includes economic benefits through increased business spending and expenditures for capital projects and operations and individual benefits such as improved health, increased property tax and property valuation. The value also includes larger society benefits like reduced health care costs, congestion reduction, ecosystem services, and climate mitigation or safety benefits.

One difficulty in generalizing the broader impact of trails is the vast variation associated with building and use based on siting and mode share (say bicyclists versus pedestrians). For instance, studies have documented variations in the cost of trail construction ranging from hundreds to millions of dollars per mile. Additionally, a 2018 review of economic impact studies of trails across the country revealed that average user spending ranges from between \$5 to over \$67 or more per user per day. Data from the Outdoor Industry Association by user type (comparing hikers and bicyclists but not specifically multi-use trail users) notes that out-of-state day users spend nearly \$100 more (\$191) than in-state day users (\$100) and overnight stays generate nearly double the spending (\$332) for in-state overnight users.

Not surprisingly, the data from the Outdoor Industry Association suggests that tourism has significant direct impacts.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, communities across the country have focused on local and regional strategies to capture tourism dollars related to trails, particularly bicycle tourists. Since 1973, the Annual RAGBRAI (Register's Annual Great Bicycle Ride Across Iowa) has grown to involve an estimated 8,500 riders per year and has been replicated by many states across the nation. The event generates an estimated \$2 million per town for many of the 761 rural towns along the 15,500 mile route.<sup>14</sup> Factors that appear

to have the greatest effect on business spending include the quality of the trails and amenities to support users as well as the ability for trail users to connect to communities via spurs or shuttles.<sup>15,16</sup>

A number of studies have documented the positive effects of trails on regional economies. When considering the regional impacts, including jobs, wages, and business output, a well-documented study from North Carolina found that a one-time investment of \$26.7 million in four local greenways supported the following:

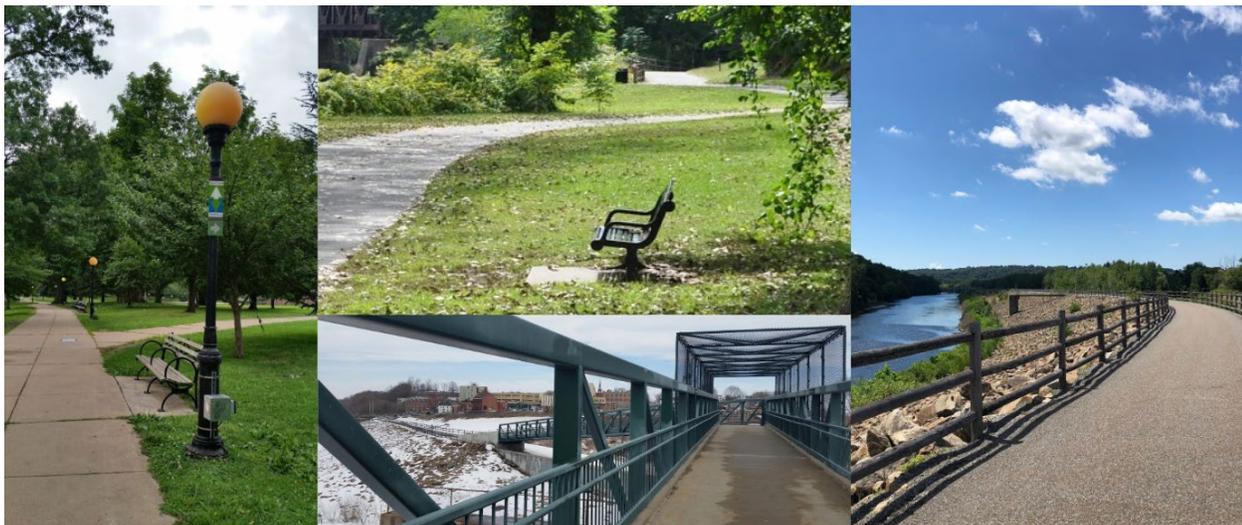
- \$19.4 million in annual sales revenue from local businesses,
  - \$684,000 in local and state tax revenue,
  - \$25.7 million in estimated savings due to increases in physical activity, less pollution and traffic, and
  - \$48.7 million in business revenue from construction.
- Every \$1 spent on construction yielded \$1.72 in additional impact annually.<sup>17</sup>

These are significant impacts, but they are specific to a state or region and given regional differences in structure and use of trails, these types of studies are generally not comparable. For additional information, Headwaters Economics maintains a library of 144 studies of trail related benefits searchable by benefits, use, year, and region. (<https://headwaterseconomics.org/>)

While some may view multi-use trails as transportation passages for vehicles or amenities for out-of-town tourists, this narrow view limits the ability to see the other functions they serve for communities and the local people who use them.<sup>18</sup> In a presentation on the impact of a section of the Naugatuck River Greenway in Derby, Connecticut, trail advocate Jack Walsh described the newly built section of trail as "the new town square;" the place where people gather, commingle, and catch up on town life.<sup>19</sup> The value trails provide may be best measured not solely by their economic function and impact, but in their value as tools for improving health and quality of life, contributing to ecological conservation,



Users on the Derby Greenway, in Derby, Connecticut, a heavily used multi-use trail that is part of the 40-mile Naugatuck River Greenway. Photo credit: Jack Walsh.



*Trails have the greatest impacts when they are used.*

and improving community health and safety. From this perspective, a growing body of literature documents a variety of additional individual and community benefits accrued from trails and their use.

Most existing literature related to trails and health points to positive impacts of parks, greenspaces, and trails on physical health across age groups.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, a growing body of literature is exploring impacts of trails, parks, and greenspaces on other aspects of health including evidence that greener neighborhoods contribute to better social, psychological, and health outcomes.<sup>21</sup> Exercising for as little as five minutes in “green spaces” such as trails or parks, for instance, has been found to increase self-esteem and mood.<sup>22</sup> More recent work is exploring the mechanisms of how these green environments impact mental health and improve community cohesion.

While several studies have found trail and park amenities to contribute to physical activity and health outcomes, these benefits are not experienced universally. Interest in and use of trails, and the benefits that these users enjoy may be affected by numerous factors: an individual’s proximity, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, accessibility and connectivity, perceptions of safety; and available community programming. This speaks to the need for community and economic developers to be aware of the hidden barriers preventing low-income, people of color, and disadvantaged communities from taking advantage of and benefiting from trail amenities and to engage these populations in meaningful decision making.

At the community level, trail-based amenity development often involves working with local property owners who may have concerns about how the trail will impact their property values or public safety. A number of studies have found that homes near trails generally have higher values, with premiums ranging from 5-10 percent.<sup>23,24,25,26</sup> One study of home prices along 14 greenway corridors along the Monon Trail in Indiana found that the recreational greenways studied had either positive or neutral effects on property values. While the

magnitude of the impact was uncertain based on their modeling, from a policy and community decision-making perspective it was clear that trails had no adverse effects on home values.<sup>27</sup> The literature on crime rates and trails is less developed, however evidence from a broad review of existing literature suggests that green spaces have a mitigating effect on crimes such as murder, assault, and theft.<sup>28</sup>

## **CAPITALIZING ON TRAILS – TRAIL ORIENTED DEVELOPMENT**

The mere presence of a multi-use trail itself doesn’t imply that communities will automatically incur benefits from it. The greatest benefits occur when trails are *used* and communities take steps to capitalize on them through a wide variety of trail oriented programs and development strategies. Programs and projects can take many forms such as local, community-based fitness events, social media campaigns, or programs to engage artists to create works about cultural history.

The concept of a “trail town,” a gateway destination along a trail, has also gained in national popularity over the past decade. This concept was formalized as a technical assistance program by the Progress Fund in Pennsylvania to help rural communities capitalize on trail assets, with a focus on creating “bike-friendly destinations.”<sup>29</sup> Similarly, the National Main Street Center has started offering community-based services for Trail Oriented Development<sup>30</sup> and regional programs like the Appalachian Trail Community Program<sup>31</sup> serve to assist communities with sustainable economic development through tourism and outdoor recreation. For those seeking general information, see the resource “Implementing Trail-Based Economic Development Programs” developed by the Iowa Department of Transportation.<sup>32</sup>

Trail Oriented Development or TrOD represents a comprehensive strategy that some communities are using to take advantage of the many benefits of trails as active transportation systems and guide to local govern-

## GATHERING TRAIL DATA – THE CONNECTICUT TRAIL CENSUS: A VOLUNTEER-BASED TRAIL DATA COLLECTION PROGRAM – RESOURCES FOR CONDUCTING A USER INTERCEPT SURVEY

Understanding current trail users can be essential for making good decisions about programming, improvements or connectivity and for determining current impacts. This data can be easily collected by trained volunteers or staff.

The Connecticut Trail Census is an innovative statewide volunteer-based data collection and education program that encourages data informed decision-making and promotes active citizen participation in multi-use trail monitoring and advocacy. The Trail Census includes trail use counts recorded by infrared pedestrian counters, trail user intercept surveys administered by trained volunteers, manual counts to calibrate infrared counter data, and public education programs.

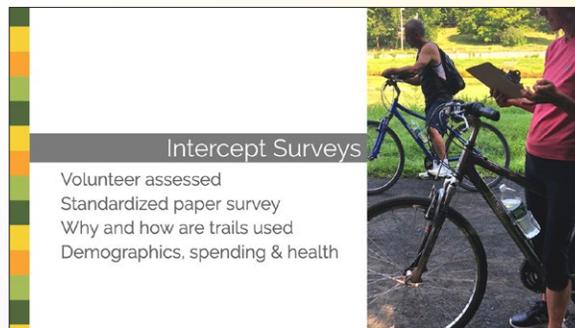
The project is statewide and serves community leaders and decision makers including local elected officials, planners, economic development professionals, trail advocates, trail maintenance professionals, environmental, health and outdoor activity advocates, as well as the general public. The program was developed as a partnership program among the University of Connecticut, the Naugatuck Valley Council of Governments, the Connecticut Greenways Council, and local trail advocacy organizations. Tools developed through the census including the intercept survey tool, manual count forms, infrared sensor maintenance guides, and a variety of training videos are free and downloadable online.

### Resources for Collecting Trail User Data

- Connecticut Trail Census Survey and Infrared Counter Methods and Tools  
[www.cttrailcensus.uconn.edu](http://www.cttrailcensus.uconn.edu)
- Rails to Trails Trail User Surveys and Counting  
<https://www.railstotrails.org/build-trails/trail-building-toolbox/management-and-maintenance/trail-user-surveys-and-counting/>
- National Bicycle and Pedestrian Documentation Project  
<http://bikepeddocumentation.org/>



*The Connecticut Trail Census installs counters that use infrared technology to count uses on trail sites. Data is downloaded and analyzed quarterly.*



*The Connecticut Trail Census engages community volunteers from local trail advocacy organizations to administer paper-based intercept surveys to trail users that include questions about where they are from, how and why they use trails, spending, and amenity preferences.*

ments, trailside property owners, and developers toward a comprehensive approach to physical infrastructure development along trail systems. This parallels the increasing focus on Transit Oriented Development (TOD) over the past decade characterized by mixed-use, compact residential and commercial development around a transit node such as a train or bus station.

TrOD focuses on multi-use trails and bike paths, bike lanes, bike share systems, and active transportation routes as the focus areas for development. The strategies may vary from community to community but the publication of a community's goals and TrOD guidelines provides the community and potential developers with an understanding of the community's goals, proposed strategies, local financing and policy tools and resources to support a project, key development areas through maps, and design guidelines.

The Houston-Galveston Area Council's TrOD primer clarifies their goals: "Trail-oriented development con-

nects trail users with nearby land, improves or adds to the number of destinations along a trail, and increases bicycle and pedestrian traffic to trail-adjacent businesses and amenities" and includes low, medium and high investment strategies such as outdoor furniture installation, repair stations, wayfinding signage, and bike/ped bridges.<sup>33</sup> The Friends of Lafayette Greenway in New Orleans developed a similar guide that includes specific site and building design guidelines such as setbacks, open space, trees plants and seating and pedestrian scale design.<sup>34</sup>

The Urban Land Institute's report on "Active Transportation: the Next Frontier" details ten real estate case studies from the United States, London, and Singapore that highlight key aspects of sustainable development along active transportation systems and provide some guidance for interested communities.<sup>35</sup> The report identifies three key findings from across the case studies: 1) bike lanes and sidewalks add value to development projects,

Trails are resources for both community engagement and may be part of broader transportation systems and infrastructure in a region. A broad range of partners should be involved.

- 2) the market is growing for inclusion of bike friendly amenities in residential and commercial properties, and
- 3) private-public partnerships will maximize the investment in TrOD projects.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

Communities may aim for large-scale development being implemented in some major cities, but taking advantage of existing trail systems need not involve million dollar investments. In 2017, Community & Economic Development staff from the University of Connecticut, University of New Hampshire, and the University of Vermont traveled to Kentucky to learn about their Trail Town program and explore strategies for success that other communities might learn from. Their discussions with key economic development leaders related to trail development yielded important insights for communities considering capitalizing on existing trails or building out trail infrastructure. The recommendations below are based on that learning<sup>36</sup> as well as best practices identified by American Trails, a professional organization for trail advocates.<sup>37</sup>

1. **Understand Your Users and Identify Goals** – Communities that already have trails should know who are their existing users and those considering trails should engage the local residents and the broader community early on to discover what is most needed. These constituents should help to define longer term goals for development.
2. **Take a Systems Approach** – Trails are resources for both community engagement and may be part of broader transportation systems and infrastructure in a region. A broad range of partners should be involved.
3. **Start at the Heart – Downtown** – Communities should focus on the areas most likely to have existing amenities
4. **Connect to Downtown and Amenities** – Connectivity is key. Clarify the way for people on trails to access downtown amenities and people downtown to access the trail safely.
5. **Regional Collaboration** – Successful projects involve a wide range of stakeholders that create community buy-in and may involve engagement of multiple communities that are part of a trail system
6. **Good Design Is Good Business** – Trail design can have an effect on who uses the trail and how they experience it as well as a community's long-term maintenance costs.
7. **Consider Trail Town Validation** – Many communities have found the trail town model to be a successful way to develop programming around the trail.
8. **Engage Artists to Tell the Story** – Artists are just one group of non-traditional stakeholders that can help to build a story around the history and uniqueness of a trail.
9. **Engage Anchor Institutions** – In the most successful examples, universities, major employers, utilities, and museums have played an essential role in supporting trail development and promotion.
10. **Create Programming** – Trails themselves are just wayfinding guides. The greatest benefits are incurred when they are used. 🌐



  
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## ENDNOTES

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