

TrailNation Summit, October 2025

Trails as Economic Engines

Suburban Cohort



*Pinellas Trail, Dunedin, FL
Credit: Visit Dunedin*

Introductions

**WHIT
BLANTON**



FORWARD PINELLAS



BOB IRONSMITH
CITY OF DUNEDIN, FL



LIZ THORSTENSEN
RAILS TO TRAILS CONSERVANCY



**ERICA
BRIGGS**

RAILS TO TRAILS CONSERVANCY

Trails as Economic Engines

Agenda

Class Overview

Liz Thorstensen, RTC

Part 1: Strategies for Leveraging the Economic Potential of Suburban Trails

Whit Blanton, FAICP, Forward Pinellas

Part 2: Case Study - City of Dunedin & The Pinellas Trail, FL

Bob Ironsmith, City of Dunedin, FL

Part 3: Developing Your Action Plan

Whit Blanton, FAICP, Forward Pinellas

Objective S

Objective 1:

Understand how suburban trail systems can be leveraged to revitalize aging commercial corridors, support mixed-use redevelopment, and strengthen town centers.

Objective 2:

Learn strategies to retrofit existing infrastructure to better integrate trails with transit and bike/ped infrastructure, employment hubs, and community amenities, while addressing resident concerns.

Objective 3:

Explore case studies and actionable tactics that demonstrate how trail networks boost property values, attract employers, and enhance quality of life, strengthen social and neighborhood connectivity.

What Typically Defines a Suburban Trail?

- Car-centric development pattern with segregated, low density land uses surrounded by parking
- Trails presented as linear parks
- Lack of connectivity except to parks or recreation destinations
- Often parallel to or crossings of high-speed arterial roads



*Trail Crosswalk Marking /
Photo by Whit Blanton*

Issues and Challenges

- Can be difficult to connect between housing, jobs and retail
- Conflicts with high-speed roadways & large parking lots
- Crowding at peak times due to lack of walking & bicycling options elsewhere





Transportation Funding Workshop / Photo by Whit Blanton

Issues and Challenges, Cont.

- Access, connectivity and continuity – difficult to create a real network
- Fragmented parcel ownership, political subdivisions, competing priorities
- Limited funding for maintenance or capital expansion
- Public opposition (NIMBY)

Trail Access to Businesses



Before



After

*Left to Right: Vacant land, Pinellas Trail Crossing West Bay Drive, Largo, Florida. Completed Trailhead same location.
Photo by Whit Blanton*

Defining the Context

Integrating trails with development

Set the vision – connectivity and scale

General Plan policies, special area plans, redevelopment support, etc.

Zoning category and Land development regulations

Placemaking – the “4 Ds”

Density

Diversity

Design

Destinations



Creative Alignment of the Multi-Use Regional Trail, Sarasota, FL| Photo by Whit Blanton



Vision, Partnerships, and Policy



More than a trail – an identity and icon

Function

Economy

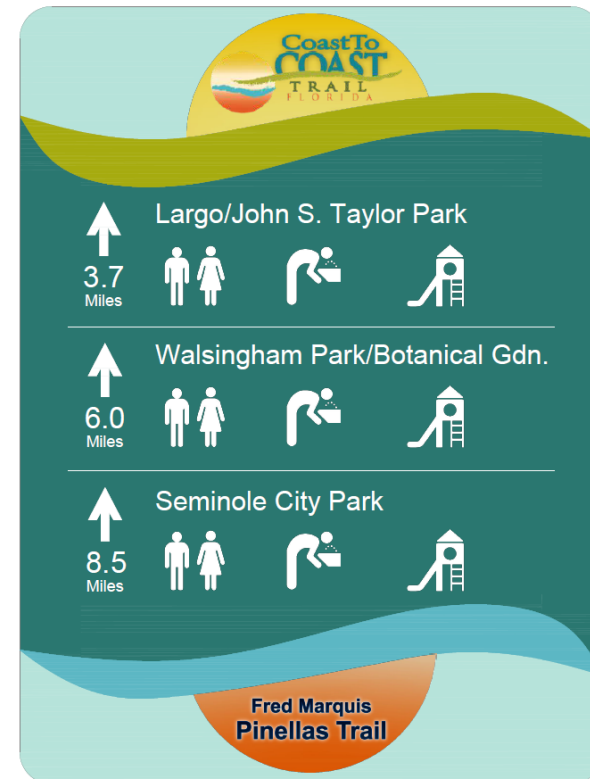
Network

Responsible entity that collaborates

Clear long-term vision, short-term action

Consistent facilities, standards, branding

Invite ownership and enable flexibility



Planning & Placemaking

Land uses

Comprehensive / General Plan

Neighborhood or District Plan

Allowable uses – lodging, retail, services, residential

Density and intensity

Development form

Building orientation

Visibility

Parking – bike and car

Public spaces

Access and connectivity



*Left to Right: Integration of trail and transit, St. Petersburg, Florida.
Placemaking Adjacent to Regional Transit Hub, Arvada, CO | Photos by Whit Blanton*

100

Winter Garden Trail Town

Former rail line serving citrus industry

West Orange Trail – 22 miles

Transformed downtown into thriving center

Baldwin Park Trail (Orlando)

Redevelopment of Naval Training Center

10,000 residents and mixed-use center

Interconnected street grid and connections to regional trail network



Economic Growth & Opportunity

Identifying Champions – Community Engagement and Buy-in

- Charrettes

- Surveys

- Walking audits

Districts and Main Streets

- Revising codes and policies

- Establishing character and scale

- Overlay districts

- Development incentives



*Wayfinding and placemaking, Downtown
Aiken, SC | Photo by Whit Blanton*

Economic Growth & Opportunity, Cont'd

Enabling access

Business-friendly permitting

Wide sidewalks

Secure bike parking near commercial entrances

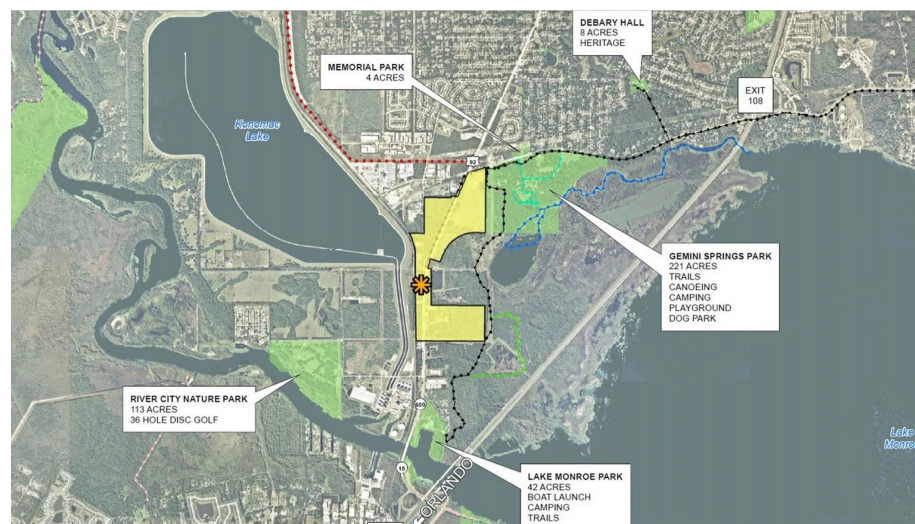
Placemaking and hubs of connectivity

Trailheads

Wayfinding & branding

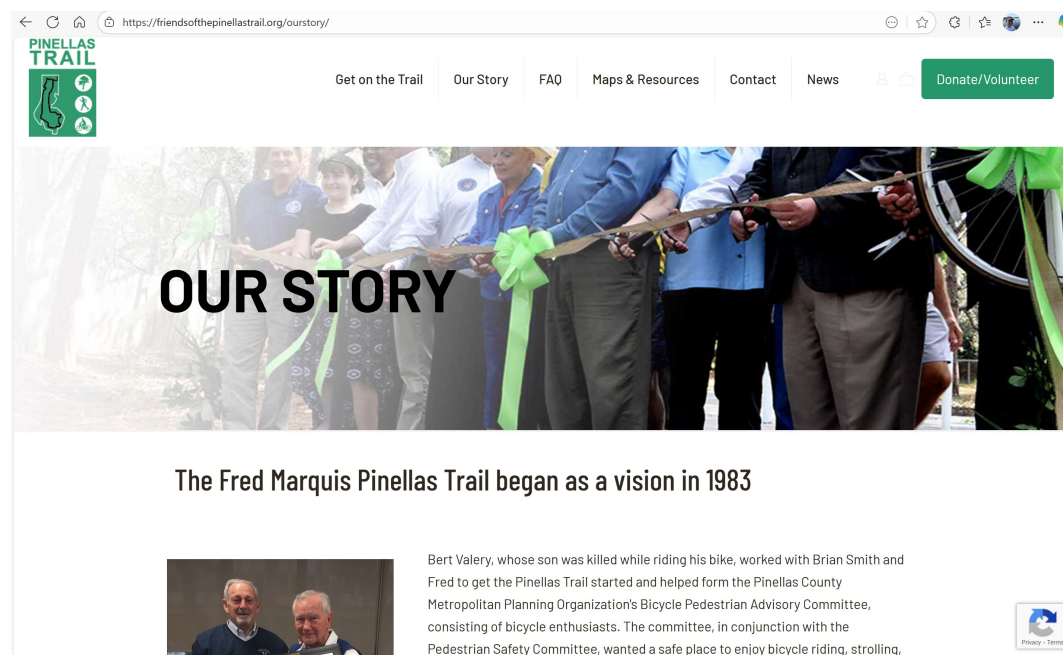
Amenities (shade, water fountains, etc.)

Mixed use development



Funding

- Interlocal agreements
- Recurring revenue, value capture, grants
- Capital and operating costs
 - Design, ROW, construction
 - Maintenance and management
 - Programming
- Partnerships
 - Community groups
 - Foundations
 - Public agencies



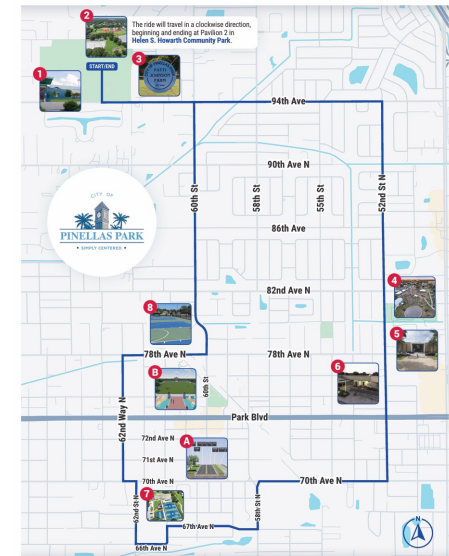


MPOs as Trail Partners

Keys to Effectively Working with Your MPO

Understand	Understand policy goals and framework: • Federal and state • Long Range Transportation Plan
Connect	Connect the dots – link the plan to outcomes that reinforce policy goals and objectives Tell the story using data and personal testimony
Collaborate	Actively participate in the MPO committee process Bring funding to the table, if possible
Demonstrate	Maintain continuity of local commitments

2000+ participants since inception



- | Points of Interest | | Planned Improvements | |
|---|--|--|--|
|  Forbes Recreation Center
6401 NE4th Ave |  Pinellas Park City Hall
5010 1st Ave N |  40th St Complete Streets Project (6050 S 10th between 7200 W Ave and 82nd Ave N)
Multiple projects are planned to make it safe to walk and comfortable to bike, and drive along 60th St as part of the City Center Master Plan. | <p>Interested in learning more about the City of Portland as a whole?</p> <p>Scan here for the Pinellas Park City Hall</p> |
|  Helen S. Hewitt Community Park
3001 94th Ave |  Barbara S. Evans Public Library
7730 52nd Ave |  Broadview Recreation Center
1121 64th Ave N | |
|  Port Jefferson Park
7101 16th Ave |  Fredrickson Community Center
7000 Courts at Pinellas Park
City Center 6050 1st Ave N |  Davis Community (601 S & 78th Ave)
This project will include the development of a central street, community gardens, open green space, playground and a splash pad. | |
|  English Brothers Park
5017 81st Ave | | | |
|  | | | |

Bike Your City Event, St. Petersburg, Florida / Photo Credit: Forward Pinellas



Pinellas Trail Loop Status

- 67 of the 75.5 miles are open – 89%
- South Gaps I and II should be completed by 2030
- Alignment finalized along 126th Ave N
- San Martin Trail is programmed for construction in 2027
- 33.4 Miles of the Gulf Coast Trail complete in Pinellas
 - 8.6 miles planned

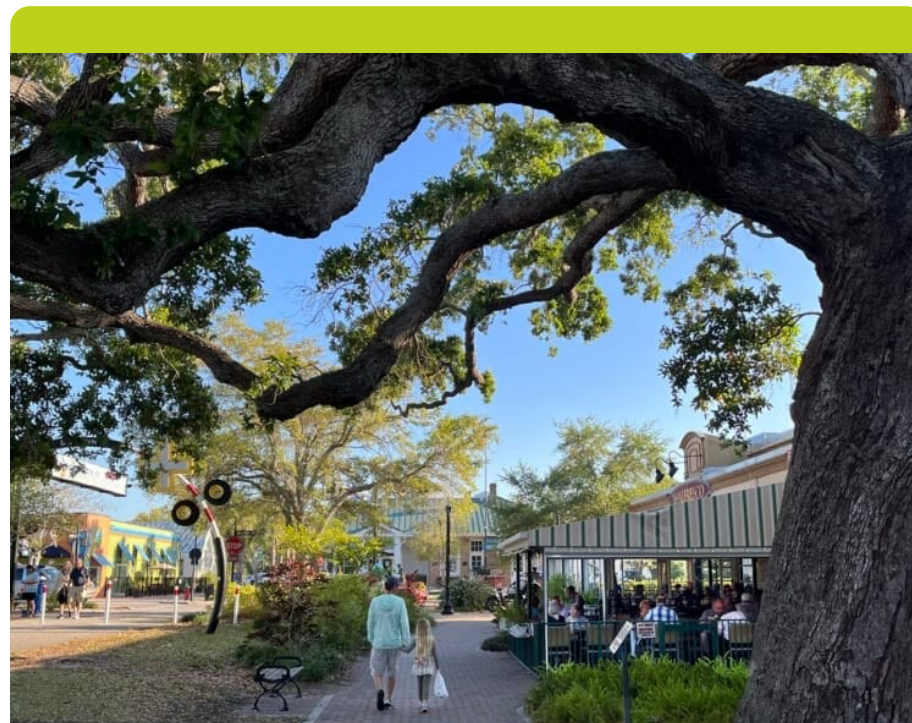


Case Study:

Dunedin's Downtown Revival Through the Pinellas Trail

About Dunedin, FL

- Located on the west coast of Florida, north of Clearwater
- 10 square miles
- 36,000 est. population
- Built out – prime for redevelopment



Downtown Dunedin / Photo by Bonnie Gross

Downtown: 1980's

- Traffic moves, but not much else
- No charm or ambience
- Little private investment
- Vacancy rate: 30%
- Declining tax base
- Infrastructure degrading
- Assessed Property Values (1988): \$35,411,500



*Downtown Dunedin in the 1980's /
Photo Credit: Dunedin Historical Society*

Downtown: Today

- 1% vacancy rate
- Assessed Property Values (2024):
\$305,565,426
- Thriving community
- Recognized as a great place to live and visit



Photo Credit: Visit St. Pete-Clearwater



Photo Credit: Southern Living

Dunedin's Winning Strategy

Embrace the Pinellas Trail

Foster adaptive reuse

Slow traffic – pedestrian is #1

Beautify, beautify, beautify

Build a sense of place

Complete small projects annually



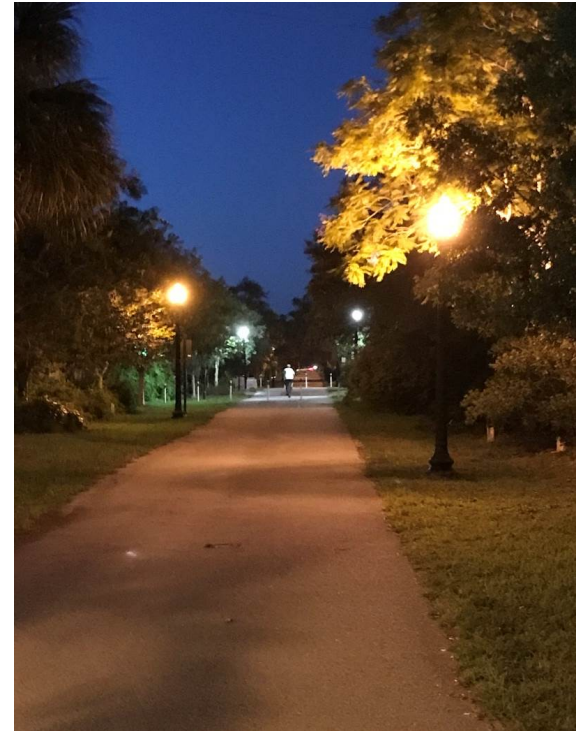
Build a Sense of Place



Banners on the Trail



Enhanced Lighting



Left to Right: Before and After Enhanced Lighting | Photo Credit: City of Dunedin

Creative Amenities



Steam Train Bike Rack Main Street



Dog Bike Rack on Broadway

Special Events

Highland Games

Celtic Music and Craft Beer Festival

Dunedin Wines the Blues

Mardi Gras

Friday Night Films at Pioneer Park

Arts and Crafts Festival

And so many others...

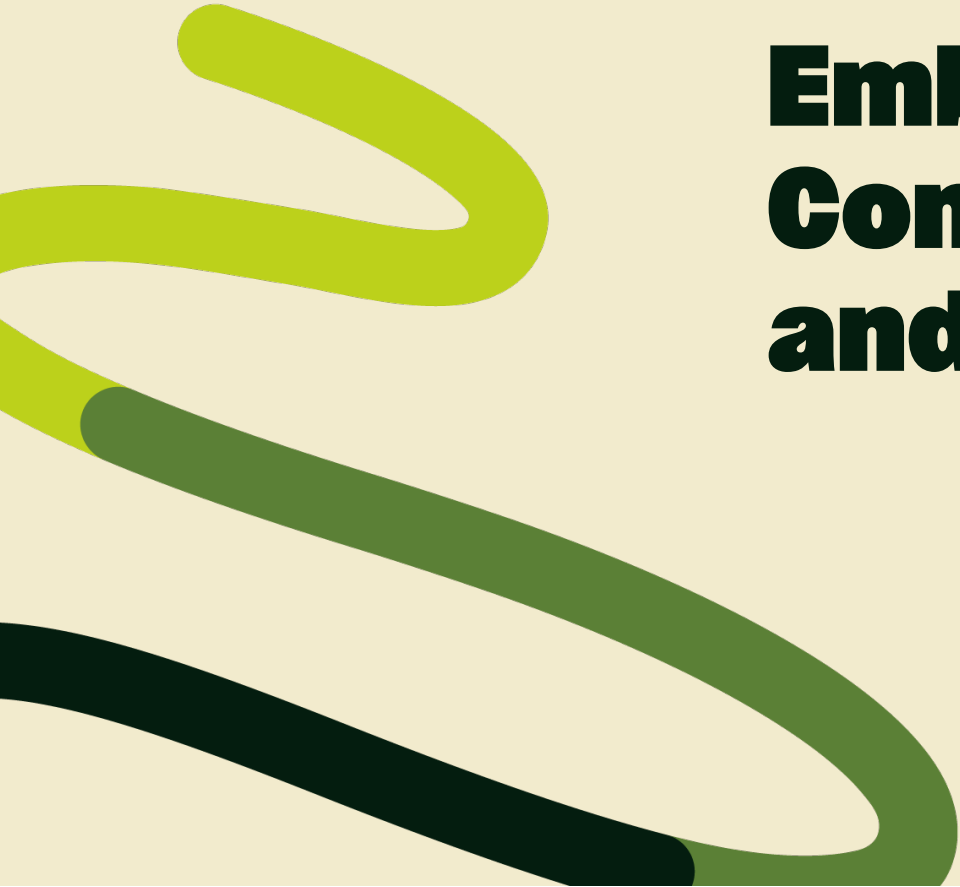


Photo Credit: Visit St. Pete-Clearwater

Placemaking



Video Credit: Visit Dunedin



**Embrace
Connectivity
and Safety**

Enhanced Pinellas Trail Connection



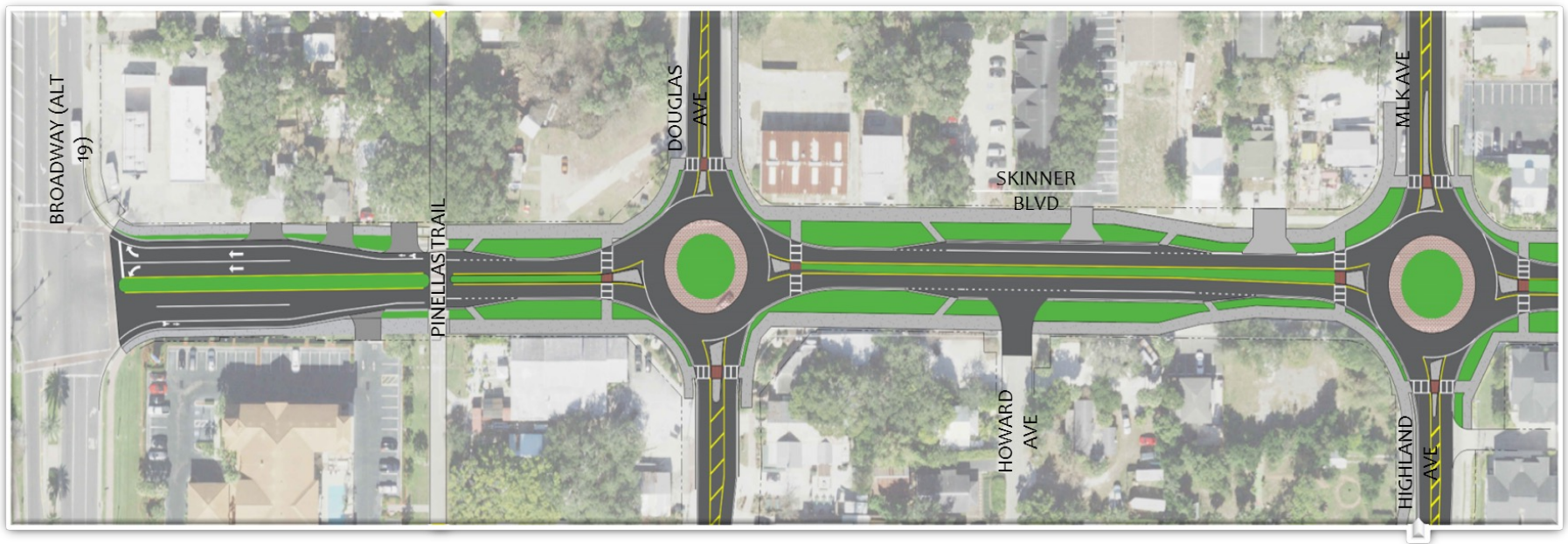
Pinellas Trail Connection | Photo by Robert Ironsmith

Pinellas Trail at SR 580



Left to Right: Before/After Pinellas Trail Enhancement / Photo Credit: City of Dunedin

Skinner Blvd. Complete Streets



Skinner Blvd. Complete Streets



Skinner Blvd | Photo by City of Dunedin

First Place : Pinellas Trail Counter



Pinellas Trail Count Data Summary

Automated Trail Counter Data Collection Period:
April 1st-30th

April 2025

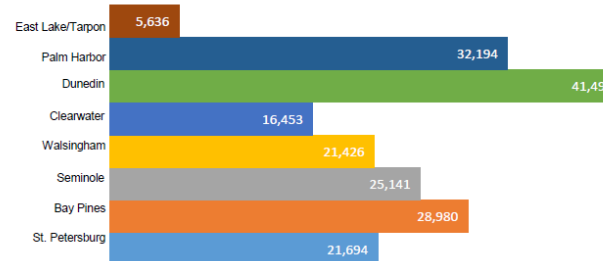
30-Day Count Total: 193,020

Daily Average Count: 6,434

Highest Daily Totals:

Not available due to counter maintenance.

April Totals by Counter Location*



Counter Locations



Weekday & Weekend Profile*

Trail User Mode Split*

Not available due to counter maintenance.

Source: Forward Pinellas April 2025

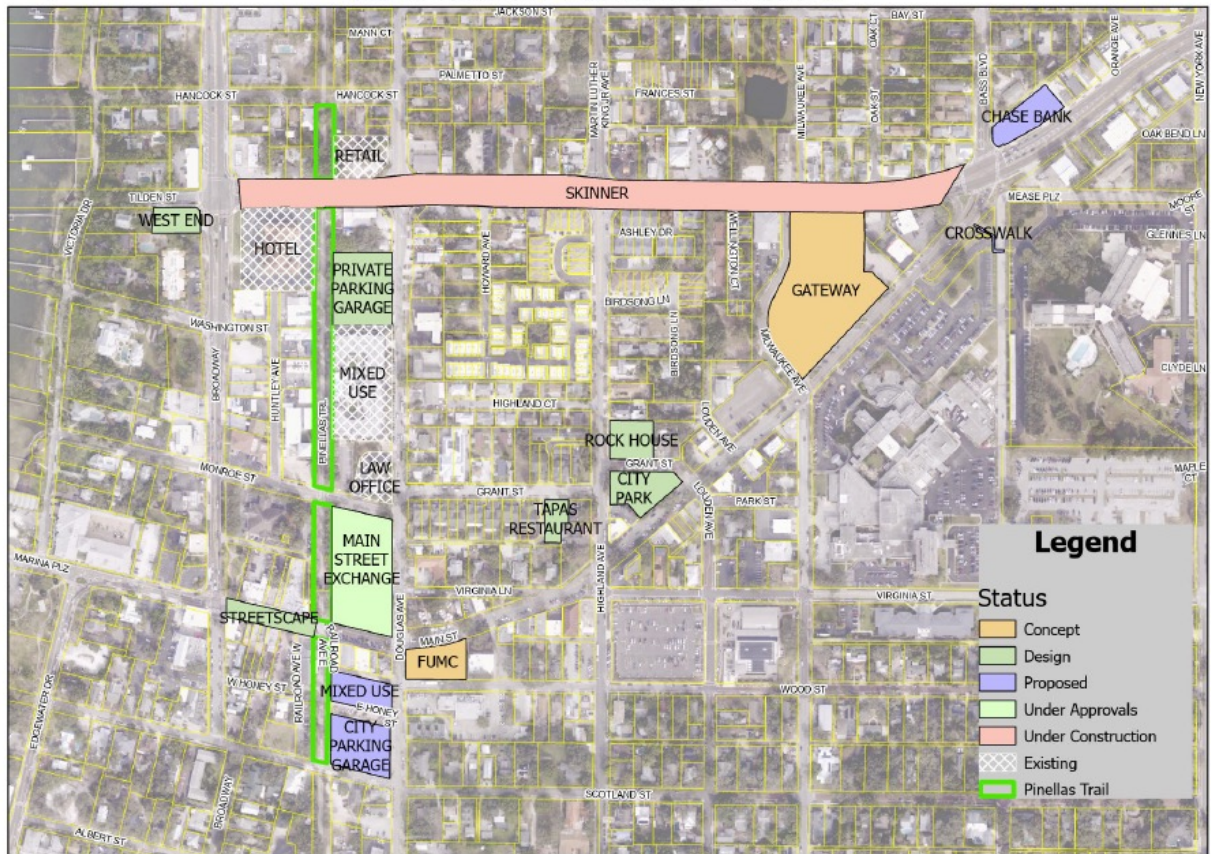


Trail and Placemaking Create Economic Opportunities

- Trail Spur Mixed Use Projects
- Planned Streetscape Improvements
- Downtown Parking Garages



CRA PROJECT ACTIVITY UPDATE





Dunedin's Results are Attracting Attention

First Florida State Trail Town, April 2018

- Improved Quality of Life for Residents
- Attracting Visitors
- Economic Asset



National Attention

"Best walking town in America" - *Where to Retire Magazine*

"One of the Best Places to Live on the Coast" - *Money Magazine*

"Main Street ends at the glorious blue waters of the Gulf of Mexico....a laid-back Florida beach community, you never want to leave" - *Southern Living Magazine*

"Dunedin may be the Tampa Bay area's best-kept secret" - *Coastal Living Magazine*



Questions?

Action Planning



Individual Work Time (5 MINUTES):

- Digest new info
- Jot down your main thoughts in the Action Plan
- Identify: A key challenge to realizing the economic potential of your trail



Break into Small Groups (35 MINUTES):

- Break into groups of 4-6
- Share your challenges
- Utilize the power of the group to brainstorm solutions and strategies
- Identify a partner to follow up with



Sharing Out (5 MINUTES):

- Each group nominates one person to share out their top trending strategies and solutions in 20 seconds or less.



**Share Out:
Your Group's
Top Trending
Strategy/Solution**