



Trail Towns-hip: Leveraging your existing trail system for community and economic development

Trails were once considered to be undesirable and unnecessary infrastructure in communities. People worried that trails would bring crime and unwanted people into their neighborhoods. Oh, how wrong we were! Trails have proven to be sought-after amenities for most communities. Trails not only increase nearby property values, they contribute to sense of place and offer new economic development potential. In addition, long, multi-jurisdictional trail systems can provide an unforeseen economic boost to an entire region.

'TRAIL TOWNS'

The "Trail Town" concept was developed by the Allegheny Trail Alliance, a coalition of seven trail organizations along the Great Allegheny Passage, a 150-mile multi-use trail running through Pennsylvania and Maryland. The basic Trail Town concept is simple: ensure that communities along the trail are better able to maximize the economic potential of trail-based tourism.

While the Trail Town concept is primarily geared toward cities and large urban centers, we believe the concept is very much applicable in townships. Even if it's just a small handful of shops, restaurants and a gas station, many townships have at least one center of commercial activity. Furthermore, many of the over 2,000 miles of trails in Michigan travel directly through townships.

Over the last several years, as the full economic potential of linking trails, recreation, tourism and business development has become better known, the Trail Town concept has caught on. According to an article¹ from the Rails-to-Trail Conservancy, "Communities around the country are increasingly utilizing the 'Trail Town' model of economic revitalization that places trails as the centerpiece of a tourism-centered strategy for small town revitalization."

Trying to determine how trails affect the local economy is no easy task. A quick Internet search reveals a clearinghouse of national, regional and local economic impact studies related to trails. A recent statewide study² in Wisconsin found that bicycle recreation supports more than \$924 million in tourism and resident spending each year, of which nearly \$533 million

is direct impact occurring annually, such as travel, equipment sales and restaurant expenditures. Closer to home, a 2008 study³ by the Land Policy Institute at Michigan State University found that properties in Oakland County within a half-mile of bike paths have increased in value by as much as 6.3 percent.

There are a number of different ways in which local communities can organize around community efforts to establish a successful Trail Town program. For the last five years, the Allegheny Trail Alliance has applied the “Four Point” or “Main Street Approach” developed by the National Main Street Center of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. The Main Street Approach offers a complete outline for downtown revitalization and has been implemented in more than 1,200 communities across the United States.

THE FOUR-POINT APPROACH

Organization. Organization establishes consensus and cooperation by building partnerships among the various groups that have a stake in trails and the downtown or commercial district. By getting everyone working toward the same goal through volunteer recruitments, collaboration and an organizational structure consisting of a board and committees, your program can provide effective ongoing management and advocacy for your Trail Town program.

Promotion. Promotion sells the image and promise of a Trail Town to all prospects. Promotions communicate your community’s unique characteristics and trail resources to local customers, investors, entrepreneurs, property owners, residents and visitors.

Design. Design means getting a Trail Town into top physical shape, creating both a safe and appealing environment. Creating an inviting atmosphere through attractive window displays, professional signage, well-maintained sidewalks, accessible parking areas, appropriate street lights and inviting landscaping conveys a visual message about what a Trail Town is and what it has to offer.

Economic restructuring. Economic restructuring is carried out to strengthen your community’s existing economic assets while diversifying its economic base. By helping existing businesses expand and by recruiting new businesses to respond to current market forces, a Trail Town program can help to convert unused space into productive property and increase the competitiveness of business enterprises.

GETTING STARTED

The first step in organizing such a Trail Town effort is to assess the economic development resources and organizational capacity of your community. Chances are, you have a handful of local or regional agencies and non-profit organizations—for example, a downtown development authority, chamber of commerce or business association—already implementing economic development programs throughout the community or area. The staff of these organizations can often provide technical expertise, resources and assistance in getting ►



Courtesy of Paul T. Olson

‘Helping to strengthen our sense of place’

In the Upper Peninsula’s Marquette County, the Iron Ore Heritage Trail (IOHT) forms a 48-mile, multi-use, year-round trail that connects communities and people to the region’s historic sites and human stories. Stretching from **Republic Township** to **Chocolay Charter Township**, this surfaced and signed transportation/recreational corridor provides access to a wide variety of recreational amenities.

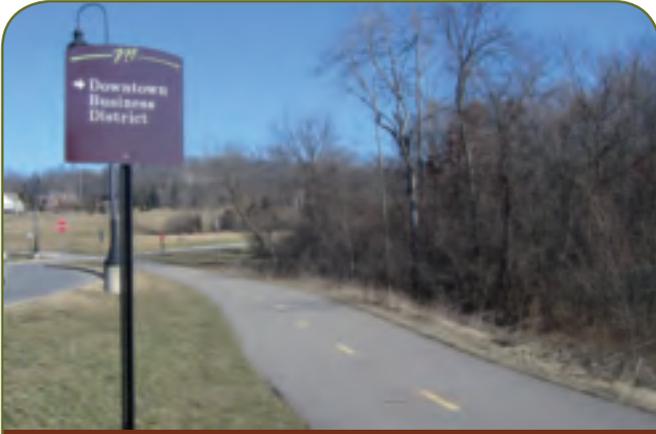
Marquette Charter Township (Marquette Co.) was an initiating jurisdiction in the formation of the trail system, and hosts the formally designated Trailhead #9, which serves as an access point to adjacent commercial, residential and recreational areas. Other informal access points are served by additional trail networks. The township is also working to link its 2.7-mile portion of the IOHT to two other major trail networks in the area, the North Country Trail and Noquemanon Trail Network.

“Marquette Charter Township is widely recognized for the trail networks within our boundaries that help make our township such a great place to live, work, play and visit,” said township manager **Randy Girard**. “Our trails provide, arguably, the best and most challenging mountain biking in the U.S.”

The township’s efforts to promote these features of their community have paid off—literally. “Our focus on community amenities has been instrumental to our continued growth over the last 10 years, leading to 22 new major developments that Marquette Township staff has proudly added to our regional economy,” Girard said, noting that these developments have created 1,945 new jobs, and helped increase the township contribution to the total regional tax base by over \$123 million.

According to **Jason McCarthy**, township planner and zoning administrator, the IOHT has afforded local municipalities the opportunity to work together on a collaborative vision that has helped to strengthen their sense of place. “Walkers, runners, hikers, nature/wildlife observers, bicyclists, and skiers can enjoy this captured piece of history,” said McCarthy. “Classrooms can visit different areas to learn of the local industry while gaining an understanding of the natural and cultural history. Existing events and future activities will be hosted on the trail, providing regional tourism growth.

“These benefits combine for a win-win project that assists our area in the promotion of economic development, a healthy lifestyle, and a sense of pride and place.”



A trail portal—where the user exits the trail to visit a nearby central business district—should be a welcoming point, where landscaping and wayfinding clearly directs trail users into the district.

a local Trail Town initiative started. The local economic development organization may even be willing to direct all or a portion of the Trail Town initiative.

If your community does not already have a local economic development organization, you may have to rely more on individual community members and volunteers. In either instance, it can be helpful to identify a point person, or catalyst, to organize and lead the Trail Town initiative.

Once the community has indicated it is ready to move forward with a Trail Town initiative, it is important to organize and assemble a broad-based coalition of community stakeholders. The coalition will help organize and direct the Trail Town initiative, build partnerships and cultivate an active volunteer base. The coalition should include people from organizations with a direct stake in the viability and success of the downtown or commercial district. However, to establish a truly comprehensive initiative, it is important to involve a wide variety of community stakeholders, including local trail organizations, civic groups, church organizations, government officials, financial institutions, health providers, students, local foundations and local business owners.

One of the primary tasks of the Trail Town catalyst and coalition will be to find and secure the financial resources to implement the Trail Town initiative. Fortunately, community and economic development (including placemaking) are high priorities for state and federal governments. Therefore, public funding sources may be available to assist in the implementation of your Trail Town initiative. In addition, you may be able to secure grants through other regional, state and/or federal agencies that work on some of the ancillary aspects of the Trail Town initiative such as your county health department, the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) and the Department of Natural Resources (DNR). Additionally, members of your broad-based coalition may be able to help secure funding through corporate philanthropic programs and local service organizations to support specific aspects of your Trail Town initiative. For example, your local

hospital or health care providers may host and sponsor an annual “bike-to-work week.”

Once the Trail Town initiative is up and running, it is important to continually publicize your efforts and successes. It may be helpful to create a marketing committee that is responsible for getting the word out about the initiative. It is also important to develop relationships with the community and your local media—submit recurring articles to the local paper, and offer to speak to local service organizations and at school functions and large community events. Finally, it can also be helpful to create a catchy name for your organization, one that lets the community know what you do and is easily remembered.

DESIGN ISSUES

One of the first, and most important, tasks of any Trail Town effort is to assess the physical and administrative character of your local trail(s). In some communities, this effort may include an assessment of only one non-motorized trail looping through a small area. In other communities, this effort may include an assessment of an entire network of trails. The assessment will help the coalition better understand the trail and the challenges a visitor might encounter.

TRAIL TYPE AND ADMINISTRATION

Another step in the process involves characterizing the trails in your community and who oversees the development and maintenance of trails. For example, do you know what type of surface each trail has and how that surface changes under certain weather conditions? Do you know what types of activities take place on the trail? It is very likely that your trail accommodates different activities at different times throughout the year. Are there instances when these activities conflict? Do you know how long the trail is in your community—is it a short stand-alone trail or just one segment of a much larger multi-jurisdictional trail? If it's a multi-jurisdictional trail, how far is the next trailhead? Do you know who manages the trail and their contact information? If the trail is operated by the DNR or a regional trail advocacy group, there might be different rules about how the trail is used and how it is maintained.

TRAIL GEOGRAPHY AND CONNECTING ELEMENTS

Another important element to assess is the physical relationship between the trail and the downtown or central business district—the “trail-to-town” relationship. Distance, elevation change, physical obstacles and ease of movement contribute to the willingness of visitors to leave the trail and enter your commercial district. For trails that traverse right through the central business district, the trail-to-town relationship is fairly obvious. However, when the trail is located more than a mile or two from the commercial activity, it is important to provide for a town map at the trailhead and clear wayfinding signage along pathways. The following connecting elements provide a more detailed approach to the trail-to-town relationship.

Trailhead. The trailhead is the area where users can access the trail by road. Ideally, trailhead amenities should include

restrooms, water, shelter, bike racks, trash receptacles and picnic tables. The trailhead should also provide appropriately sized parking areas with shade and lighting for evening uses. For example, if your community is home to an equestrian trail, does the parking area accommodate large trailers?

In many instances, the trailhead is the point at which the trail user may first come in contact with the community and the point at which trail users will decide whether or not to enter into the community. Therefore, it is imperative to develop clear and appropriate information for visitors available at the trailhead. In addition, by providing such amenities as water and restroom facilities, the community welcomes visitors, showing hospitality and inviting them to visit the community.

Portal. The portal is the point at which the trail user exits the trailhead with the intent of visiting the nearby central business district. The portal should be a welcoming point, where landscaping and wayfinding signage clearly directs trail users into the central business district.

Pathway. The pathway is the corridor that trail users follow from the portal to the central business district. Depending on the location of the trail, the pathway could be just a few blocks or several miles. The pathway should be regularly assessed for cleanliness, safety, lighting, physical condition and interaction with traffic. In addition, it is important to consider the needs of local business owners along the pathway. For example, is there an opportunity to locate the pathway along retail establishments that provide services not available in the central commercial district?

Gateway. The gateway is the point at which the trail users enter the central business district of the community. The gateway should be located at the edge of the central business district that is closest to the trailhead along a well-developed pathway. The gateway area should welcome trail users and visitors into the central business district and be the starting point for directional signage to individual attractions and businesses within the district. ►



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'Benefits that any township can achieve'

Some 13 local governments in St. Clair County are working together to develop a 54-mile "Bridge to Bay" Trail, starting under the Blue Water Bridge in Port Huron and connecting community to community as it extends through the county, often near waterways and other times inland.

Four miles of paved "Bridge to Bay" paths wind through **China Charter Township**. The township's parks and recreation committee and parks commission work with the county and its neighboring communities to promote the pathway—along with the miles of unpaved, maintained hiking nature trails that are part of the township's 23-acre, wooded park and Belle River access site.

"Both entities work to develop, improve and maintain our facilities," explained Trustee **John Steffy**, who also sits on the park board. "We have worked with the adjoining communities on installing road signage, and with St. Clair County in promotion and marketing of both biking and hiking trails, as well as our canoe and kayak access and 'blueways'—i.e., water trails.

"All of [these efforts] contribute to a greater quality of life for our residents," he said. "There are also the obvious financial and economic benefits to the stores and vendors, along and near the trails. However, the greater benefits may include the fitness and health of our residents, guests and visitors. Those are among the benefits that any township can achieve by focusing resources to trails."

Steffy notes that trails can provide residents and visitors with a chance to disconnect from the bustle of everyday life and unwind—an opportunity he takes advantage of himself.

"Personally, I enjoy biking and hiking nature trails," he said. "It is a great way to reduce stress levels, and get away from the daily grind of life."

Center. The center is the central business district of the community. It may serve as the hub of goods and services for the trail user. The center should be regularly assessed for cleanliness, safety, lighting and physical condition. In addition, the center should be assessed on the availability of amenities that help the trail user enjoy their experience (e.g., bike racks, outdoor seating at restaurants, ATM machines, Internet access and public restrooms).

In completing this assessment, it can be helpful to identify all the "connecting elements" on a map or sketch of the community. Completing a thorough assessment of the physical relationship between the trail and central business district may reveal new opportunity for improvements. These improvements can then be clearly defined and integrated into action strategies for the community.

IMPLEMENTING THE FOUR-POINT APPROACH

As previously mentioned, economic restructuring may be needed to expand and retain existing businesses, and recruit new retail opportunities. Prior to moving forward with retention and expansion efforts, it is important to get a clear understanding of the socio-economic and lifestyle preferences of the people visiting your trails. For example, do you know where trail users like to eat and where they like to shop? Do you know how much money trail users spend on biking and traveling per year?

Several national trail organizations and bicycling affiliations have attempted to identify general lifestyle preferences and spending habits of trail users. However, it may be beneficial to administer your own survey to get a better understanding of the lifestyle preferences and spending habits of local trail users. Once you have a clear understanding of your local trail users, you can better assess what basic and long-term goods and services are needed in your community. You can also work with local businesses to expand their offerings and identify ways to benefit from trail users.

Great effort should be made to effectively market and promote your Trail Town and the image of a Trail Town. For example, it can be helpful to develop attractive marketing materials (e.g., website, brochures), a logo and local advertising. These materials work to convince local residents, the larger region and tourists that your community supports an attractive Trail Town environment.

In addition, it can be useful to hold Trail Town events and conduct Trail Town retail promotions throughout the year. It may be helpful to hold events in the business district or near the trail that celebrate the history and culture of the community. It can also be useful to incorporate presentations or workshops on bike safety or cross-country skiing near the beginning of different trail seasons or during trail-related events. These promotional activities may be especially effective if they coincide with multi-day trail-related events, such as a bike tour.

If your community hosts a community-wide event or festival, be sure to have a booth or table with information about the trail

readily available. You may also be able to work closely with your local merchants association to conduct sidewalk sales on or near the trail.

THE 'TRAIL TOWN' MASTER PLAN

Once the catalyst and larger coalition has conducted a complete evaluation of the physical character of the community and needs have been identified, the next step is to begin planning projects and/or programs. The direction of these efforts should be explicitly detailed in a Trail Town master plan. A Trail Town master plan provides the framework for future marketing efforts, capital improvements and community outreach, and helps to solidify support and leverage funding.

'TRAIL TOWN' EFFORTS IN MICHIGAN

Many communities across the state are working to leverage their existing trail resources for community and economic development. However, only a handful of communities are exploring the creation of a Trail Town program. A regional approach to the Trail Town concept might be especially impactful to the collection of communities that naturally line the state's many rail-trail corridors.

Two years ago, the Land Information Access Association (LIAA) worked to develop a regional Trail Town Manual for the seven communities the lie along the 62-mile North Central State Trail. These seven communities, along with a large consortium of local jurisdictions, regional planning agencies, economic development organizations and LIAA, are about to embark on an

effort to develop a regional Trail Town guidebook and program throughout a 22-county region in northern Michigan.

In St. Clair County, the Metropolitan Planning Commission is pursuing funding to develop and establish a formal Trail Town program for its extensive county-wide system of greenways and blueways.

These and other efforts seek to play to one of Michigan's greatest strengths: an abundance of excellent outdoor recreation opportunities. Trails can provide a framework for both enhancing these opportunities and maximizing their benefits to the community-at-large. The next time you're on a stroll or paddle in your community, take a look around—and take note of the possibilities. ■

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Footnotes

¹ *From Trail Towns to TrOD: Trails and Economic Development: Rails-to-Trails Conservancy. 2007*

² *Kittner, Gena, Report shows \$1.5 billion annual impact of bicycling in Wisconsin. Wisconsin State Journal, February 1, 2010*

³ *The Economic Valuation of Natural Resource Amenities: A Hedonic Analysis of Hillsdale and Oakland County. Land Policy Institute, Michigan State University, Report #3. 2007*

