

Working with Adversaries

As an advocate for local trails and the East Coast Greenway, you may encounter people who are opposed to developing a new trail, particularly if they feel that this trail will affect their community or property negatively, or in a way they perceive to be negative. These people generally fall into 2 categories:

- People who are adamantly opposed to the trail and whose opinions you won't be able to change, no matter how many facts and information you provide.
- People who are opposed to the trail, but they will change their minds if offered proof that their opposition is unfounded.

Whichever type of adversary you are confronted with, keep in mind that they believe in their opinion just as much as you believe in yours. Their opinions shouldn't be blown off, ridiculed, or confronted in an adversarial manner.

Whether an individual opposed to a trail directly confronts you, or if there is a growing controversy surrounding a trail in your community, here are a few things to remember:

- **An opponent's beliefs are often based in fear** – fear of crime, loss of privacy, etc – and that fear is often based on feelings, not facts. If you can find ways to address their concerns instead of ignoring them, you will have a much better chance of changing their minds.
- **Controversy can help your trail.** If there is a growing controversy over a trail, it can actually help your cause. When controversy begins, you have people's attention, and this is a great opportunity to get more people's support. There will be many in the community who support the trail, or who aren't actively opposed to it. If there is controversy, this is a chance to get those people to actively support the trail.
- **Opponents' minds can be difficult to change.** Generally, about 10% of people are staunch supporters of your cause. Another 10% are staunch opponents whose minds are very difficult to change – don't focus all your energies on convincing these people. The remaining 80% of the people in the middle are the ones who can really make a difference, because they are easier to convince (and may already quietly support you) and they may speak up if you ask them to. These “undecided” people will listen most when things get controversial, and may ultimately support your cause if you focus on them instead of opponents.
- If someone is denouncing a trail publicly, if possible **don't deny** what he or she says. Your audience may end up believing the opposite, since it's human nature to believe something when you hear it repeated. Instead, **tell your part of the story**. For example, if an opponent says “This trail will bring crime to our neighborhood.” You should *not* reply with “This trail will not bring crime!” Rather, state a positive: “This trail will offer

recreational opportunities for a lot of people. Having all these people and ‘eyes’ on the trail will deter mischief.” You can also address ways to prevent crime on the trail, such as asking the town police to patrol the trail with officers on bikes.

- **Make sure you are using words that your audience will understand.** You want to stay on a general level. For some people, the definitions for words such as sprawl, watershed and biodiversity are lost. You want to make sure you can reach people of all educational levels and backgrounds.
- **Use facts, statistics, and examples from nearby towns.** A great way to show that a trail won’t increase crime or devalue properties is to bring in examples from other towns. A stronger point can be made if these towns are of a similar size and demographic to your own. Police departments from nearby towns can offer statements about the safety of their trails. The ECG website will have links to many trail studies that include statistics about crime, economic development, and health benefits of trails.