Ohio

PROFILE:
POPULATION: 11,544,225
MEDIAN INCOME: $46,829
MEDIAN HOME VALUE: $127,600
% W/ BACHELORS DEGREE: 16.0%
WALK SCORE:
   Columbus: 40/100
   Cincinnati: 50/100
   Cleveland: 57/100

STATISTICS:
→ A 2011 study completed by researchers at the University of Cincinnati showed that for every foot closer a house is to a trail, its value goes up by $9. In other words, owners are willing to pay a $9,000 premium to be 1,000 feet closer to a trail. (University of Cincinnati)

→ The city of Akron in northern Ohio has seen $110 million in investments along the Ohio to Erie Trail.

→ When the trail is finally complete—more than 70 percent of it is open for use—it will be the longest paved off-road trail in the country.

→ The Friends of Madison County Parks and Trails cites as many as 40,000 people using the trail segment over the course of a year.

→ Only 10 percent of the trail’s right-of-way has yet to be acquired.

Repurposing Rails, Transforming Towns

From the Ohio River in downtown Cincinnati to the rolling hills of rural Amish country and on to the sandy shores of Lake Erie, the best of the Buckeye State is showcased by the 300-mile Ohio to Erie Trail. Built on hundreds of miles of reclaimed rail-trails and canal towpaths, the Ohio to Erie Trail was conceived more than two decades ago as a focal point for recreation opportunities. Yet the benefits have proved much broader. Today, the trail is not only a valuable amenity for locals, it is also attracting tourism and spurring economic development.

Undoubtedly, the trail has provided local citizens a safe place to engage in outdoor recreation, but they have also benefitted when it comes to the value of their homes. A 2011 study completed by researchers at the University of Cincinnati showed that for every foot closer a house is to a trail, its value goes up by $9. In other words, owners are willing to pay a $9,000 premium to be 1,000 feet closer to a trail.

Townes across Ohio are becoming increasingly tourism based, and the Ohio to Erie Trail is responsible for some of the positive economic upswing in local communities. For example, the trail attracted more visitors to the small town of Loveland, which is now seen as an outdoor activity hub that connects individuals to recreation opportunities throughout the region. “With its amazing setting right on the Little Miami River, Loveland was primed for this renaissance,” says Eric Oberg, manager of trail development for Rails-to-Trails Conservancy’s Midwest Regional Office. “What the trail did was turn many of the businesses’ back doors into their front doors, which open right onto the trail.”
QUOTES:

“Now, by reusing those railroad beds, we have an opportunity to provide services.... They used to be called railroad towns, but now they’re trail towns.”
—KIM MARSHALL, Knox County Park commissioner

“I often joke that trails are like potato chips; I’ve never eaten just one.... Once a trail has gone in, people want to know, ‘How come we don’t have more? Why isn’t it finished yet?’ We’ve had all kinds of development activity going on along the trail.”
—JERRY RAMPELT, executive director of the Ohio to Erie Trail Fund

“When the Great Ohio Bicycling Adventure stopped here in 2011, the group stayed two days in the London area.... Some of the local restaurants were delighted. They couldn’t believe it when the town was inundated with thousands of bike riders.”
—WAYNE ROBERTS, Friends of Madison County Parks and Trails

Loveland is not the only small town that has benefited from its proximity to the Ohio to Erie Trail. Mount Vernon and Centerburg in Knox County are now connected by trail thanks to the repurposing of rail lines between the two communities. “Now, by reusing those railroad beds, we have an opportunity to provide services,” says Knox County Parks Commissioner Kim Marshall. “They used to be called railroad towns, but now they’re trail towns.”

Bike tourism is booming in Ohio, and the benefits are direct. “When the Great Ohio Bicycling Adventure stopped here in 2011, the group stayed two days in the London area,” says Wayne Roberts of Friends of Madison County Parks and Trails, which helped create the trail segment. “Some of the local restaurants were delighted. They couldn’t believe it when the town was inundated with thousands of bike riders.”

Ohio trails are attracting businesses to the region, as Dan Rice, president and chief executive officer of the Ohio & Erie Canalway Coalition, points out. “We’ve seen companies relocating next to the towpath trail so their employees can have access to it.... The project is being used as part of an economic development package to help companies relocate and move to northeast Ohio.” Increasingly, trail communities are considered desirable locations, a trend that has encouraged fresh investment. According to Rice, the city of Akron in northern Ohio has seen $110 million in investment along the trail.

The slow but steady progress of the Ohio to Erie Trail is inspiring, as Ohio’s trail advocates have encountered and triumphed over nearly every possible challenge along the way—from negotiating railroads for rights-of-way to crafting easements and securing funds. With only 10 percent of the trail’s right-of-way left to be acquired, Oberg is cautiously optimistic that the entire trail will be fully complete within the next 10 to 15 years. The late Ed Honton, an avid Columbus cyclist who is considered the trail’s visionary, would no doubt be delighted. From Cincinnati to Cleveland, the gradual, mile-by-mile progress of the Ohio to Erie Trail is building a statewide network that is reinvigorating communities big and small.