

Strategic Plan for Sustaining and Growing Impact Through and Beyond the Pandemic Starting FY21

Executive Summary



Photo by Thom Carroll

The Approach

This strategic plan contains a set of principles, analyses and strategies that will guide Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC) in its mission to build a nation connected by trails during a time of unprecedented challenge and opportunity. This plan seeks to evaluate the opportunities of the current moment and anticipate the path moving forward.

Rather than attaching a fixed time horizon, RTC will operate under this plan during and after the conclusion of the pandemic, or until a substantially different political, economic and cultural environment emerges. Annually, we will not only review progress but fully revisit the assumptions and analyses.

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The Old Normal

RTC has had a national impact at a scale like few other nonprofit organizations. Today, there are rail-trails in every state and 40,000 miles of multiuse trails across the country, including 24,000 miles of rail-trails. RTC serves as the sector's leader in each of its programmatic areas of focus—policy, trail development, and communications and movement building.

Prior to the pandemic, many factors foretold the opportunity for the trails movement to deliver impact at a greater scale, including: cultural shifts toward an interest in cities and higher-density living and away from car ownership and sprawl; the rise of micromobility; widespread recognition of climate change; and the potential for a significant increase in federal funding for trails, walking and biking.

The New Normal

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought a dramatically different set of opportunities and challenges. At the time this document was created, more than 250,000 related deaths had been recorded in the United States, and projections suggest as many as 500,000 by spring 2021. The nation has experienced massive job loss, housing and food insecurity, and severe economic contraction. BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Color) communities have been hardest hit, and tragic incidents of violence have made starkly clear the depth and extent of racial injustice in America.

Amidst the tumult, trails have served as significant sources of respite and relief, as well as ways to maintain health and wellness. Trail use surged 200% in the early weeks of the pandemic and has maintained at rates 60% higher than in previous years. RTC has taken a leadership role in providing public health guidance on safe outdoor activity, and, due in part to our advocacy, more than 70 cities took early action to repurpose streets for outdoor physical activity. The use of [TrailLink](#) has surged to all-time highs, with an expected 10.5 million users by year-end. RTC's valued donors and supporters have generously sustained the organization through this period of economic uncertainty.

Most social movements begin with shifts in knowledge and attitudes and then are followed by shifts in behaviors. Those shifts have occurred simultaneously, and the long-sought argument that trails are essential has in many ways been made. The opportunity now ahead for RTC is to capture these shifts to grow public will and support for trails while helping our movement emerge stronger.

The Foundation

As part of the strategic planning process, RTC developed a set of foundational statements that undergird the core priorities in this plan, as well as RTC's identity as an organization and the change we seek to make in the world.

Mission Statement: At Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, we are building a nation connected by trails. We reimagine public spaces to create safe ways for everyone to walk, bike and be active outdoors.

The mission statement has been updated to put a greater emphasis on connections between people and communities. While rail-trails remain a vital part of our work and legacy, the new mission statement also reflects RTC's broader work in communities and adaptive reuse beyond rail corridors.

Vision Statement: Trails connect everyone, everywhere.

Paired with the mission statement, the vision statement describes the future we seek as nothing short of trails being ubiquitous, connected seamlessly and available for everyone. We also developed a detailed and specific commitment to equity, which is embodied in the [Equity Statement published on our website](#) and described in the full plan as well as in the organization's North Star, which will guide our strategies, tactics and role in population-level change.

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The Method

In seeking to make our most value-added contribution, we established a methodology through a SWOT analysis. In sum, RTC has deep expertise and vast national reach, and now operates in an environment where our issues—trails and active transportation—are more visible and central than ever before. Juxtaposed against this is a large responsibility for national leadership in many areas, limits on capacity relative to our leadership role, and a very uncertain public funding environment for trails.

Factoring in the SWOT, we filtered the range of needs and priorities through three effective questions:

1. What does our country and movement most need from us now and in the foreseeable future?
2. Where are we uniquely positioned to lead?
3. What is possible in an uncertain, resource-constrained environment?

The Priorities

Based on this analysis, we've established the following five core priorities and supporting strategies to sustain and grow our impact through and beyond the pandemic.

Priority 1: Sustain the national shift in attitudes about the value of trails and behaviors in trail use so that the public believes trails are essential community assets.

Sustain shifts in attitudes and behaviors through a multipronged national influence strategy and real-time communications focused on the public's needs during the pandemic.

- Launch “[Trail Moments](#)” national campaign through targeted calls to action and storytelling, leveraging users' stories and engagement for advocacy.
- Leverage COVID-response rapid deployment of protected bike/walk infrastructure to engage decision-makers in planning for increasing permanent active-transportation infrastructure.
- Unite the movement through joint advocacy, including shared policy goals, collaboration on tactics and coordinated communications.

Continue to increase awareness and access to trails by growing the market share of TrailLink, increasing the diversity of users and developing new ways for users to engage.

- Continue to innovate search strategies, and website and app optimization.
- Increase user engagement through Trail Moments influencer campaign and marketing through paid ads, and travel and tourism partnerships.
- Develop approaches to increase the diversity of TrailLink users, including forming partnerships with national disability rights organizations.

Priority 2: Pass policies that significantly increase federal funding and support for trails and assist state and local partners in adapting to a new funding and policy environment.

Significantly increase federal funding for trails and active transportation through visionary reauthorization and stimulus advocacy.

- Run a multifaceted campaign to influence the outcome of the federal surface transportation reauthorization, including drafting policies, directly lobbying key decision-makers and driving pressure from coalitions representing diverse disciplines and constituents.
- Develop recommendations for the transition to a new federal government and advocate for FAST Act reauthorization, stimulus recovery funding for trails and the creation of an Active Transportation Administration.

Support state and local governments adjusting to a new funding and policy environment through adaptive funding and capacity tactics.

- Where states invest their own funding, implement a blended advocacy approach of defense when states try to cut state funding and opportunistic offense of new programs.
- Scale signature initiatives that build the movement or set the table for future advances in state policy (trail caucuses and coalitions, state trail plans, active-transportation resource team).
- Develop a systematic approach to planning for and funding trail maintenance and resiliency.

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Priority 3: Increase the spread and local replication of interconnected and equitably developed trail systems across the country.

Continue to advance TrailNation™ projects while pivoting to a focus on replication on a national scale.

- Modulate RTC’s role in TrailNation sites to three levels of involvement across the portfolio: 1) remain in a project leadership role to implement equitable development strategies; 2) remain or transition to a co-lead role to pilot key innovations and grow local capacity; 3) transition from a project management role to providing value-added contributions to the project.
- Complete the TrailNation Playbook, and pivot to a focus on disseminating best practices and providing technical assistance and support to local efforts creating connected trail systems.

Continue the forward momentum of the Great American Rail-Trail™ by deploying adaptive funding and capacity tactics to state and local partners while developing innovative experiential and activation approaches.

- Launch a national advisory council of partnerships along the route.
- Prioritize Great American states and catalyst project partners when scaling signature policy programs. Provide technical assistance and strategic advice for the catalyst projects.
- Continue to develop innovative activations and experiences virtually and/or compatible with social distancing practices.

Priority 4: Increase the diversity and representation of RTC and the active transportation sector, and reduce disparities in access and use of trails among BIPOC communities and people with disabilities.

Increase diversity and representation of RTC as an organization.

- Implement a board pipeline strategy that focuses on recruiting high-caliber members that increase diversity and representation aligned with national demographics.
- Prioritize increasing staff diversity through hiring and professional development.

Increase diversity and representation within the trails and active-transportation sector.

- Incorporate equity and inclusion principles in all of RTC’s editorial content and standards.
- Incorporate equity principles into existing topics in the trail-building toolbox and create specific content on equity in the toolbox.
- Seek out and respect BIPOC voices in RTC’s coalition work and routinely incorporate equity as a core value in our program and advocacy activities.

Reduce racial disparities in users of trails and communities with access to trails.

- Expand commitment to equitable development and community engagement within TrailNation projects to set the standard for inclusivity when developing trail systems.
- Develop a trail equity map as a visual and geospatial tool to evaluate equitable trail distribution, and help shape policy and direct funding to trail deserts across the United States.
- Launch latent demand research phase 3, including focus groups, case studies and market research to create scalable models for understanding barriers to trail use and access.

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Priority 5: Ensure RTC is a sustainable, growing and resilient organization with the capacity to lead the movement and sector.

Ensure the long-term financial sustainability and capacity of the organization to meet the moment by maintaining gains in revenue and making tactical investments in capacity.

- Continuously focus on enhancing the membership experience, quality of premiums and engagement strategies with new and long-time members.
- Prioritize retaining and growing support from mid-level and major donors and foundations while expanding our planned-giving program.
- Shift focus of budgeting from sustainability to making strategic investments in mission-critical programmatic and operational capacity.

Ensure organizational resiliency by fostering a strong organizational culture—prioritizing staff wellness, and board and staff development.

- Continue to explore and implement strategies that both keep the organization connected virtually and support the physical and mental wellness of staff and their families.
- Maximize involvement of board members' individual expertise and connections to their respective networks.
- Determine the long-term “future of work” balance of in-person and virtual work, and focus on lease negotiations and/or search for new headquarters space to create this environment.

The Unknown

Though many experts no longer predict the economy falling off a cliff, it's hard to predict the duration and depth of prolonged economic contraction. Helping the movement adapt to this new funding environment is a core strategic priority, but perhaps the greatest challenge will not be decreases in funding but decimated capacity and staffing of state and local governments.

The surrounding context in which we'll move forward is also uncertain—particularly with regard to the future of commuting and vehicle usage and shifts in the built environment. There are multiple scenarios for the future, from decreased commuting and business travel of all modes, to mass transit facing a permanent decline and cars choking streets. These scenarios present both an opportunity for trails to serve as transportation alternatives and a challenge for trails to serve as the last mile of travel by transit.

All these developments have direct or tangential effects on RTC's mission. As these shifts unfold, we will continue to advocate for transportation alternatives to cars, lend support for smart growth and maintain allegiance with mass transit and the programs that support trail-to-transit connections.

The Trail Ahead

This document represents a different approach to planning—setting long-term goals and aspirations that we will pursue for as long as the challenges and opportunities we've identified remain. At the same time, we will be rigorous about setting and pursuing aggressive but achievable targets along this path in each fiscal year, starting in FY 2021. While no one could have predicted the events of 2020, in many ways, we've been preparing for this moment since our founding 34 years ago.

