

NBPC TECHNICAL BRIEF

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The Economic and Social Benefits of Off-Road Bicycle and Pedestrian Facilities

Economic Benefits

All across the country, bicycle and pedestrian facilities are proving to be a wise economic investment for the communities through which they pass. Studies have shown that they stimulate local economies by attracting bicyclists, hikers, cross-country skiers and other tourists to an area.

This, in turn, attracts and revitalizes businesses, creates jobs, and increases public revenue. Trails and pathways also have a positive effect on nearby properties as homebuyers and business owners realize the value that such facilities bring to a community.

If You Build It, They Will Come

Many Americans prefer to visit places such as greenways and trails which offer safe, scenic recreation and transportation for the whole family. The U.S. Department of Transportation, in its *National Bicycling and Walking Study* (NBWS) final report estimates that 131 million Americans regularly bicycle, walk, skate or jog for exercise, sport or recreation.

According to research conducted by Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, 85 million people used rail-trails in 1994 alone. Given these numbers, it is easy to understand how communities can profit by responding to trail users' needs.

There are a variety of businesses that attribute their success to nearby trail: restaurants, convenience stores, bicycle shops, campgrounds and bed-and-breakfast establishments. Examples from around the country further illustrate the positive economic impacts of trails:

- ▶ The downtown area of Dunedin, Florida was suffering a 35 percent storefront vacancy rate in the early 1990s until the Pinellas Trail came into town. Now, storefront occupancy is 100 percent and business is booming.
- ▶ Peak-season hotel rooms along Wisconsin's Elroy-Sparta State Park Trail are booked up to a year in advance. A study of the trail revealed that the average visitor travels 367 kilometers (228 miles) to experience it.
- ▶ After biking the Youghiogheny River Trail in southwestern Pennsylvania, Robert Benns and his wife purchased a rundown trailside building and converted it into the River's Edge Cafe which now serves over 1,000 meals a day.

Trail-Related Tourist & Visitor Expenditures in Local Communities

Recent studies have shown exactly how much the average trail user is bringing into communities which have multi-use paths.

- ▶ A study of the Oil Creek Bike Trail (Pennsylvania State University, 1992) in Pennsylvania revealed the average visitor spending \$25.85 per day. This was broken down into \$9.09 for food, \$6.27 for transportation, \$2.56 for lodging (many visitors camp) and \$7.94 for equipment and other activities.
- ▶ According to a 1992 National Park Service study, approximately 170,000 individuals visit the Tallahassee-St. Marks Trail in Florida every year, where the average user spends more than \$11 per day.
- ▶ The 135,000 visitors of the Heritage Trail, which winds through eastern Iowa's farmland, spend \$9.21 each, and suburban California's Lafayette-Moraga Trail receives \$3.97 from each of its 400,000 users. In each case, total annual revenue exceeded \$1.2 million (*The Impacts of Rail-Trails*).

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Suburban and rural trails that encourage "vacation-style" trips tend to generate more revenue per user than urban and suburban trails used primarily by nearby residents. However, a substantial amount of revenue can still be generated from the large number of users that a residential trail typically attracts.

Trailside Property is at a Premium

Homebuyers have begun to recognize the benefits of bicycle and pedestrian facilities and are showing a preference for properties close to those facilities.

- ▶ "Walking and biking paths" ranked third among 39 features identified by homebuyers as crucial factors in their home-purchasing decisions, according to a 1994 study by American Lives, a research firm serving the real estate industry. "Community designs that deliver low traffic and quiet streets" were ranked first, and "lots of natural, open space" was second.
- ▶ The increased salability of listings is considered to be the greatest value that the Northern Central Rail-Trail has brought to trailside properties in Baltimore County, Maryland. According to a 1994 study conducted for the Maryland Department of Natural Resources, "if two identical properties are for sale and one is near the trail and the other is not, the trail is used as a selling point and helps many nearby owners sell their property faster." (*Analysis of Economic Impacts of the Northern Central Rail-Trail*).
- ▶ In addition, 63 percent of survey respondents, comprised of trail users, nearby landowners and local businesses, felt the trail added value to nearby properties.
- ▶ Not only has Seattle's Burke-Gilman Trail been used as a selling point for nearby properties, but it has also been proven to increase the value of those properties. According to a study conducted by the Seattle Engineering Department (1987), "property near but not immediately adjacent to the trail is significantly easier to sell and, according to real estate agents, sells for an average of 6 percent more as a result of its proximity to the trail. Property immediately adjacent to the trail, however, is only slightly easier to sell..."

Business is Booming

The 376 kilometer (235-mile) Katy Trail traverses nine counties and adjoins 35 towns in Missouri, ranging in population from 60 to 60,000. These communities, many in economic decline since the railroad's demise, were initially opposed to the trail. But when the first sections opened, sentiments changed. Visitors flocking to the new rail-trail proved to be responsible, likable guests who needed goods and services available in the towns.

Within weeks of the trail dedication, new and old businesses were vying for tourist dollars. Restaurants, bed-and-breakfasts, bicycle rental shops, antique dealers, and campgrounds all opened to meet the needs of hundreds of thousands of visitors. A 1993 user survey on the trail's western half showed that it generated an estimated \$3 million in local revenue.

The Northern Central Rail-Trail attracts 457,000 visitors every year and has had an enormous economic impact on nearby businesses, leading to the creation and support of 262 jobs. These positions range from trail construction and maintenance work, to jobs in local restaurants and hotels serving trail users, to added positions in regional sporting goods companies and supermarket chains due to increased business.

Bicycle and pedestrian trails also attract high-quality businesses by providing commuting options for employees, scenic places for stress-free strolls at lunchtime, and safe, convenient sites for family recreation.

Choosing a location that will help attract and retain key personnel was cited as the number one factor in selecting office locations (by a June 8, 1989 *San Francisco Chronicle* article), and corporate real estate executives now say employee "quality of life" issues are as important as cost when deciding where to locate a new factory or office.

Trails Save Taxpayer Dollars

Locally and nationally, bicycle and pedestrian facilities have proven to be a cost-effective use of public funds. The above mentioned study of Maryland's Northern Central Rail-Trail found that while the trail's cost to the public in 1993 was \$191,893, it generated State tax revenue of \$303,750 the same year. This revenue was a direct result of a growing economy's sales, property, and income taxes.

The construction of multi-use trails allows more Americans to replace automobile trips with non-motorized trips. According to the NBWS final report, the American public saves from 3 to 14 cents for every

automobile kilometer (5 - 22 cents per mile) displaced by walking and bicycling due to reduced pollution, oil import costs, and costs due to congestion, such as lost wages and lost time on the job.

Social Benefits

Bicycle and pedestrian facilities enhance the quality-of-life for many individuals. Multi-use trails are great places for outdoor recreation such as hiking, cycling or cross - country skiing. Along with on-road facilities and sidewalks, trails encourage the use of non-polluting transportation alternatives to the automobile for those short trips to work, school, or the local store.

The increase in the level of walking and bicycling due to the creation of these facilities leads to a cleaner environment and a healthier population. Rail-trails and other pathways are also an expression of community pride and character, and in many cases a means of preserving the natural and historical resources of a region.

Close to Home Recreation

The recent explosion in the number of people participating in outdoor recreation has led to an increased demand for bicycle and pedestrian facilities. Participation rates for trail uses, such as hiking, walking, mountain biking, and in-line skating have experienced phenomenal growth in recent years.

The number of bicyclists alone in this country grew from 72 million to 99 million in the decade leading up to 1993 (*Bicycle Safety-Related Research Synthesis FHWA, 1995*). Multi-use trails provide convenient access to the outdoors for enjoyment and relaxation while promoting health and fitness activities.

These trails are becoming especially popular among people living in cities and suburban areas, where close to home recreation opportunities are scarce.

Convenient Transportation

The most common forms of non-motorized transportation are bicycling and walking, and facilities for bicyclists and pedestrians play a major role in the success of local transportation systems.

Nearly half of all trips people make within their communities can be made easily on foot or bicycle. The NBWS final report revealed that nearly 50 percent of all personal travel trips are less than 4.8 kilometers (3 miles) long, and personal business trips, like doctor

visits, household errands, and visits to friends, account for 41.5 percent of all trips. Such personal, short distance trips are well-suited to travel by walking or bicycling.

Public rail-trails, multi-use pathways, and on-road bicycle facilities offer communities a means of safe and convenient transportation and keep the essential links within a community open to all. They can connect neighborhoods to schools, workplaces, commercial and cultural centers, historic sights, and transit stations.

Health and Fitness

The health benefits of exercise derived from recreational activities such as bicycling and walking lessen health-related problems and reduce health care costs. A recent U.S. Center for Disease Control Handbook, *Promoting Physical Activity Among Adults*, states that "...the most effective activity regimens may be those that are moderate in intensity, individualized, and incorporated into daily activity."

Rail-trails, spacious sidewalks, and greenway trails offer adults and children alike the opportunity to integrate moderate, individualized exercise with their daily trips to work, school, the library, or shopping (*NBWS final report*).

Such regular, moderate exercise has been proven to reduce the risk of developing coronary heart disease, stroke, colon cancer, hypertension, diabetes, osteoporosis, obesity, and depression. This kind of exercise is also known to protect against injury and disability because it builds muscular strength and flexibility, which helps to maintain functional independence in later years of life.

Dr. Harold E. Varmus, the Director of the National Institutes of Health, and a regular bicycle commuter states, "It's nice to get an extra return on the time that I have to spend commuting to work each day--and that's the physical conditioning that contributes to a healthier heart and lungs. With trails accessible to a growing number of cyclists like me, another source of real satisfaction is becoming a more important part of everyday life."

Bicycling and walking offer many health benefits not only by improving physical health and quality of life but also by reducing health care costs. According to a National Park Service study, *Economic Impacts of Protecting Rivers, Trails, and Greenways Corridors*, people who exercise regularly have 14 percent lower claims against their medical insurance and spend 30 percent fewer days in the hospital.

Environmental Benefits

Our society is "driving itself to death" because of its love affair with the automobile. Cars, trucks and buses are major sources of noise, water and air pollution. This is especially true in urban areas, where carbon monoxide emissions from mobile sources can be as high as 90 percent of all emissions. Bicycling and walking are non-polluting alternatives to the automobile.

It has been estimated that, in 1991 alone, bicycling and walking trips in the U.S. replaced nearly 28.8 billion motor vehicle kilometers (18 billion miles). These non-motorized trips saved about 3.2 billion liters (850 million gallons) of gasoline which would have added 10.4 million metric tons of exhaust emission air pollution into the atmosphere (*NBWS Final Report*).

Greenways and other off-road trails also provide environmental benefits by linking existing parks, open spaces, and undeveloped lands while allowing for the preservation of the natural landscape. Such facilities are havens for flora and fauna, whether they are endangered, threatened, rare, or abundant.

- ▶ The endangered black-crowned night heron have found homes along the Fox River Trail in Illinois. Trail Manager John Carlson stated, "The habitat for wildlife such as these rare birds has been dramatically improved by the rail-trail. The wildlife along the rail-trail is abundant compared to other sections of the river where there are private homes and manicured lawns abutting the river's edge."

Historic Preservation

Railroads played an important role in the development of our young nation. They crossed rivers and penetrated mountain ranges, facilitating increased trade and westward expansion. Preserving abandoned rail corridors and canal towpaths as public trails offers future generations the chance to experience and learn about the history of America.

- ▶ The 3.7 kilometer (2.3-mile) Snoqualmie Pass Tunnel along the Iron Horse rail-trail in Washington State was an engineering marvel of the early 20th century. Construction began in 1912 with 2500 men blasting nearly 3,660 meters (12,000) feet of solid rock from both ends. Today, the tunnel allows trail users to traverse the east and west sides of the Cascade Mountain range.
- ▶ The 18 kilometer (11-mile) Minuteman Bikeway runs through the historic towns of Lexington, Arlington and Bedford, Massachusetts,

following part of the route marched by British soldiers in 1776. However, this rail-trail is most famous for being the route Paul Revere chose for his historic midnight ride.

Enhancing Our Communities

Each bicycle and pedestrian facility contains elements of local character and regional influence, and reflects the hard work, enthusiasm, and commitment of individuals, organizations, elected officials, and agencies. All are able to take pride in having worked together to successfully complete a bicycle, pedestrian, or trail project.

This sense of community pride is illustrated by the many group events that take place on the Northern Central Rail-Trail in Maryland. Local charities including St. Jude's Children's Hospital, the Maryland Air National Guard, and the National Kidney Foundation raise money and support by using the trail for walk-a-thons, bike-a-thons, and other activities.

Multi-use pathways also provide opportunities for communities to get to know each other. They offer a chance for people to get out of their homes and cars and come in contact with each other on a regular basis.

Trails contribute to personal interaction, neighborhood socialization, and community unity. One popular example is the B & A Hike and Bike Trail in Maryland, which is commonly referred to as "Anne Arundel County's backyard" because so many people use it to meet, talk, and generally catch up on local affairs.

For More Information

The National Bicycle and Pedestrian Clearinghouse distributes 24 Case Studies and the Final Report of the Federal Highway Administration's National Bicycling and Walking Study, including Case Study No. 7, *Transportation Potential and Other Benefits of Off-Road Bicycle and Pedestrian Facilities*; and No. 15, *The Environmental Benefits of Bicycling and Walking*. Contact: NBPC, 1506 21st Street, NW, Washington, DC, 20036, (800) 760-6272.

The Rails-to-Trails Conservancy has a variety of resources regarding the benefits of off-road bicycle and pedestrian facilities available for distribution, including the executive summaries of *The Impacts of Rail-Trails* (1992), *The Economic Impacts of the Northern Central Rail-Trail* (1994), and *The Burke-Gilman Trail's Effect on Property Values and Crime* (1987). Contact: RTC, 1400 16th St, NW, Washington, DC, 20036, (202) 797-5400.