

# COMMUNITY TRAILS

## A BENEFIT TO ALL

**Rail-trails** are multi-purpose public paths built on former railroad corridors. An investment in trails equals an investment in Maine's future by providing economic development opportunities, health and transportation choices, and recreational benefits. Flat by nature, rail-trails are accessible by people of all ages and abilities, and are utilized in a wide variety of ways including bird-watching, bicycling, walking, horseback riding, snowmobile riding and more. Rail-trails in rural areas are unique in character as they wind through some of the country's most beautiful landscapes. They are treasures to be protected and used.

### Economic Benefits for Your Community

Across the country, trails and greenways are stimulating tourism and recreation spending, and in many rural communities they are seen as a catalyst for economic growth. Rail-trails often pass through town centers providing visitors with trail access from hotels and bed-and-breakfasts. Businesses such as restaurants, shops and rental facilities often thrive as a result of trails. To enjoy the largest economic impacts, communities must invest in amenities such as water fountains and bike racks, and promote businesses and partnerships that will attract trail visitors. The end result is worth the effort. The Maine Department of Transportation estimates two million bicycle tourists spent approximately \$36.3 million in 1999, and investments in three trails will yield approximately \$2.7 million per year.<sup>1</sup> The economic impact of many trail systems has been documented, for example:

- \* A 1999 study of Ohio's 72-mile Little Miami Scenic Trail found an estimated 150,000 people used the trail annually. Trail users spent approximately \$2 million on trip-related expenditures in one year, which translates into an average of \$13.54 per person per visit.<sup>4</sup>
- \* The estimated overall annual economic impact of tourism related to the New York State Canal is \$380 million.<sup>3</sup>
- \* Annual trail users' expenditures along the proposed 324-kilometer Trans Canada Trail through Alberta are estimated at \$7.4 million (Canadian dollars) in Alberta and \$3.2 million in the region.<sup>2</sup>
- \* The average economic activity associated with three multi-purpose trails in California, Florida and Iowa was \$1.5 million annually.<sup>5</sup>



## Creating Health and Recreation Opportunities

Trails and greenways create opportunities for people of all ages to bicycle, walk, hike and jog. In providing attractive, safe, accessible, and low- or no-cost places, they make it easier for people to engage in physical activity.

Most Americans are not getting the exercise they need. In Maine, more than half of adults are either overweight or obese.<sup>6</sup> Individuals must choose to exercise, but communities can make that choice easier. Lack of time or convenient access to outlets for healthy transportation and recreation make it harder to make healthy choices. Communities can use trails and greenways to make physical activity more convenient and neighborhoods more exercise-friendly. A study of walking behavior in 12 rural counties of Missouri found that 55 percent of new trail users are exercising more now than before they had access to a trail.<sup>7</sup>

The lack of physical activity contributes to illnesses such as heart disease and diabetes, but it also impacts all of society through health care costs. In 2000, cardiovascular disease accounted for approximately 29,000 hospitalizations in Maine, which translates into \$437 million or one-fourth of all hospital charges.<sup>8</sup>

## Providing Transportation Choices

Rural rail-trails are valued as part of an integral transportation network, both for preserving rail corridors and for providing additional transportation choices. By preserving the integrity of the corridor, we preserve the opportunity for future rail use. In addition, there are more than 60 rail-with-trail corridors in the country simultaneously providing rail and bicycle/pedestrian uses within the same linear corridor.

Trails connect residential areas with retail districts, neighborhoods with schools, and homes with workplaces. Trails provide safe and pleasant environments for people to commute to work or school, run errands, or visit friends, while simultaneously enjoying recreational and health benefits. And because rail-trails often lead to town centers, they provide additional incentive for frequenting local businesses. Providing bicycling and walking choices can help alleviate air pollution and traffic congestion by making it easier for children and adults to get around town without getting in a car.

## Trail Management and Maintenance

Trail management and maintenance are important to ensure that a trail user's experience is pleasant and safe, and that the community derives the most benefits. In many cases, a municipality or state owns the corridor, but like the Elroy-Sparta State Park Trail in Wisconsin, a volunteer organization helps with the maintenance.

The cost of maintaining trails and trail systems is usually included in a general budget for the trail or parks system. Most trails do not charge user fees. Many trail managers hold events to raise funds or rely on advocacy organizations to help raise funds to supplement their maintenance budgets.

Involving the community in maintaining the trail is a great way for residents to participate in improving their community. These advocates act as the eyes and ears of the trail and help report any needed maintenance. Communities are also important partners in promoting the trail through events, educational programming, outreach and more.





## George S. Mickelson Trail

LOCATION: Deadwood to Edgemont, South Dakota

LENGTH: 114 miles \* SURFACE: Crushed stone, gravel

USES: Hiking, horseback riding, snowmobiling, bicycling, cross-country skiing, wheelchair access

**T**he George S. Mickelson Trail travels through the heart of the Black Hills of South Dakota. Seven communities experience the benefits of this 114-mile trail, built along a Burlington Northern Railroad route. The trail is 10-foot wide, with 14 trailheads and 97 bridges.

The South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks Department (SDGFP) manages the trail, but the surrounding towns are beginning to increase their involvement as they see the increasing economic impact the trail is having on the area. Communities organize events and help promote the trail, and volunteers have cleaned up litter on trail sections close to town centers. Each year the SDGFP holds the Trail Trek ride to commemorate the trail's opening. On average, 400 people participate.

Since the trail opened in 1998, there has been an obvious and consistent rise in usage each year. Revenue raised through the sale of day or annual trail passes helps the SDGFP determine that use increases by an estimated 25 percent each year. Although trail managers have not found a way to accurately count the number of users by type (bicyclists, hikers, etc.), they believe that bicyclists are the most common on the trail. Motorized vehicles are prohibited from the Mickelson Trail with one exception: snowmobiles are allowed on the trail's northernmost 18 miles. This provides snowmobilers access to the state's main snowmobile trails from the towns of Deadwood and Lead.

Each town has seen revenues increase since the trail was built, and many boast new businesses catering to bicyclists and other trail users. For example, a bicycle shop in Deadwood, Deadwood Bikes, opened in a former railroad building.



## Mesabi Trail

LOCATION: Grand Rapids to Ely, Minnesota

LENGTH: 90 miles \* SURFACE: Asphalt

USES: Walking, biking, cross-country skiing, skating, wheelchair accessible, snowmobiles (within the corridor, but not on the actual trail)

**R**unning through the heart of northern Minnesota's Iron Range region, the Mesabi Trail is well on its way to becoming one of the finest long-distance paved trails in the United States. The Mesabi Trail takes its name from the Ojibwa Indian legend, Land of the Mesabi, which means "Sleeping Giant." The trail will eventually extend 132 miles and connect more than 28 communities and two counties. Currently, about 90 miles of trail are developed, with the longest paved segment running 51 miles from Nashwauk to McKinley.

This extensive project is the result of the St. Louis & Lake Counties Regional Railroad Authority and the Itasca County Rail Authority, and numerous citizens groups, assembling the parcels of land and acquiring the funding to construct the trail.

To help fund the long-term maintenance of the trail, a \$3 two-day or a \$12 annual wheel pass is required for bicyclists to use the trail. Approximately 700 two-day passes and 900 annual passes are sold each year. Interns, trail operators and the sheriffs department (on high-traffic days) monitor the trail to ensure that trail users are purchasing wheel passes. Towns along the trail route also contribute to maintenance efforts by sweeping, mowing and removing branches from the trail.

To increase tourism and enhance the tourist's experience, the St. Louis & Lake Counties Regional Railroad Authority has created a Web site ([www.mesabitrail.com](http://www.mesabitrail.com)) and provides a variety of services including information about lodge-to-lodge bicycling services and a trail-shuttle service.

# Elroy-Sparta State Park Trail

LOCATION: Elroy to Sparta, Wisconsin

LENGTH: 32 miles \* SURFACE: Crushed stone

USES: Hiking, snowmobiling, bicycling, fishing, wheelchair access

In the late 1960s, when the Chicago and North Western Railroad abandoned the 32-mile corridor between the towns of Sparta and Elroy, many residents served by the line feared the closure would bring economic ruin. As in many small towns on rail lines, the rails meant economic livelihood for farmers and factories.

Local citizens, determined not to fall into economic isolation, encouraged the State of Wisconsin to appropriate \$12,000 to purchase the entire rail corridor. The track and ties were removed, and the corridor was covered in crushed limestone. In 1971 the Elroy-Sparta rail-trail was opened.

To better market the trails in the region, the Sparta Area Chamber of Commerce built a Web site, [www.bikesparta.com](http://www.bikesparta.com), to assist visitors with trip-planning. The site features events, lodging information, shopping and restaurants, and a link to a bicycle shop that provides shuttle services.

The popularity of the Elroy-Sparta State Park Trail (ESSPT) and other area trails has boosted the economic well-being of the area. According to the Sparta Area Chamber of Commerce, trail business is responsible for the 80 percent room occupancy during peak summer months. New businesses opened in response to this tourism, including four new restaurants, an 80-room hotel, four new bed-and-breakfasts, expanded antique shops and specialty stores.

The ESSPT is a 32-mile, crushed-stone trail with many unique features. Bicycling is the primary activity of the trail, but people also walk and use snowmobiles in the winter months. The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) estimates that in 2003, 56,490 people visited the ESSPT, with approximately 20 percent of those being snowmobilers. Users of the trail are required to purchase passes — \$15 annual or \$4 daily — that are sold through the DNR office, or through the friends group, which coordinates sales through local vendors. The friends group keeps 10 percent of the profits to fund its activities.

Maintenance of the trail is carried out by the DNR and local volunteers. The DNR employs two full-time employees and two summer employees to manage the ESSPT and two other trails. The crushed stone surface requires regular improvements, but approximately every three years, DNR sets aside money to resurface a significant portion of the trail.

The DNR considers volunteers important partners in supporting, promoting and maintaining state parks and trails. The state has a friends group coordinator, and each state property is encouraged to have a nonprofit friends group associated with the property. The Friends of the Elroy-Sparta State Park Trail assist the trail managers with weeding, mowing and other ongoing maintenance tasks. They sell trail passes, raise funds, hold events and generally rally support for the trails.



## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Maine Department of Transportation, Bicycle Tourism in Maine, Economic Impacts and Marketing Recommendations, April 2001.

<sup>2</sup> An Economic Impact Analysis of the Proposed Alignment of the Trans Canada Trail in East-Central Alberta.

<sup>3</sup> Eric Mower and Associates, New York State Canal Corporation Economic Impact Study of New York State Canal Tourism Final Report, June 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Ohio-Kentucky-Indiana Regional Council of Governments, Little Miami Scenic Trail Users Study, 1999.

<sup>5</sup> National Park Service, Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program, The Impacts of Rail-Trails, A Study of Users and Nearby Property Owners from Three Trails, 1992.

<sup>6</sup> Maine BRFS, 2000.

<sup>7</sup> Ross C. Brownson, "Promoting and Evaluating Walking Trails in Rural Missouri," Saint Louis University school of Public Health.

<sup>8</sup> Maine Health Data Organization 2001.



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*Creating a nationwide network of trails from former rail lines and connecting corridors to build healthier places for healthier people.*