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CONTACT: Patricia Brooks, patricia@matchmapmedia.com, 202.351.1757

New Data Illustrates Importance of Connected Trail Infrastructure to the Nation

Efforts to connect multiuse trails into transportation systems prevalent nationwide with developing trail networks in every state, reaching at least half of Americans.

COLUMBUS—Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC), the nation’s largest trails and active transportation advocacy organization, today released the [first-ever spatial analysis of the country’s trail networks](#).

The analysis found that there are more than 150 known multiuse trail networks—infrastructure that creates walking and biking routes that connect within and between communities, separated from traffic—in development nationwide, with trail networks underway in all 50 states, Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico. At least half of Americans (49.75%) live in a county that is home to a developing trail network. Of the counties where trail networks are being developed, 74% are majority suburban/urban and 26% are majority rural populations.

“This data validates what we’ve long known—that multiuse trail networks are critical to the well-being of the nation. The scope and scale of trail network development underway nationwide has the potential to deliver powerful solutions for the climate, economic and mobility challenges facing all types of communities,” said Ryan Chao, RTC’s president. “People want more investment in infrastructure that will help them get around in their communities, whether or not they drive. The impact of this infrastructure is invaluable.”

Alongside the spatial analysis of America’s trail networks, RTC released national opinion-poll data capturing public support for trail networks.

- People indicated that connectivity and active transportation infrastructure would help them walk and bike more. The top five factors include more destinations within a 10-to-20-minute walking distance (37%); friends and family to join them (34%); trails and greenways separated and protected from traffic (30%); more sidewalks (30%); and more protected bike lanes (29%).
- Nearly one-third of people (29%) say that trail networks would make it easier to walk and bike where they need to go instead of drive.
- Overwhelming support for spending tax dollars on trail networks is consistent across party affiliation—82% of people agree that tax dollars should be spent on connecting trails to each other and important destinations (81% Republicans, 84% Democrats, 81% Independents, n = 619).

- More people think that the government spends too little money on walking and biking infrastructure versus other forms of transportation infrastructure (49% compared with 39% public transportation and 38% roads).

These findings come as the U.S. Department of Transportation prepares to release the first-ever call for applications for the [Active Transportation Infrastructure Investment Program](#), which was authorized as part of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law in 2021. This new federal program is the first to dedicate funding to the connectivity of active transportation infrastructure. According to RTC, the scale and scope of the nation’s trail networks illustrate the urgency to fully fund the program, which only received a portion of the authorized funding in the 2023 federal budget. RTC, Congressional champions and partners across the country are continuing to advocate for full program funding, which is necessary to complete safe routes in communities across America and more quickly unlock the safety, climate and equity benefits of active transportation networks—especially critical at a time when thousands of pedestrians and cyclists are dying in crashes each year.

The data was released as part of a panel discussion at WOSU in Columbus featuring RTC, Latino Outdoors and the Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission (MORPC). The event elevated Columbus as a prime example of what it takes to prioritize and accelerate the pace of efforts to connect trails into larger recreation and active transportation systems across the country, and the regional, statewide and national impact of those investments. The region is the hub of the Central Ohio Greenways network, an anchor in the statewide Ohio to Erie Trail, and a community along the route of the cross-country [Great American Rail-Trail®](#), which stretches 3,700 miles between Washington, D.C., to Washington State.

The analysis of America’s trail networks is part of RTC’s [TrailNation™](#) initiative, redefining how the country builds trail networks and the impact this infrastructure can have on people and places. The analysis includes trail networks that are locally adopted; in development (either planning, construction, or both); and comprising two or more multiuse trail segments or contiguous loops that provide seamless connectivity without traffic interaction. The infrastructure represented in this assessment was identified by RTC as of Dec. 1, 2023, from spatial analyses and local and regional nonprofits and agencies. This assessment serves as a benchmark of trail network development nationwide and will expand over time as more networks are reported and developed. View the interactive map of America’s trail networks at railstotrails.org/trailnation.

RTC’s opinion poll was conducted online, Sept. 14–23, 2023, by the firm [Stratalys Research](#), with a sample size of 1,200 adults over age 18, including an oversample of 200 Black and 200 Latino respondents.

Rails-to-Trails Conservancy is the nation’s largest trails organization—with a grassroots community more than 1 million strong—dedicated to building a nation connected by trails, reimagining public spaces to create safe ways for everyone to walk, bike and be active outdoors. Connect with RTC at railstotrails.org and @railstotrails on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#).