



Fred Marquis Pinellas Trail | Photo by Jane Bianchi

Preparing for Successful Trail-Based Tourism

August 05, 2026



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Preparing for Successful Trail-Based Tourism

Agenda

- 1. The Trail Tourism Opportunity**
- 2. Explore the Toolkit**
- 3. The Ecusta Trail (North Carolina)**
- 4. The Cowboy Trail (Nebraska)**
- 5. Q&A**

The Trail Tourism Opportunity

- **181 million Americans participated in outdoor recreation** in 2024, following 37% growth over the last decade.
- Nearly **45% of Americans travel more than 50 miles** for outdoor recreation activities.
- **79% of rural destinations** reported stable or growing visitation.

Source: State of Rural Tourism report

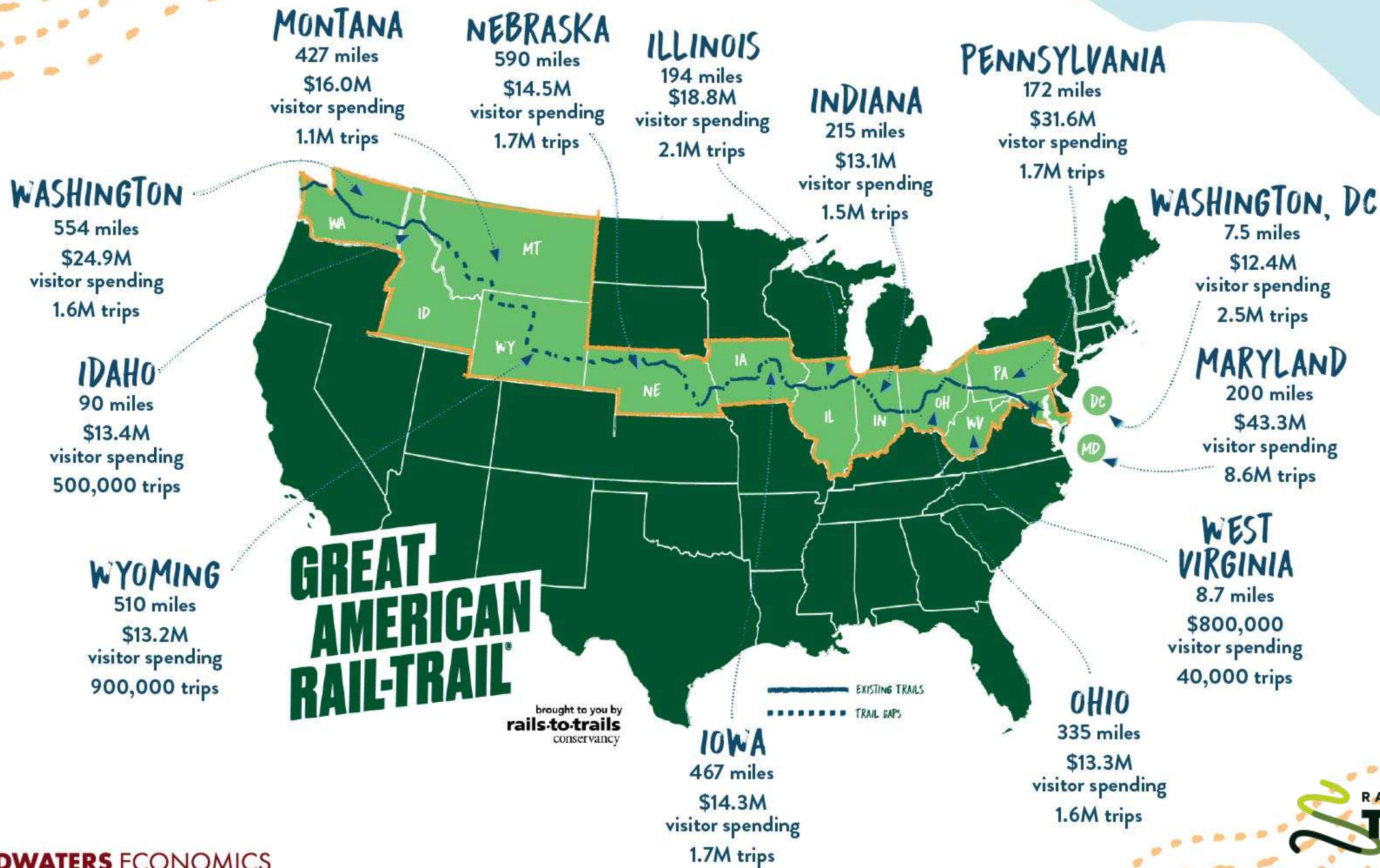


Quality of Place Drives Demand

Visitors want the same thing residents want:

- Walkable downtowns
- Connection to nature
- Outdoor recreation
- Local retail
- Unique public gathering spaces
- Authentic experiences
- Strong community identity







Bub's
BURGERS
& ICE CREAM

BICYCLE
FRIENDLY
COMMUNITY
THE LEAGUE
OF AMERICAN BICYCLISTS

The background image shows a lively urban street scene. On the left, a two-story building with a ground-floor cafe or shop has people sitting at outdoor tables. A sign for 'Pete's' is visible. A paved bike lane with a yellow line runs down the center. A person is riding a bicycle in the lane. To the right of the bike lane, a man is walking a small white dog. The street is lined with trees and other buildings. A sign on a pole on the right says 'BICYCLE FRIENDLY COMMUNITY' and 'THE LEAGUE'. The entire image has a green tint.

**The Trail is the Asset.
The Ecosystem Creates the
Experience.**



Toolkit for Generating Trail Tourism

Growing a Trail Tourism Ecosystem



Trail Tourism Readiness Self-Assessment

This assessment helps users identify strengths, and opportunities, and associated resources and tools, along a continuum of progress for effectively promoting and marketing trails. Answer each of the questions to determine which phase of readiness per indicator best describes your community. Throughout the toolkit, recommendations for next steps are organized by readiness phases.

Elements of Success	Definitions	Questions	Phases of Trail Tourism Readiness			
			In Development (community assets and experiences are minimally marketed, and they receive limited visibility even locally)	Local Favorite (community has assets it promotes, though with limited access, and known primarily by locals)	Regional Destination (community has a developed tourism approach, and has some regional visitation)	National Destination (community has a strategy and established partnerships to attract a national audience)
Advocacy for Trail Tourism	The ability to influence decisions within political, economic and social institutions, including state tourism boards and destination marketing organizations (DMOs), to affect public policy, laws or budgets that support trail tourism.	How aware and supportive of trail tourism are local public officials and tourism entities?	Our community's trail, prospective trail or outdoor recreation opportunities in general are not yet on the radar of our public officials and tourism entities.	Our trail is known locally, but our community lacks a formal advocacy campaign to communicate about trail tourism to public officials and tourism entities.	Policymakers and tourism partners are aware of the benefits of trail tourism and see it as an economic development driver, but support for increasing the scale of trail tourism could be greater.	Our community's trail and outdoor recreation environment is a driver of tourism and maintains continuous relevance and support from local and state governments and other partners.
		How developed are your trail tourism advocacy messages?	We do not yet have advocacy messaging or defined asks aimed at our elected or public officials.	We have developed advocacy messaging and defined our ask, but have not fully engaged elected or public officials.	Our community has effectively communicated the benefits of trail tourism and needed support to public officials through effective advocacy campaigns.	Our advocacy messaging is driving or complementary of regionwide tourism or economic development strategy.
	Prioritizing the development of amenities—desirable or useful features—that enhance the visitor experience.	What is the visitor landscape like for supporting trail tourism in your community?	Our community has no or few visitor attractions to support trail and outdoor recreation-based tourism.	Our community has some visitation assets to support local day use, such as food and retail, but lacks those necessary to promote visitation.	Our community has enough lodging options and adjacent tourism attractions to support non-locals, but may lack the necessary amenities to support multi-day trips.	Our community has a visitor landscape which elevates the overall tourism user experience, accommodates and facilitates multi-day trips, and serves as a draw for visitors from outside the community.

Trail Tourism Readiness Assessment

Where is your community today, and what steps will move you closer to fully tapping your trail tourism potential?



Phases of Trail Tourism Readiness



In Development

Trail infrastructure is incomplete, newly developed or minimally used. Trail and/or regional not yet well known. Limited coordinated tourism messaging. Few visitor amenities.



Local Favorite

Trail is open and functional. Trail is used frequently by residents. Trail and/or outdoor recreation is not yet viewed as an economic driver. Promotion of trail and/or region relies primarily on word-of-mouth marketing. Insufficient visitor amenities.



Regional Destination

Consistent trailheads with amenities and wayfinding. Strong trail identity with recognizable branding. Local trail promotion. Trail is activated with programming, events and other activities led organically by organizations and businesses. Used by visitors from within the region who spend money locally.



National Destination

Leading piece of the regional tourism strategy and a main reason why people visit. Well-documented economic benefits that are used to justify continued investment in the trail and trail tourism. Abundance of trail-specific amenities throughout the community.



9 Key Elements of Trail Tourism Success

Elements of Trail Tourism Success



Advocacy

Generating public and political support



Trail Tourism Economic Ecosystem

Amenities to support the breadth of destination trail experiences



Demonstrating the Impact of Trail Tourism

Insights and data to make the case for investment in trail tourism

Elements of Trail Tourism Success



Funding for Trail Tourism

A plan for generating investment



Developing a Regional Trail Identity

An intentional approach to building a place-based brand rooted in the trail



Maintenance and User Experience

Proactive maintenance planning that supports a positive user experience

Elements of Trail Tourism Success



Marketing for Trail Tourism

Marketing to maximize the trail tourism potential



Developing Organizational Capacity and Collaboration

Capacity to collaboratively pursue trail tourism strategies



Fostering Stewardship and Belonging

Stewardship and a culture of welcome

The Ecusta Trail, NC

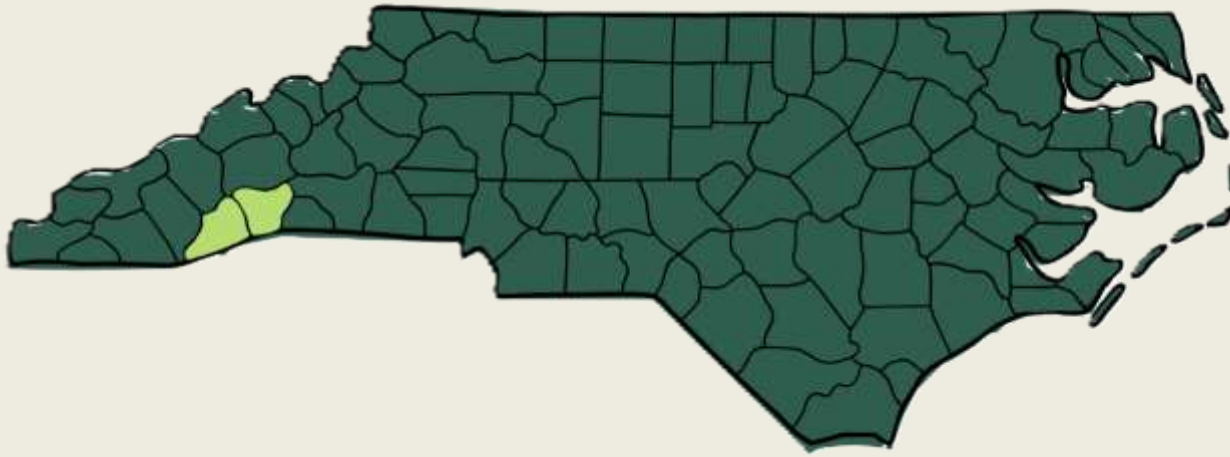
Choose Your Adventure



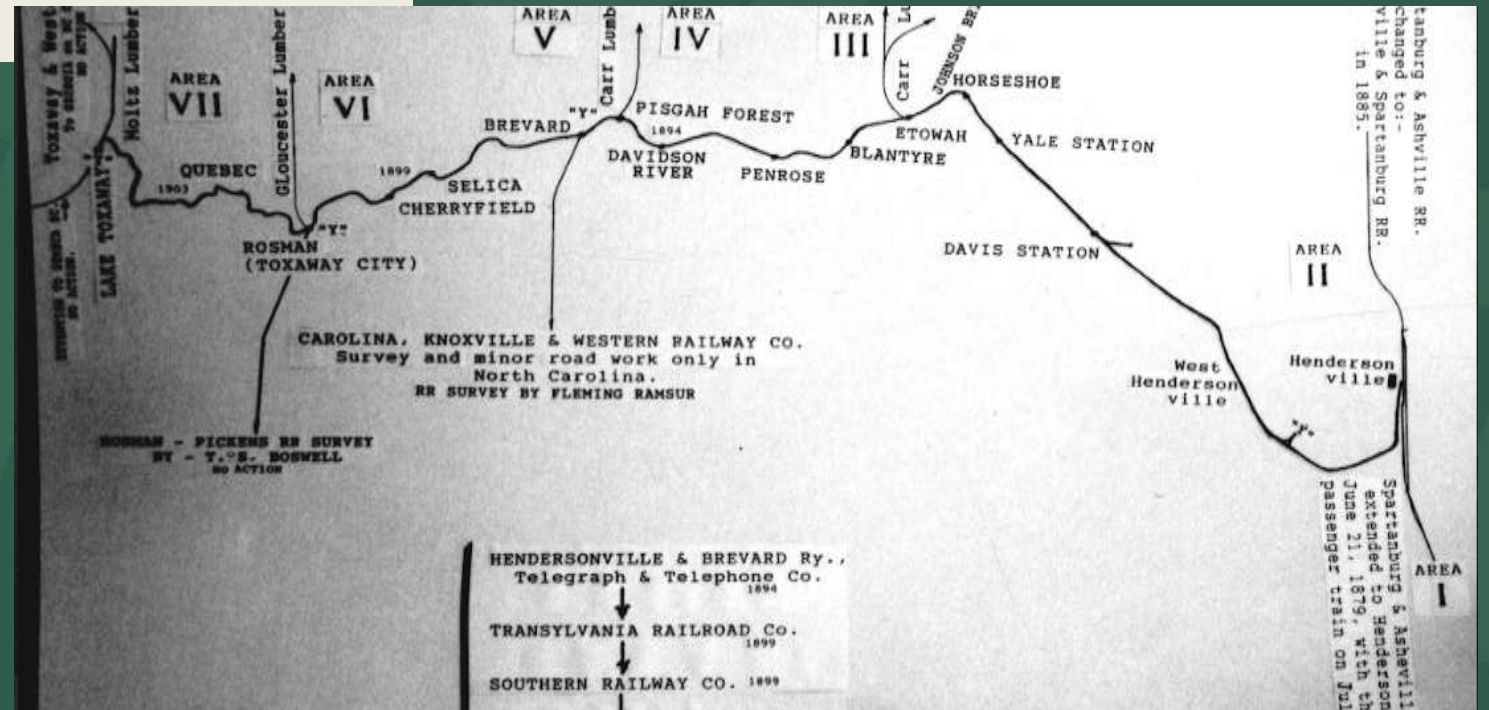
Laura Rice, Friends of Ecusta Trail



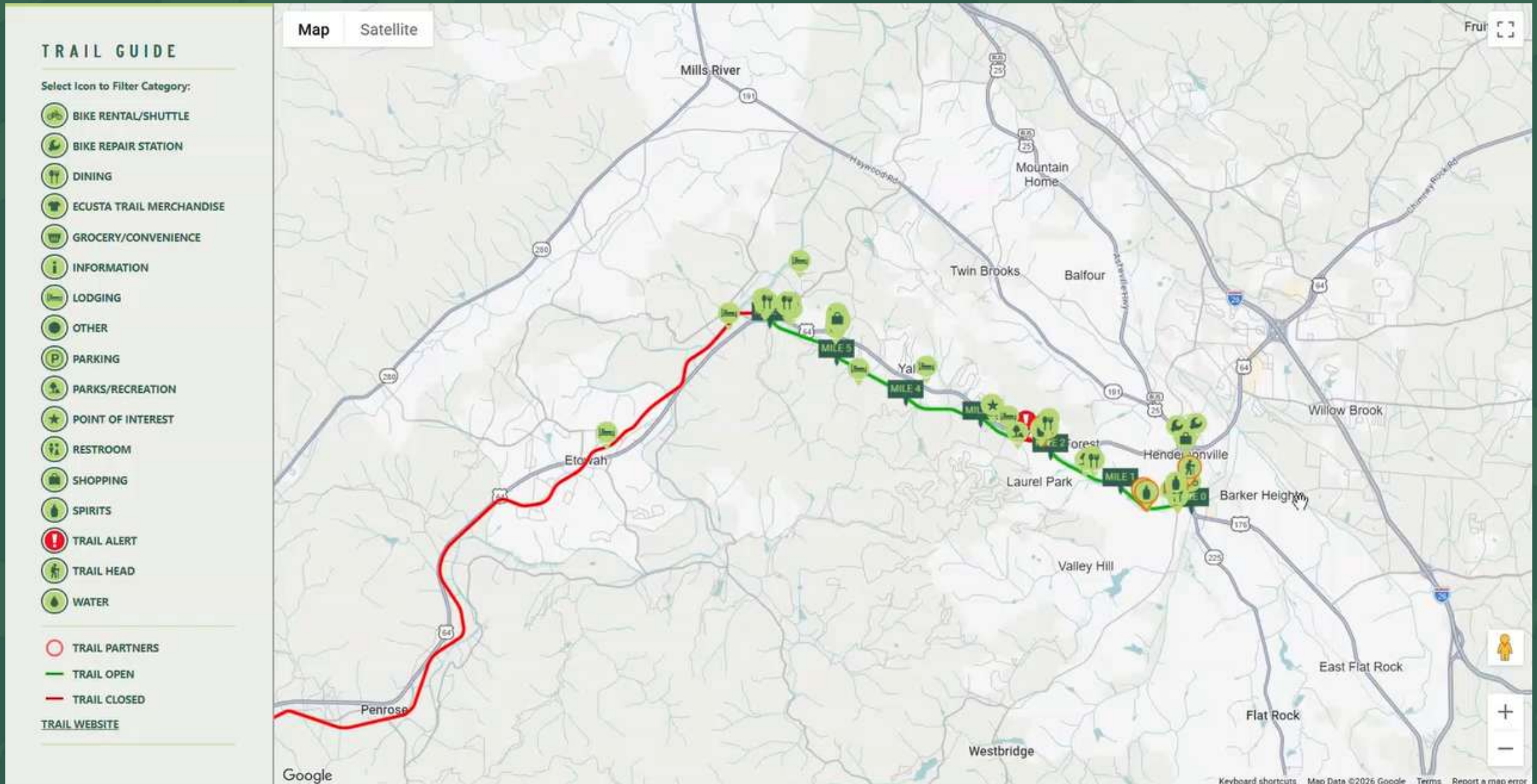
Michelle Owens, Henderson County TDA



The Ecusta Trail is the visionary transformation of a former rail line into a multi-use greenway in North Carolina, spanning over 19 miles between downtown Hendersonville and downtown Brevard.



The Map



Trail Partners

TRAIL GUIDE

Select icon to Filter Category:

- BIKE RENTAL/SHUTTLE
- BIKE REPAIR STATION
- DINING
- ECUSTA TRAIL MERCHANDISE
- GROCERY/CONVENIENCE
- INFORMATION
- LODGING
- OTHER
- PARKING
- PARKS/RECREATION
- POINT OF INTEREST
- RESTROOM
- SHOPPING
- SPIRITS
- TRAIL ALERT
- TRAIL HEAD
- WATER

TRAIL PARTNERS

TRAIL OPEN

TRAIL CLOSED

TRAIL WEBSITE

Map Satellite

Map showing the trail route through Hendersonville, NC. The trail is marked with a green line and mile markers (MILE 1, MILE 2, MILE 3, MILE 4). Key locations include Horse Sheds, Yale, Laurel Park, and Hendersonville. The trail starts near Horse Sheds and ends near Laurel Park. The map shows surrounding roads like US-421 and US-158, and landmarks like Indian Cove and Twin Brooks.

TRAIL PARTNER

HENDERSONVILLE WELCOME CENTER AND TRAILHEAD

The Welcome Center and Trailhead in downtown is right on Main Street Hendersonville, with free parking, lots friendly information and advice, inspirational videos and photos all around, and clean facilities — it is the first place for you to visit during your trip to Hendersonville! There is also parking for your bike and a bike repair station. Open M-Sat 10am-3pm, Sun noon-4pm.

Location:
Mile 0 - Downtown Hendersonville

[Learn More](#)

Google

Keyboard shortcuts Map Data ©2025 Google Terms Report a map error

Trail Partners



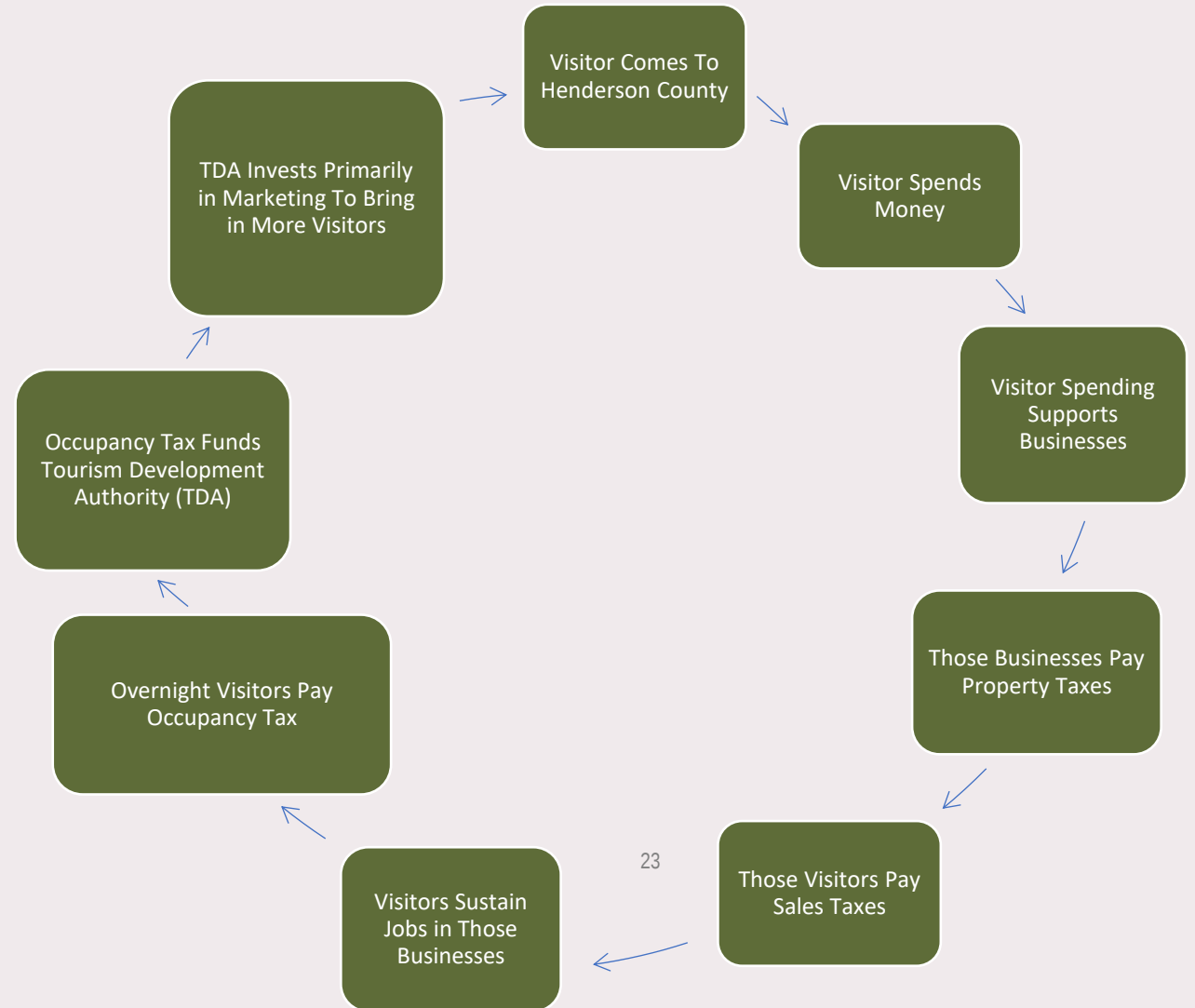
OFFICIAL PARTNERS



Almost everywhere across the globe, just about every locale has a **DMO (Destination Marketing/Management Organization.)** They are funded differently, usually either by membership fees or by a local tax. It's important you understand how your DMO is funded and what it can spend its moneys on, and what its mission is.

22

The Henderson County Tourism Development Authority is a **public authority** created by the **NC General Assembly** and the **Henderson County Commissioners** to carry out a narrow governmental function. It is solely funded by an occupancy tax (or lodging tax), not memberships.



NC legislation directs how TDAs are to spend the occupancy taxes:

- **at least** 2/3 on marketing to visitors,
- and **up to** 1/3 on tourism-related capital expenditures



A Myriad of
Strategies are used
to promote the
trail

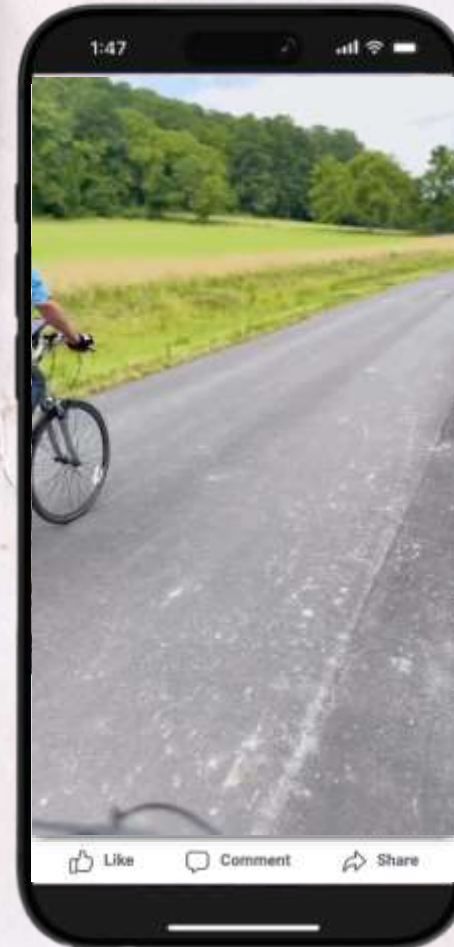


Marketing: paid, owned, and earned

Meta (FB and IG) ads



Facebook Posts

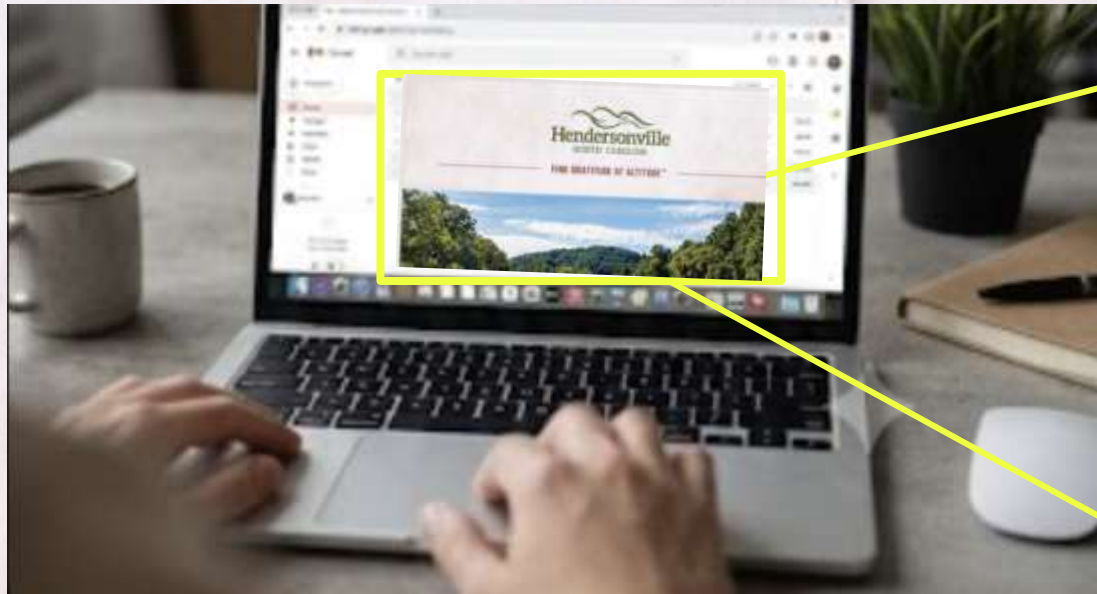


Hendersonville
NORTH CAROLINA

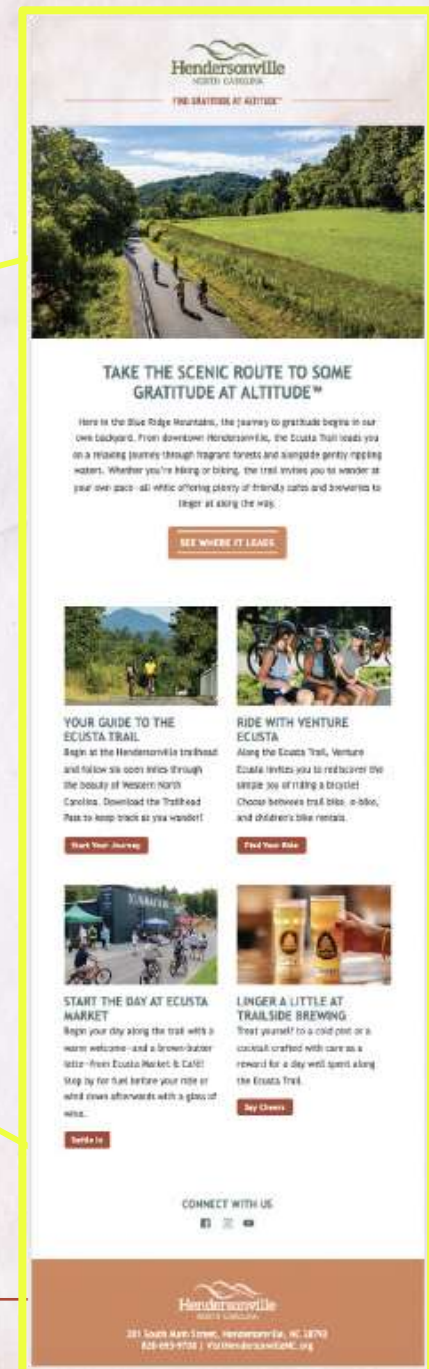
Landing Page



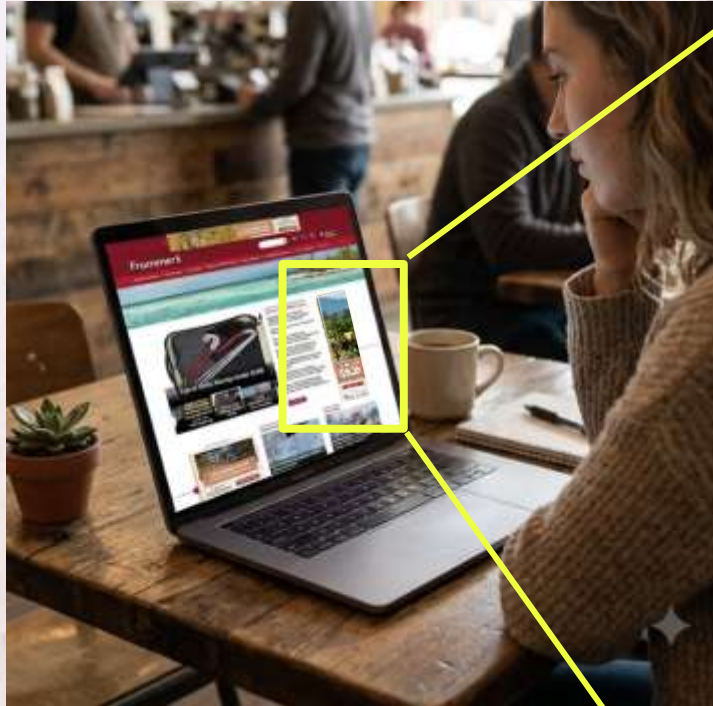
Marketing: paid, owned, and earned



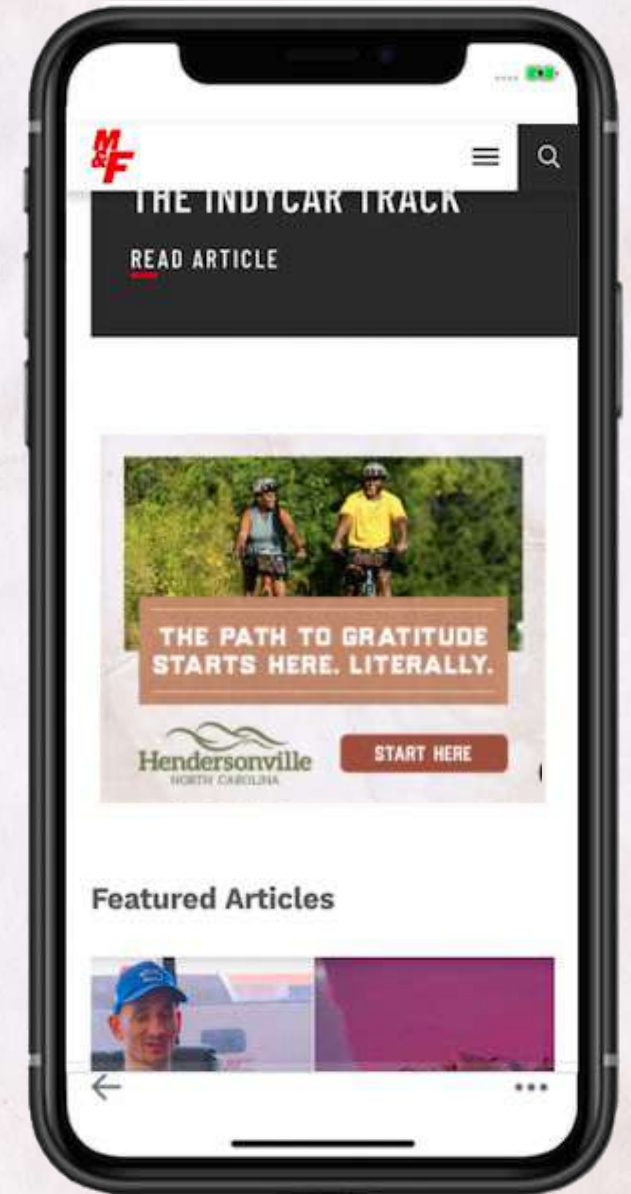
Eblasts



Marketing: paid, owned, and earned



Digital display & mobile banners



Digital Trails: Connecting the Ecusta Trail to Businesses



Trailhead Pass

- Mobile exclusive
- Instantly delivered via text and email
- No apps to download

FREE

[Sign Up](#)

[Learn More](#)

How this Pass Works



Step 1 - Get Your Pass

This mobile exclusive passport is a collection of curated attractions, retailers, restaurants and more located on the Ecusta Trail.



Step 2 - Receive Text

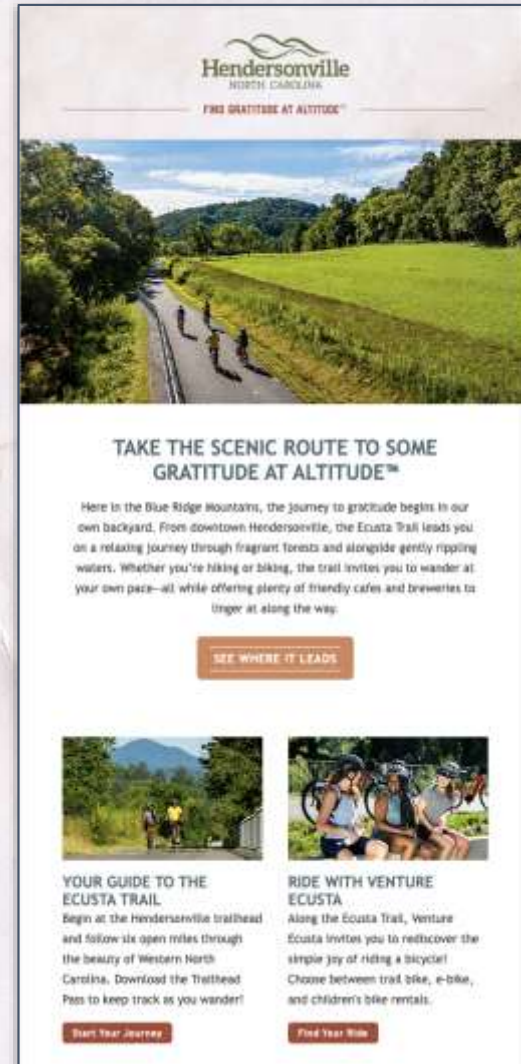
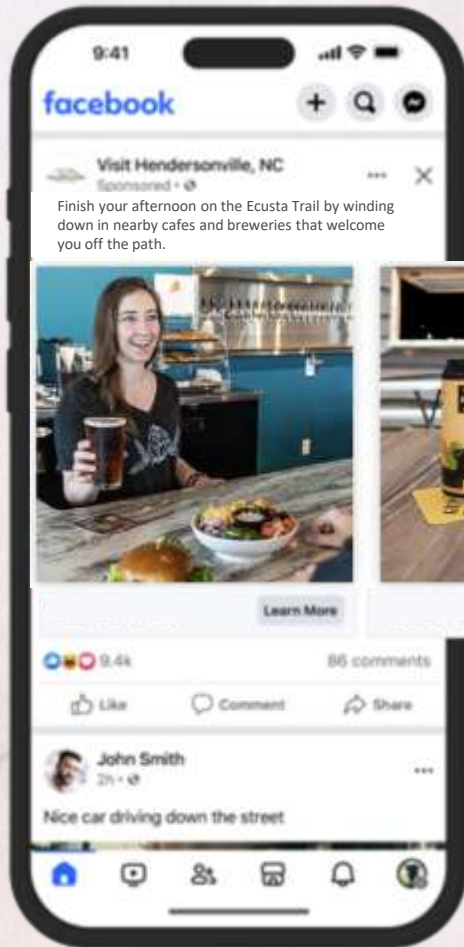
Your pass will be instantly delivered to your phone via text and email and is ready to use immediately! There is no app to download. Your pass can be saved to your phone's home screen for easy one-tap access.



Step 3 - Redeem

When visiting a participating business, simply open the pass and click "Check-In". Earn points and redeem them for prizes at the Hendersonville Welcome Center.

Ecusta Trail - Connecting Outdoor Recreation to Downtown



the ecusta trail



henderson county welcome center





Lennox Station











Lennox Station Facts

- 3 businesses and room for more!
- Provide parking and restrooms as a Trail Partner
- 70-75 employees
 - 50% FT or work 30+ hours
- Venture Ecusta
 - 31 states and 33 NC counties (of which 70 NC cities/towns are represented)
 - North Carolina, Florida, South Carolina leading rentals
 - States as far away as Alaska, Hawaii, California
- Local investment, locally run
- Unofficial trailhead and community center





The Cowboy Trail, NE

Your Pathway to the Prairie



Hannah Jones, Nebraska Game & Parks Commission



Cait Dumas-Hein, Bike Walk Nebraska

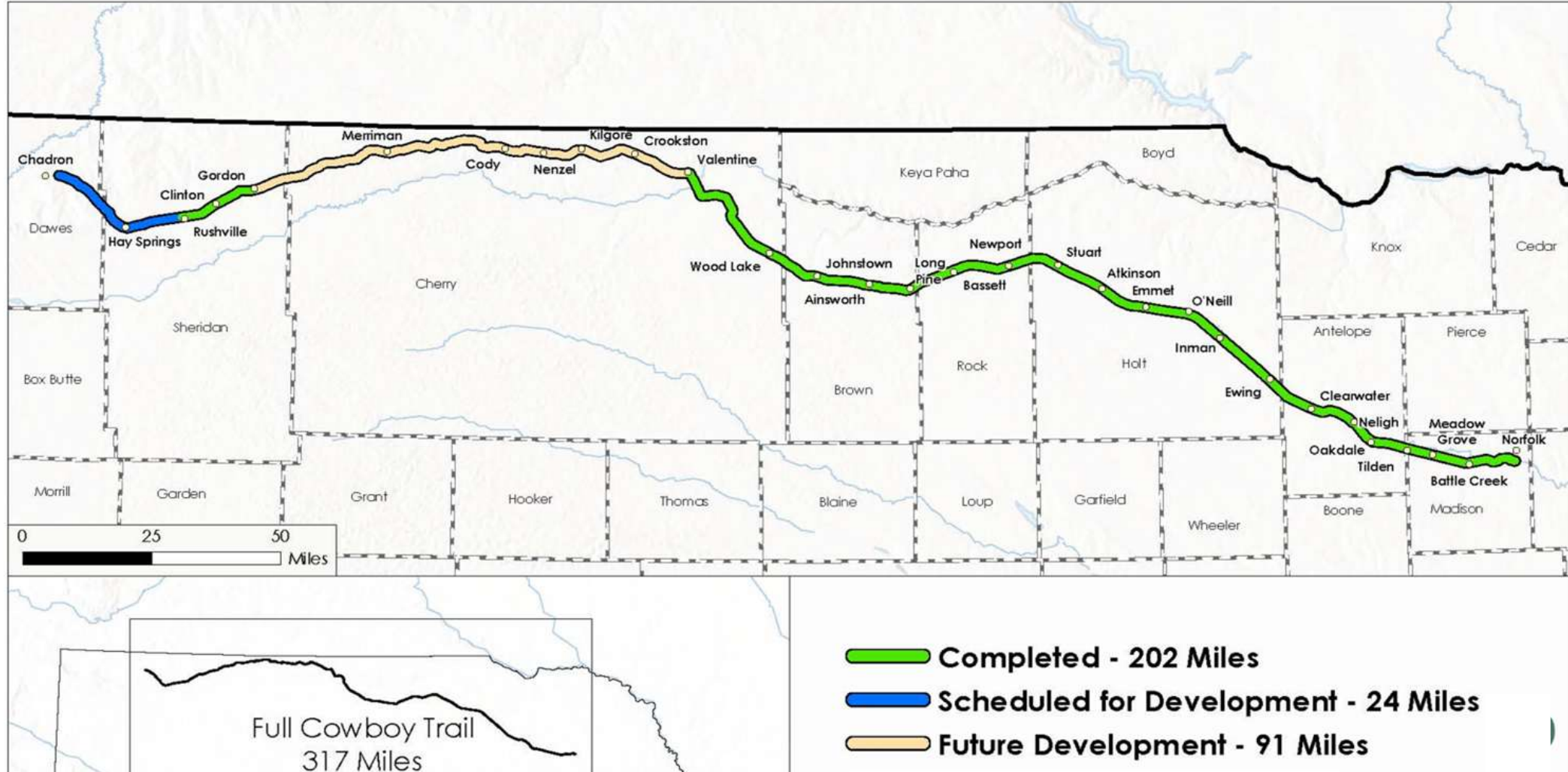
Cowboy Recreation & Nature Trail

A 317-mile rail corridor gifted
to the State of Nebraska in
1993.



NEBRASKA
— GAME  PARKS —

Cowboy Trail Development



The Cowboy Trail Coalition

**GREAT
AMERICAN
RAIL-TRAIL**



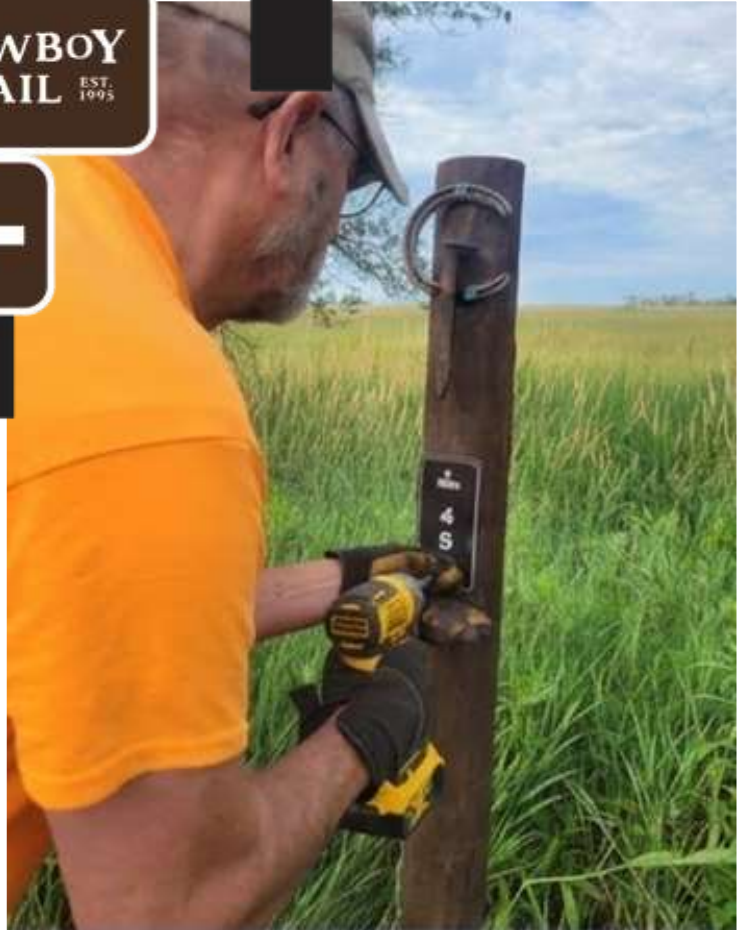
**Trail-Side
Communities**



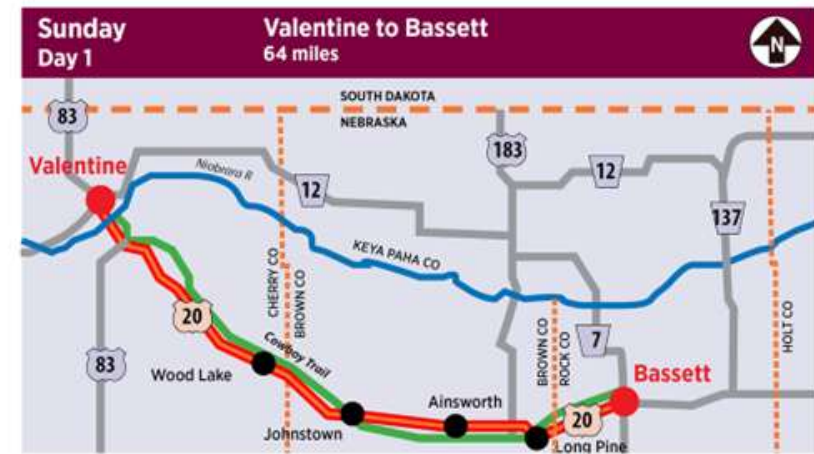
What The Coalition Does:

The Coalition's collective goals and priorities established in 2024 (what's highlighted is already done/started):

- **Community Education:**
 - An economic impact study, conducted in Nebraska for Nebraska
 - Marketing & communication support around the trail
- **Trail-Side Amenities:**
 - Signs: Information kiosks/trailhead signs & wayfinding signage
 - Amenities: e-bike charging stations, fix-it stations, picnic shelters, historical signage
- **Funding:**
 - Generate a grant list for communities' reference
 - Advocate on the state level for budgetary needs
 - Passing of the property tax credit on trail easements bill







CBT 30TH CELEBRATION



FALL 2025

EXTRAORDINARY TRAIL LIVES | REMEMBERING HEART MOUNTAIN | 2025 HALL OF FAME INDUCTEE

RAILS TO
Trails
magazine

A Nebraska Legacy

Examining the Geography, Reach and Impact of
the Cowboy Trail Across Three Decades

POWERED BY RAILS TO TRAILS CO.