

Urban Pathways to Healthy Neighborhoods

Focus on: Promotion & Programs

What are Urban Pathways?

Urban pathways go by many names, including bikeways, trails and greenways. These pathways are used for healthy recreation and—when seamlessly interconnected with pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure like sidewalks and bicycle lanes—can be ideal routes for active transportation, including biking and walking.

Part of the Solution

In many urban areas across the country, low-income populations and communities of color face disproportionate challenges of obesity, difficult commutes and scarcity of open space. Promoting the development and use of urban pathways can help address these challenges by integrating physical activity into daily routines, connecting residents with green spaces and providing cost-effective solutions to improving community health.

The Urban Pathways Initiative

Through the generous support of The Kresge Foundation, Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC) launched the Urban Pathways Initiative to advocate for equitable investment in vulnerable communities that promote the health, transportation and environmental benefits of trail use. Learn more at www.railstotrails.org/urbanpathways.



Volunteers on the Lafitte Corridor construct kiosks to promote the future greenway. Photo: Dana Eness.

Trail advocates sometimes use the old mantra, “Build it and they will come,” to describe the immediate success of new trails. But complexities of the built and social environments in urban areas present factors that may affect trail use and require programmatic interventions to encourage use once the trail is constructed. Research indicates that strategies to “increase perceived trail safety, accessibility, and awareness about trails may result in a higher rate of trail use and more time spent on urban trails”¹. Hosting trail events and activities, whether frequent or one-time, big or small, can extend the benefits of the trail into the nearby community.

When focusing on encouraging trail use, local community groups and trail managers should adopt a new mantra: “Build it, promote it, program it and they will come.” Whether your trail is in the planning phase or has been open for many years, conducting community outreach is essential to encouraging trail use among neighborhood residents. This summary presents lessons from Washington, D.C., and cities in California, Massachusetts, Ohio, Louisiana and Michigan. Learn how these communities are finding innovative ways to promote and program their trails through outreach, events and activities.

This issue summary is part of a series that explores best practices and lessons learned from urban pathways across the United States. To access the entire series visit www.railstotrails.org/urbanpathways/lessons.

Know whom to invite and involve—and take notes!

Leverage the event as a launching pad for advocacy, or magnify the event's impact by including local elected officials and community leaders. Elected officials can become champions of the trail and work as an ally to ensure the trail is developed, maintained and cared for by the city. Reach broadly for your audience and partner with schools, the faith-based community and neighborhood groups as you plan events and activities. Collect surveys or program evaluation forms to identify who is currently served by your programming and how future programming can reach under-represented populations. Don't forget to document it! Photos, video, audio and written comments will help you illustrate the value of events and community-based programming on your trail.



Photo: ©M.V. Jantzen

Kalamazoo, Mich. Kalamazoo River Valley Trail

The Parks Foundation of Kalamazoo County and the Kalamazoo County Parks Department conducted a market research report to create recommendations for future programming. In 2010, the Foundation completed a Trail Programming report that highlights implemented programs, trail activities and includes data about trail use.

Learn more: Kalamazoo County Parks Department, www.krvtrail.com

"I see [the Met Branch Trail] as hooking up the city. So when I see that a part of the city that was not a part of the trail is now a part of the trail, I see connectedness in our city."

—REP. ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON ON THE MET BRANCH TRAIL IN WASHINGTON, D.C.

Promote , promote, promote.

Use the media and other online resources like listservs, Facebook and Twitter, but couple this outreach with word-of-mouth and personal efforts. Partner with neighborhood groups to send your message to the community, go door to door inviting nearby residents to the trail, and promote your event and programs at other well-attended community activities. These methods can be time-consuming but are sometimes the best way to reach nearby residents.

Washington, D.C. Met Branch Trail

In 2010, Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC) celebrated National Trails Day by hosting an event with Kaiser Permanente on the Met Branch Trail. The event, called "Meet the Met: Party on the Met Branch Trail," introduced surrounding communities to a new pathway that had opened just one month before. While some area residents had been involved with the long history of getting the trail built, many in the surrounding neighborhoods didn't know the trail existed. RTC partnered with neighborhood associations, nearby schools and youth mentoring programs, city agencies, local arts organizations, bicycle



Trail advocates and neighborhood groups often use chalk to promote events and activities on the Met Branch Trail in Washington, D.C. Photo: ©M.V. Jantzen.

retailers and advocacy groups and a business improvement district to promote and host a grand opening for trail users and neighborhood residents. Elected officials, from neighborhood-level commissioners to city council representatives, were invited and attended to show their support of the trail. Nearly 1,000 people turned out on a hot June day for the celebration, and of the 200-plus surveyed, nearly half had never been on the Met Branch Trail before. Watch the video to learn more: www.railstotrails.org/urbanpathways/lessons/programs.

Be creative without reinventing the wheel.

Partner with existing groups to host events or do outreach. Showcase the trail, but demonstrate local connectivity by incorporating neighborhood destinations and involving local organizations, businesses and agencies.

Use annual days of observation for trail activities and events. Many trail and neighborhood groups focus on community stewardship opportunities for National Trails Day or Earth Day. Some notable nationally observed days that incorporate community service and stewardship include:

- **Martin Luther King, Jr. Day of Service** (January) www.mlkday.gov
- **Earth Day** (April) www.earthday.org
- **National Trails Day** (June) www.americanhiking.org/NTD.aspx
- **September 11th Day of Service and Remembrance** (September) www.911day.org



More than 300 community volunteers fill the Richmond Greenway in honor of Martin Luther King, Jr. Day.

Learn about creative approaches to trail programming below and in the “Case Studies” on following page.

San Francisco Bay Area, Calif.

Iron Horse Regional Trail

In 2009, East Bay Regional Park District teamed up with Bay Area Regional Transit to host “Tracks to Trails,” an event to promote physical activity on the Iron Horse Regional Trail in California’s Alameda and Contra Costa counties. Participants were encouraged to “Walk, Run, Roll, or Ride” and visit a series of energy stations along the 24-mile trail.

Cleveland, Ohio

Morgana Run Trail

The Morgana Run Trail in Cleveland’s Slavic Village neighborhood knows how to party. As part of “Walk + Roll,” a large neighborhood walking and biking festival, neighborhood residents took to the streets and the trail to play games, visit local business and organization open houses, paint murals and eat ice cream. Among many other events on the trail, Slavic Village Development organizes “Walk a Hound, Lose a Pound,” an annual event for dog owners and lovers to enjoy the Morgana Run Trail with their four-legged friends.



“Walk a Hound, Lose a Pound” event on the Morgana Run Trail in Cleveland, Ohio. Photo: Slavic Village Development Corp.

CONNECTICUT RIVERWALK AND BIKEWAY

SPRINGFIELD, MASS.

LENGTH: 3.7 MILES • OPENED IN 2002

While offering sweeping views of the Connecticut River—a designated American Heritage River—the Connecticut Riverwalk and Bikeway is largely sequestered from adjacent neighborhoods by an active Amtrak corridor and concrete barrier. To increase awareness of the trail among residents of the Brightwood Neighborhood, Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC) hosted “Fun on the River Walk,” a four-hour festival along the trail. RTC partnered with several community and health organizations, including Brightwood Community School Based Health Center, City of Springfield Planning & Economic Development, North End Campus Coalition, North End Citizen’s Council, Partners for a Healthier Community, Riverview Senior Center and Pioneer Valley Planning Commission.

The event featured activities for all ages, such as hula hooping, a BMX demonstration, balloon animals, face painting, Zumba and Tai Chi. There was also a DJ and free food. The event was widely publicized—flyers were produced in both English and Spanish. An estimated 300 to 400 people attended the event, allowing neighborhood residents to become more familiar and comfortable with the trail.

LAFITTE CORRIDOR

NEW ORLEANS, LA.

LENGTH: 3.1 MILES • PLANNED TO OPEN IN 2014

Each April since Hurricane Katrina, a group of New Orleans residents has “hiked” along 3.1-miles of a former rail corridor, the home of the future Lafitte Greenway. Hosted by Friends of Lafitte Corridor (FOLC), the purpose of the annual hike is to raise awareness of the city-owned corridor and keep the project moving forward.

Through the Urban Pathways Initiative, Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC) brought additional resources for the 2011 Lafitte Corridor Hike, helping local partners to provide a more structured event. RTC helped develop a Greenway Ambassadors Program to educate community residents about the corridor’s history and the greenway planning process. On the day of the hike, the Greenway Ambassadors guided small groups along the corridor, giving hikers a more personalized tour of the corridor. RTC also worked with FOLC to create fun activity stations along the hike, allowing participants to stop and play volleyball or other group sports, and speak with the team designing plans for this exciting new greenway. The annual hike is an effective community outreach tool—a record 369 participants attended the hike in 2011. Learn more on RTC’s website: www.railstotrails.org/urbanpathways/lessons/programs.



Photo: Bart Everson

“It’s really exciting when we walk along here to think about how good this space could be for families.”

—REBECCA MARSHBURN, NEW ORLEANS RESIDENT²



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1. Wolch, J. 2010. Proximity and Perceived Safety as Determinants of Urban Trail Use: Findings from a Three-City Study. *Environment and Planning*, 42: 57–79.

2. Stroup, Sheila. Hikers along the Lafitte Corridor will trace the path of a soon-to-be greenway. *Times Picayune*, April 10, 2011. Accessed 12/13/2011. www.nola.com/outdoors/index.ssf/2011/04/hikers_along_the_lafitte_corri.html