



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Jan. 14, 2026

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Rails to Trails Conservancy Launches New Program to Strengthen Community Safety, Health and Economic Opportunities

RTC's TrailNation Accelerator designed to build capacity among rural and small-town communities to further develop trail networks as opportunity-generating tools

WASHINGTON—Rails to Trails Conservancy today announced the inaugural cohort of communities selected to participate in its TrailNation Accelerator, a new capacity-building program that helps rural and small-town communities advance connected trail networks that support safety, health, economic vitality and quality of life.

Made possible with generous support from the REI Cooperative Action Fund and building on RTC's TrailNation initiative—the organization's flagship program to accelerate the pace of trail network development nationwide through model projects, a playbook for action and a national peer network—the Accelerator connects local progress to national momentum. Through a hands-on, cohort-based experience, participants receive tailored technical assistance, practical tools and peer connections to turn trail visions into actionable, locally driven plans.

"Trails are essential infrastructure for communities of all sizes," said Kelly Pack, RTC's TrailNation Accelerator program director. "Through the TrailNation Accelerator, RTC is able to offer targeted support for rural and small-town communities that are ready to move from aspiration to action, giving the people who live there safe places to connect outside and inviting visitors to experience by trail all that these towns offer."

The Accelerator is a first-of-its-kind approach to trail network development. Over the course of the year-long program, RTC will work with the cohort and adapt economic and community development strategies, like regional collaboration and investment readiness, to align vision, resources, and partnerships for long-term success. By combining capacity building, technical assistance and peer learning, the Accelerator supports resilient trail network planning rooted in local priorities and equips communities to turn vision into long-term impact.

The selected cohort reflects a range of geographies and projects at different stages of connecting local trails, united by ambitious visions for essential trail infrastructure that provides safe transportation options, improves equitable access to recreation and strengthens health, mobility and local economies.

For example, an effort in Cochise County, Arizona, will examine corridors for shared-use paths, bicycle facilities and safe pedestrian routes to strengthen connections between communities, building on existing regional plans and investments. In Tennessee, partners in Johnson County are planning nearly 100 miles of multiuse trails to link communities across three states, building on decades of grassroots advocacy. A regional coalition in Illinois is advancing a connected trail vision to link multiple towns across two counties. In West Virginia and Missouri, multi-county initiatives are working to connect towns,

tourist destinations and existing trails to support outdoor recreation and economic development. In Arkansas and Montana, local leaders are exploring trail connections to improve safe transportation while expanding access to outdoor recreation. Washington state partners are leveraging unique corridor opportunities to improve outdoor access in rural areas with limited public lands.

“This cohort reflects the creativity, determination and local leadership driving trail development across the country,” Pack said. “Individually, these communities reflect diverse needs and visions. Collectively, they’re places where limited resources, capacity gaps and persistent inequities really highlight the importance of tailored technical assistance and learning from one another.”

While the cohort teams will receive customized support, participants will collectively advance locally driven trail networks and contribute practical strategies to strengthen the broader trails movement nationwide.

The eight teams selected as members of the first Accelerator cohort in 2026 are:

Douglas and Bisbee / Sun Corridor Trail – Arizona

Partners: City of Douglas, Bisbee Bikeways, Sun Corridor Trail Alliance

Helena-West Helena – Arkansas

Partners: City of Helena-West Helena, studioDRIFT

Trails of the Grand Prairie (Central IL) – Illinois

Partners: Trails of the Grand Prairie

Van Buren / Poplar Bluff – Missouri

Partners: Van Buren Trails Coalition, Poplar Bluff Trails Coalition, Ozark Trail Association, National Park Service RTCA Program

Beaverhead Trails / Dillon – Montana

Partners: Beaverhead Trails Coalition, City of Dillon, Beaverhead Bikes

Johnson County Trails – Tennessee

Partners: Johnson County Trails Association, First Tennessee Development District, Johnson County Tourism Office

TREAD / Mansfield Branch Line Trail (Douglas County) – Washington

Partners: TREAD, City of Mansfield, local stakeholders

Central WV Trail (Lewis and Braxton Counties) – West Virginia

Partners: Lewis County Economic Development Authority, Braxton County Development Authority, WV TRAIL

The cohort communities will advance their work side by side, making progress on distinct local goals while building the collective capacity necessary for navigating challenges that often constrain rural and small-town initiatives. As the cohort moves forward, the TrailNation Accelerator will equip teams with tools and relationships needed to advance trail networks that serve people and places equitably.

“These communities are strengthening their ability to address longstanding disparities in access and capacity,” Pack said. “RTC is excited to connect them with ways to use trail network development as a catalyst for more equitable health, mobility and economic outcomes.”

Learn more about the TrailNation Accelerator and the cohort's projects at railstotrails.org/trailnation/accelerator.

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.