

CHAPTER 2 GETTING ORGANIZED

Trail projects usually begin with a resource and a vision. Sometimes the source of this vision is a governmental agency, such as a local or county planning board. Just as often, the source is a local citizen. For instance, one day, while driving by an abandoned rail corridor that runs through town, someone thinks, "Wouldn't this make a great trail? I wonder what it would take to clean it up and open it to the public?"

The person with the original idea usually "tests the water" by informally sharing the vision with friends, family, and colleagues. For the idea to gain real momentum, however, the broader resources of the community must be mobilized. Therefore, one of the first steps in planning a trail is to get more people involved by forming a committee whose purpose is to organize, coordinate, and lead the effort to establish the trail.



Among the tasks the trail committee may take on:

- Communicate the vision
- Educate officials, the public, and landowners about the benefits of trails in general and this trail project in particular
- Foster public input
- Encourage more people to participate
- Build broad community support
- Determine trail route options
- Identify opportunities for access/use agreements
- Raise funds
- Organize events
- Involve the media
- Oversee or provide input into trail design
- Participate in construction
- Maintain the trail
- CELEBRATE AND HAVE FUN



TRAILS TAKE TIME

Developing a trail takes patience and perseverance but, as many communities in New York and around the country can attest, it's well worth it.

Following is a time line that shows how the Wallkill Valley Rail Trail in Ulster County came to be.

1977

Last freight run along Wallkill Valley Railroad.

1983

Local community leaders from six towns form a committee to visualize a plan for a linear park and to consider buying the abandoned rail bed.

Community volunteers organize themselves into the Wallkill Valley Rail Trail Association.

1985

Town of Montgomery buys two miles of rail bed; Town of Shawangunk buys 2.3 miles of trail bed; New York State Department of Corrections buys 1.4 miles of rail bed.

1986

Private citizen John Rahl buys 11 miles of rail bed.

1988-90

Wallkill Valley Land Trust, the Town of New Paltz, and the Village of New Paltz negotiate jointly to purchase 12.5 miles of rail bed in New Paltz and Gardiner and sell to the municipalities involved.

1991

Land Trust completes purchase of the rail bed and sells appropriate sections at once to the Town and Village of New Paltz.

Gardiner declines to purchase its section, so the Land Trust continues to own the Gardiner section.

Informal opening of the Wallkill Valley Rail-Trail in New Paltz and Gardiner.

The Wallkill Valley Rail Trail Association assumes management and maintenance of the trail.

1993

Town of Shawangunk opens its Jesse McHugh Rail Trail, from the Village of Wallkill south to the Town border.

2003

Trail is a popular amenity, drawing local and international users. It hosts many community and cultural gatherings throughout the year. The Wallkill Valley Rail Trail Association continues to maintain, promote and improve the Trail. The Association also looks for ways to expand the trail and connect it to local resources.

www.petbikeimages.org / Dan Burden



The makeup of the committee

A trail committee may be created by a municipality, community organization, non-profit organization, or interested citizens. It's very helpful if your local municipality or county government is an active partner. While the support and participation of all citizens is welcome, think strategically as to the makeup of the trail committee. Strive to have the committee represent the diversity of interests in your community to ensure broad "investment." Include the people who will be most effective at building an extensive network of support and, of course, getting the work done.

When considering possible sources for members of the committee, look to:

- Community leaders: municipal officials, scout leaders, school teachers, coaches, and administrators, religious leaders, corporate leaders, board members of civic organizations such as Rotary, Lions, Kiwanis, and garden clubs
- Outdoor recreation/user groups: trail and hiking organizations, bicyclists, runners, equestrians, cross-country skiers, bird watchers, snowmobilers, school athletic departments, scout groups, senior citizens, and individuals with disabilities
- Local businesses: downtown business associations, chambers of commerce, individual shop owners, utilities, corporations, restaurants, and lodging establishments
- Public agencies at the state, national, regional, county, and municipal level: planning, parks and recreation, public works, environmental conservation council, soil and water conservation, waterfront revitalization, health, transportation, tourism, cooperative extension, and management agencies for any open space properties such as nature preserves and state forests
- Landowners: neighborhood or homeowner associations, farmers, utilities, and other significant landowners
- Local organizations or representatives of regional, state, or national organizations with potential interest: environmental, conservation, fish and game, land trusts, farm bureau, historic preservation, alternative transportation, smart growth, and health
- University and college faculty and students
- Interested individual citizens and trail advocates
- Media: newspaper, radio, television, internet
- Technical experts: landscape architects, planners, contractors, engineers, foresters, attorneys, and public relations and computer specialists

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Leadership of the committee

Leadership is a key ingredient in transforming any vision into reality. The trail committee needs a well-respected member of the community to guide it. The ideal candidate will be a consensus builder who is sensitive to the needs and desires of the many constituencies that will have an interest in the project. He or she will have good communication skills, foster a sense of enthusiasm and teamwork, and perhaps most importantly, have perseverance. Trail development is a multi-year endeavor and, while one person cannot be expected to devote 10 years to one project (although many do!), a certain level of leadership stability is desirable. At the same time, regular rotation of leadership roles and duties keeps an organization fresh and vital.

Some trail committees find it preferable to have co-chairs rather than a single chairperson, as this spreads out the responsibilities and provides double the amount of dedicated leadership.

Keep your eyes open for "spark plugs"

Individuals make trail projects happen. It's amazing what the leadership and inspiration of a single person can mean to the success of a trail project. Private citizens, non-governmental organizations, governmental institutions, planning and consulting firms, and the private sector all have roles to play in the complex process of trail development. Out of this cast of players, most likely one or two champions or "spark plugs" will emerge who will provide critical leadership to move the project forward at various stages of development. Although no single person can carry an entire trail project singlehandedly, "spark plugs" are crucial to the success of a trail project, so be on the lookout for potential ones.

FROM THE FIELD

Spark Plug Extraordinaire

Elinor Mettler has been lobbying and laboring for a rail-trail in Columbia and Dutchess Counties ever since she visited the Cape Cod Rail Trail 20 years ago. Once the idea formed in Elinor's mind to convert the 43-mile abandoned Harlem Valley rail bed to a trail, there was no stopping her. She button-holed local officials to tell them about her idea and used the local newspaper, of which she was then editor and publisher, to educate people about the value of rail-trails.

For the most part, she was met with a stone wall. Supervisors said the trail would cause trespassing problems for neighboring landowners. Town board members shook their heads over the potential insurance and maintenance problems. Local planners were skeptical. But Elinor persevered, eventually winning the support of Dutchess County and the NYS Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation.

Slowly but surely, with the support of a local citizens group, the Harlem Valley Rail-Trail Association, local officials began to come around. As acquisition and development of the rail bed moves northward, Mettler is beginning to see her vision come to life.

At the ground breaking of the latest section of trail, some of the very same supervisors and council members who scoffed at the notion of a rail-trail 20 years ago were there smiling at the cameras. That's persistence. That's a spark plug.

At the time of publication, 12.1 miles of the Harlem Valley Rail-Trail are open to the public.

By the end of 2004, 2.6 more miles will be open, with another 7 miles expected to open in 2006.



Elinor Mettler, spark plug extraordinaire, resting on the bench along the Harlem Valley Rail-Trail dedicated to her and her late husband, John.



Establishing a purpose and goals

Initial trail committee meetings will probably be taken up with defining the group's purpose and establishing goals. Adopting clear and realistic goals early on will help the group prioritize its activities and make the most of limited resources and people power. Is the committee's goal to acquire and manage the trail corridor itself? To do enough legwork and activate enough advocates for the trail project so that a governmental entity will take over? To establish a long-term partnership with local government? Formulating very specific

objectives is best left until after the issues, concerns, and desires of the public become known. Although early trail committee meetings tend to be informal, it's helpful to have someone take notes or minutes so there is a record of decisions for future reference. During this early organizational stage, get as much information about other trails as you can. Send away for plans, maps, and brochures. Call trail managers and trail friends groups. Best yet, take some field trips to nearby trails and talk to those who made it happen.

FROM THE FIELD

Sample Trail Committee Goal and Objectives

The D&H Canal Heritage Corridor in Ulster County is filled with historical significance and natural beauty. The corridor includes historic hamlets, farmland, the Rondout Creek, the railbed of the former New York Ontario & Western Railroad, and beautiful views of the Catskills and Shawangunk Mountains. The D&H Canal Heritage Corridor Steering Committee was formed in the early 1990's by Parks & Trails New York (PTNY), with the assistance of the National Park Service (NPS) Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program, to build community support and foster planning for the creation of trails and linear parks and stewardship of the corridor's historic resources. The Committee included representatives of local municipalities, historical societies, businesses, and private landowners. Working with PTNY and NPS, the Steering Committee identified its central goals in small meetings. Then it sponsored a series of public workshops to build support for those goals and develop specific objectives. An example of one of these goals and concomitant objectives follows:

Goal

- To promote greater appreciation, protection, and beneficial use of the D&H Canal Heritage Corridor's natural, historic, and recreational resources in ways that recognize and respect the rights and interests of private property owners.

Objectives

- Provide close-to-home, non-motorized recreational opportunities throughout the corridor for jogging, cross-country skiing, horseback riding, bicycling, walking, boating, fishing, relaxing, family outings, and simply enjoying the outdoors.
- Promote community recognition, appreciation, and protection of the Heritage Corridor's historic and natural features.
- Actively involve and unify communities, businesses, groups, and individuals in the decision-making, regional coordination, and local implementation of heritage corridor projects, linking the region's historic, natural, and economic resources.



A series of public meetings helped develop specific objectives for the D&H Canal Heritage Corridor project.

CHAPTER 2

Organizational Models

At this point, committee members may want to “institutionalize” the group through incorporation and not-for-profit status. The decision about whether or not to incorporate as a not-for-profit organization must be weighed carefully. Benefits of incorporation include the ability to accept grants and tax-deductible donations, enter into contracts, hire employees, participate in group insurance plans, and hold titles and easements. Incorporating as a non-profit may also limit the liability exposure of committee members. While the benefits of incorporating can be significant, they must be balanced against the time and expense involved with filing for not-for-profit status and keeping necessary records.

Several alternatives exist to establishing a new not-for-profit organization. If the committee is working closely with a municipal government, the municipality can accept and administer funds for the committee. Another option is to affiliate with an established not-for-profit organization, such as a land trust, parks organization, or chamber of commerce, either temporarily or on a more permanent basis.

Section 501 c (3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code defines and limits the activities of not-for-profit organizations. To incorporate as a not-for-profit, the committee will need to file articles of

incorporation, adopt formal by-laws, and formally apply to the Internal Revenue Service for tax-exempt status, the most arduous part of the process. Obtaining legal advice to guide you in the incorporation process is highly recommended. For additional information on incorporation, contact the NYS Department of State Division of Corporations at 518/473-2492 or go to: www.dos.state.ny.us/corp/nfpfile.html

What's in a name?

Choosing a name for your trail project is sure to stimulate committee members' creative juices. Don't take this task lightly because, as any good marketing person knows, a name can be critical to "product" success. It can be an important factor in the trail's ability to draw users in the future. Strive to make the name distinctive and catchy. Names that are associated with local history or the local landscape are usually good choices. Several examples of interesting trail names in New York State include the Horsemen's Trail in Westchester County, the Port Jefferson Shoreline to Shoreline Greenway Trail in Nassau County, and the Lehigh Memory Trail in Erie County. You might also consider getting the greater community involved and making the selection of a trail name an integral part of your publicity campaign.



ALTERNATIVES TO ESTABLISHING A NEW NON-PROFIT

Often, fledgling organizations are not ready to undergo the somewhat lengthy process of incorporating as a not-for-profit. Their members are focused on programmatic issues, not administrative tasks. Also, young organizations do not always have the necessary funds to seek not-for-profit status.

Organizations in this situation can sometimes find an existing not-for-profit to work under. Parks & Trails New York (PTNY) can help young trail organizations through its Fiscal Agent Program. Under this program, PTNY accepts funds for a new trail group and holds them in a special account.

PTNY has a few requirements for joining the Fiscal Agent program. First, the group must have a mission that is compatible with PTNY's mission. The group must formally apply to the program by submitting an application form and a proposed budget. If approved, PTNY and the group sign a Memorandum of Understanding that outlines the rights and responsibilities of both parties.

Under this program, a newly formed trail group can quickly begin collecting funds. It can concentrate on its mission rather than spending time and money in applying for not-for-profit status. For more information call PTNY at 518-434-1583



FROM THE FIELD

A legendary trail name

The Horsemen's Trail is a 2-1/2 mile network of trails in the Hudson Valley Village of Sleepy Hollow named after the most memorable character from the Washington Irving classic, *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*. The Horsemen's Trail starts at the Hudson River and follows the Pocantico Creek for much of its length, running through wooded fields and farmlands, crossing the Old Croton Aqueduct, and stepping down into the old Sleepy Hollow cemetery.

GET LOCAL OFFICIALS ON BOARD EARLY

Be sure to reach out and establish good communication with your local elected officials early on. You want them to hear the facts about your project from a supporter, not rumors from an irate opponent. Invite a municipal representative to participate in the committee. Once on board, a municipality can become the entity that ensures the project's longevity by providing official and political support, professional and technical expertise, financial resources, and on-going trail maintenance.

Good places to look for friends within municipal government are members of planning and zoning boards, parks and recreation departments, open space committees, conservation boards, and environmental councils. Work to get your trail project "institutionalized" by having it included in your municipality's comprehensive, recreation, or open space plan. This can be a big boom in fundraising.

Think outside the borders of your community, too. The trail you are considering may have the potential to continue beyond your town or link with other nearby trails. Try to arrange for neighboring municipalities to come together to discuss potential shared trail resources. You might want to include the county or a regional planning organization in these multi-town discussions.

Partners: the more the merrier

Partners are vital to success. Think about whose support you will need, both in the short and long term. The broader the partnerships created around a trail project, the better. Identify and reach out to all groups that could possibly be of help, and involve them from the start. Think through what each constituency has to gain from the project and use these benefits to convince each to participate. Outdoor enthusiasts, recreation, and tourism-related business owners, health advocates, environmentalists,

and conservation-minded individuals and officials are all natural supporters.

Be sure to seek support from the business community. Business people can be powerful allies and help make the case for the economic benefits of trails.

With the recent emphasis on regular exercise to improve health, the health community can also be a strong ally. Refer to the list of sources for committee members (*page 7, Makeup of the Committee*) to get ideas on where to seek potential trail partners.

FROM THE FIELD

Partnerships at heart of Genesee Valley Greenway

Partnerships have been at the heart of the Genesee Valley Greenway project in western New York since it began in 1990.

In the first few years of the project, the landowner, Rochester Gas & Electric, worked with local governments, citizen committees, and a steering committee — organized by Parks & Trails New York (PTNY), with the assistance of the National Park Service Rivers and Trails Program — to open sections of trail to public use. In 1993, the newly formed Friends of the Genesee Valley Greenway (Friends) partnered with the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) and the NYS Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP) to apply for federal transportation enhancement funds under the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA). The successful funding of that \$2.5 million application cemented the partnership that has today resulted in a long list of accomplishments. The most notable accomplishment is the acquisition by the state of the 90-mile corridor, which runs from Genesee Valley Park in Rochester to close to the Pennsylvania border. Other noteworthy accomplishments include the completion of 52 miles of trail and the formation of dozens of partnerships with individuals, organizations, and local governments.

As Frances Gotcsik, Executive Director of the Friends of the Genesee Valley Greenway from 1996 to 2003, says, "The Greenway partnership functions well because DEC, OPRHP, and the Friends each contribute different strengths that combine to allow more to be accomplished than one entity could do alone."

Examples of Genesee Valley Greenway projects undertaken by area partners:

- Genesee Valley Board of Cooperative Educational Services Career Exploration, Metal Trades, and Auto Body classes—6,000 hours for trail clearing and maintenance and fabrication, painting, and installation of trail gates.
- Letchworth District Boy Scouts—3,200 hours as trail adopters and three years worth of fall camp-o-ree work.
- Six local committees, comprised of interested citizens—thousands of hours for trail clearing, maintenance, and promotion.
- Allegany County Public Works Department—labor and materials valued at \$5,000 to assist with trail development.
- SUNY Geneseo design students—560 hours for design and execution of 20 posters promoting the Greenway.



District Boy Scouts have contributed more than 3,200 hours of volunteer service to the Genesee Valley Greenway.

Role of Partners

Determine as early as possible the role of partners in the design, development, management, and maintenance of the trail. Arrangements will vary from community to community - any combination that works is fine. Local municipalities are usually key partners, but often public sector partners will not agree to assume responsibilities until public support is solidified.

Volunteers

Volunteers are the lifeblood of a trail committee. Area colleges, schools, and community service organizations are usually fertile sources for volunteers. Volunteers commit themselves to a project because they believe in it, but also because they want to enjoy themselves. Having fun helps everyone maintain their commitment and get through the inevitable difficult times. Find ways to recognize volunteers and celebrate their good work. Keep a "shopping list" of projects for volunteers. When volunteers ask how they can help, give them a project that's do-able, enjoyable, and important. Then, give them an opportunity to report their success to the committee and receive their due praise. Recognize and award volunteer efforts at an annual volunteer event.

Remember to keep track of volunteer hours to demonstrate to decision makers and potential partners and funders the level of support for a project. Also, volunteer hours can sometimes be used as part of a match for a grant.



SOURCES OF ON-THE-GROUND VOLUNTEER ASSISTANCE

Later on in your trail project, when you're ready for on-the-ground work, consider these sources of volunteers:

- Youth Groups - scouts (particularly Eagle Scouts), 4-H groups
- Service Organizations - Lions, Kiwanis, Rotary, garden clubs, religious institutions, school clubs, fraternities and sororities
- Businesses and professionals
- Correctional Institutions
- National Guard - contact the NYS GuardHELP Program, at 518-786-4643
- Americorps - Contact NYS Commission on National and Community Service, www.nyscnscs.org

Do your homework: preliminary research

Committee members should have a general sense of the opportunities, feasibility, and potential points of opposition surrounding the trail project before officially "going public." Assign a few committee members to unofficially feel out community leaders and landowners about the project.

Some questions to consider during preliminary research:

- Will the proposed trail go along an existing alignment, such as an abandoned rail corridor or along a waterway, or will the route have to be mapped out?
- Who owns the land of the proposed trail alignment and the land adjacent to it?
- What points of interest might the trail link — town park, school, library, main street?
- What makes the trail interesting — natural features, historic significance?
- What is the land being used for now?
- Could the trail be part of a larger trail or greenway system?
- What are the potential benefits to the community?
- What are the potential liabilities?
- What entity might manage the trail in the long run?
- How might the trail be funded — for acquisition, development and maintenance?

FROM THE FIELD

Going it alone

Although local municipalities and counties are usually key partners in a trail project, it is possible for a trail group to go it alone.

In the early 1990's, Betsy and Greg Russell moved to Canandaigua, N.Y., at the northwestern tip of the Finger Lakes. They wanted to take their children bicycling on the kind of safe, off-road rail-trail that was so popular in Greg's native Wisconsin. Not finding any, they got out a map and started researching old railroad corridors. Lo and behold, they discovered that Penn Central was looking to sell 35 miles of abandoned rail corridor in Ontario County.

The Russells put a small notice in the paper announcing a meeting for people interested in creating a local rail-trail. They knew they were on to something when 45 people showed up.

"We were very naive. We didn't have an organization, and we didn't have any money, but we had enthusiasm," recalls Betsy.

Penn Central's \$100,000 asking price seemed quite reasonable so the rail-trail group approached local municipal leaders. Unfortunately, some adjacent landowners who were opposed to the trail had gotten to local leaders first and the municipalities didn't want anything to do with the trail project.

Not willing to let this opportunity slip by, the group incorporated as Ontario Pathways and managed to raise the necessary funds to buy the corridor through loans and fundraising activities. The group paid off its loans of \$85,000 in 3-1/2 years through memberships, private donors, and business contributions. They also sold off several pieces of disconnected rail corridor included in the purchase to raise funds.

Today, Ontario Pathways manages 19 miles of trail open to the public.

"We're oddballs, I know. Maybe sometime in the future a governmental entity will take over. But for now, we believe we can do things better and more efficiently," says Betsy. "We're very proud of the trail and what the organization has accomplished."



The non-profit and all-volunteer Ontario Pathways owns and manages 19 miles of trail open to the public. Here, a Saturday work crew in February blazes a new trail.

CHAPTER 3

GOING PUBLIC

Your committee is formed. You've grappled with your purpose and established reasonable goals. You've asked yourself some tough questions and come up with sound answers. It's now time to share your vision with other members of the community and the public.

Patience, patience, patience

At this point, committee members are probably full of enthusiasm and raring to go but a cautionary word is in order here. The "going public" stage of a trail project can sometimes last for years, as the community hashes through thorny issues and local officials wait for the dust to settle to decide whether to lend their support to the project.

Exploring issues and opportunities in the community

Committee members will want to go out into the community to listen and learn about the range of issues and opportunities surrounding the proposed trail project. Begin by meeting individually or in small groups with community leaders, landowners, and neighbors. What is the level of interest and support? What trail route do people favor? Which community resources would they like to see connected by the trail? What are people's concerns? What are the obstacles to developing a trail?

These early meetings will provide an opportunity to meet key people, solicit information, begin to make people aware of the trail project, and get some feedback with which you can fine tune the trail concept. Keep the meetings short and remember at the close to ask for referrals to other key people.

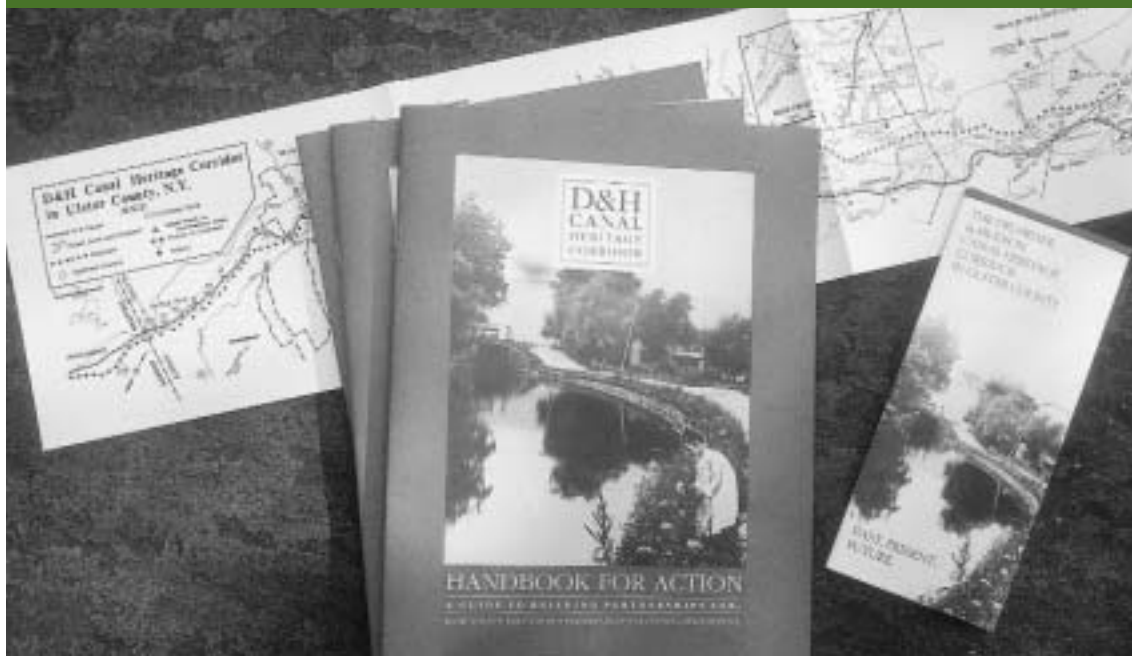
The people you meet with will have many questions. Although you won't have all the answers at this early stage of trail planning, people will view you with more credibility if you can show you've done your homework.

Approaching the media

At some point, committee members will want to reach out to the media for help in informing the public about the trail project. Newspaper and television coverage is invaluable in generating public input and support. However, publicity can also provoke opponents and, since reporters like to present both sides of a story, provide opponents with a public forum. Therefore, carefully weigh the best time to approach the media.

Make sure to invite the media to any public meeting or event. Develop a list of local newspapers and radio and television stations and call them to find out who is the best person to contact. Also inquire how they prefer to receive information. Nowadays, many media representatives prefer to receive material electronically. Put together a press kit to provide background material to the media.





Good visuals are useful throughout the planning stages of a trail.

Press kit contents:

- a folder with pockets
- a press release about the event - make sure to include the names and telephone numbers of people to contact for more information
- a speaker list with short biographical profiles
- a newsletter from your organization (if available)
- a brochure or fact sheet about the trail project

Another good avenue for getting the word out about your trail project is the op-ed and letters to the editor section of your local newspaper.

Visual aids

When taking your trail vision public, it's helpful to have something tangible to show people, either in the form of a concept plan or rough map. Keep the plan or map broad in scope at this point since its main purpose is to stimulate discussion. If you use a map, denote a wide trail corridor rather than a

specific trail route. Photos or sketches of particularly interesting historic or scenic features of the trail corridor are helpful in engendering interest in the project, as are slides and video footage.

Brochures, pamphlets, flyers and posters are good communication tools to reach large numbers of people. Brochures and pamphlets are usually folded and printed double-sided for multiple text panels. They can be handed out, stuffed in an envelope, sent as a self-mailer, or placed in libraries and other public places. Flyers and posters are typically one-sided and meant to be displayed fully open.

Keep it simple

A simple brochure that presents some background and highlights of the trail project and the purpose and goals of the trail committee is a good selling tool. Maps and photos make the brochure more interesting but aren't necessary. A standard 8 1/2-inch by 11-inch piece of paper folded into thirds is easy to hand out and mail, plus it's inexpensive to reproduce.

FROM THE FIELD

Map promotes county-wide trail concept

A group of citizens, comprised of representatives from community groups, local government, and public agencies, as well as interested individuals, banded together in 1992 to form the Saratoga County Heritage Trails Committee. The Committee set forth as its vision a county-wide network of trails and bikeways that would provide safe on- and off-road trails, connecting places where people live, work, shop, go to school and recreate. With the assistance of the National Park Service Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program, the group early on promoted its work through the development of a vision map which schematically shows existing and potential trails in the county. Today, the Committee is still going strong and has many successes to show for its years of hard work.



The Saratoga County Heritage Trails Committee early on developed a vision map to promote its work.

Working with landowners and neighbors

Landowners and neighbors are critical to the success of a trail project. No matter how much support your project has in the larger community, opposition by landowners and neighbors can slow down or sometimes even kill a project. The most important thing when meeting with landowners and neighbors is to listen to them carefully and acknowledge their concerns. Areas in which landowners and neighbors may have concerns include privacy, liability, safety, and property values. Be prepared to address these concerns as best you can. Chapter 6 of this publication goes into more detail about these issues, including results of a survey of landowners living adjacent to the Mohawk-Hudson Bike-Hike Trail in New York's Capital Region.

When to contact landowners: a horse-before-the-cart dilemma

The decision as to when to contact landowners can be tricky. It's awkward to approach landowners before many of the questions they will surely ask have been answered. On the other hand, if landowners hear about a trail project through the "grapevine," they may feel marginalized and have a strong negative reaction. The best approach is to be honest and clear with landowners from the beginning. Tell them what the committee is thinking and ask for their input.

Tips for meeting with landowners and neighbors

- Meet with landowners and neighbors early, preferably before any public meetings. You don't want them to hear and react to rumors before you've given them the facts.
- Meet with landowners individually. A landowner is more likely to express his or her true feelings about a project outside of a public setting, where pressure from friends and neighbors can be intense.
- Try to meet with all landowners and neighbors. This process is time-consuming, but experience has shown it pays off in the end.
- If a landowner seems particularly hostile to a project, consider bringing along a supportive neighbor or respected community member. Always inform the landowner that you'll be bringing another person with you.
- Schedule the meeting at a convenient time and location for the landowner.
- Be a good listener. Try not to get defensive. Acknowledge the importance of concerns the landowner may have.
- Take notes to demonstrate to landowners that their input is important.
- Have the facts straight about the project.
- Remain cool, calm, and collected.
- Be patient. Even the most vociferous opponents have been known to change their minds as projects progress.



A public process

Good trail planning involves significant public outreach, with public input informing and guiding the process from start to finish. After all, trails are for people and the best way to end up with a successful trail is to solicit and incorporate input from the people who will use it and have to live with it. This input is most often gathered in a series of public meetings held at various stages of trail development.

The community issues workshop

Once committee members have met with community leaders, landowners, and neighbors, consider holding a community workshop to identify broader issues and concerns. Ideally, if the trail project



encompasses several towns, it's best to hold more than one workshop. That way, attendees won't have to travel far and will feel more comfortable because they're in familiar surroundings.

The workshop is a structured, yet informal, public meeting. It provides a way to inform the general public about the trail project and receive valuable input on opportunities and issues. A trail represents change and local citizens may, understandably, have reservations about the project.

Benefits of holding a community workshop

- Reassures everyone that trail planning and development will be a public process in which all views, concerns, issues, and ideas will be considered and every effort made to address them.
- Builds trust and goodwill toward the committee by creating an environment of cooperation and dialogue.
- Provides factual information to the community.
- Provides a forum for the public to ask questions, express concerns, and be heard.

- Strengthens and broadens the base of support.
- Provides a forum for supporters to publicly demonstrate support and for opponents to voice their concerns.
- Identifies those in the community with expertise that can help ensure the success of the project.
- Provides an opportunity to publicize the trail vision.
- Lets the community know that an organized group of citizens is spearheading the project.

Getting the word out

Some options to consider in publicizing your community workshop: mailings, articles in local newspapers, a notice in the legal notices section of the newspaper, public service announcements on radio and cable access channels, presentations or announcements at meetings of local civic organizations, meetings with community leaders, organization newsletters, flyers, list serves, and one-on-one contact. Personally contact key supporters to encourage them to attend.

PREPARING FOR THE WORKSHOP

Adopt the Boy Scout's motto, *Be Prepared*. Things to consider when planning the workshop:

- **Goals.** Be clear about what the committee wants to accomplish.
- **Research.** Assess early on who you want to attend and the major issues and concerns that are likely to be brought up.
- **Time and location.** Choose a time that allows about two and a half hours for the workshop. Hold it in a well-known, neutral, and convenient location such as a school, library, or municipal facility.
- **Plan and timetable.** Determine tasks and committee members' assignments. Make a checklist and timetable. Clarify the role of partners.
- **Publicity.** Put together a plan to get the word out. Identify categories of people the committee would like to attend and consider how to reach them.
- **Logistics.** Prepare an agenda, a list of speakers, presentation materials, hand-outs, sign-in sheets, refreshments. Identify the convener, welcomer, moderator, and facilitators.
- **Outreach to the media.** Send a press kit to the media with information on the trail project and an invitation to attend the workshop.

SAMPLE AGENDA FOR A TRAIL COMMUNITY ISSUES WORKSHOP

6:30 p.m.

Displays set up, committee members available to informally talk with early arrivals, refreshments available

7:00 p.m. (Publicized start time)

Participants arrive, sign in, get name tags, settle in, look at displays, enjoy refreshments, and mingle

7:10 p.m.

Opening remarks

Welcome

Workshop agenda, goals, next steps (brief)

Trail project highlights

Purpose, goals and plans of trail committee

Guest speaker on benefits of trails (optional)

8:00 p.m.

Solicit, record and prioritize ideas and concerns

8:45 p.m.

Group reports and discussion (if break-out groups were necessary)

9:00 p.m.

Concluding remarks

Summarize input

Next steps

Invite use of comment sheets

Thanks and closing

9:15 p.m.

More refreshments and mingling

Workshop format

Always start and end the workshop close to the publicized time. Begin the workshop with a broad-brush introduction that touches on the workshop agenda, desired outcome of the workshop, highlights of the trail project, the purpose and goals of the trail committee, and how the committee plans to proceed. You might consider having a guest speaker give a short presentation or slide show on how trails benefit communities. A representative from a nearby successful trail may fit the bill perfectly here. The rest of the workshop should be participatory, with the goal of soliciting, recording, and prioritizing participants' ideas and concerns. Be clear about what will be done with input, both oral and written. If more than 15 or 20 people are present, break out participants into two or more groups. Be prepared to have several facilitators available to lead these break-out groups.

The facilitators will lead participants in a brainstorming session to bring forth ideas and concerns about the trail project. Be clear about the ground rules, such as only one person at a time may speak. As ideas

and concerns are voiced, volunteer recorders capture them on flip charts. Once all ideas and concerns have been recorded, the group assigns the issues high, medium or low priority status. This is often done by having participants vote with stickers or hot dots.

After soliciting input about issues and concerns, and if time allows, facilitators may ask participants to identify key sites and resources that the trail could link. Make sure this input is recorded, too.

If participants have divided into smaller groups, re-assemble them at this point. With the aid of a moderator and volunteer reporters from each break-out group, share and consolidate the findings.

Remember to have comment sheets available for people who may not feel comfortable voicing their opinion in public.

After the workshop, transcribe the results of the workshop and send it out to all participants. Inform participants how their input will be used. Schedule a follow-up workshop in which experts address the highest priority issues and concerns.



CHAPTER 3

Workshop alternative: the open house

An open house is an even less formal way to inform and obtain input from the public. One of its main advantages is that it allows one-on-one discussions. An open house might be in order if it seems likely that a block of opponents will show up at a workshop and monopolize the proceedings. For an open house, reserve a room in a community facility, such as the library or town hall, for two hours and invite people to come and talk informally with committee members. Have visual aids available to generate discussion, particularly maps of the proposed trail corridor. Also provide brochures and information that people can take home with them. Make sure that an adequate number of committee members are available so that people who show up feel welcome. Provide a sign-in sheet, comment sheets, and, of course, refreshments.

Down the road, other types of workshops are advisable or may be required. These include workshops on trail design and management and official public hearings, such as those mandated under New York State laws such as the State Environmental Quality Review Act (SEQRA).

State Environmental Quality Review Act - SEQRA

New York's State Environmental Quality Review Act (SEQRA) requires all state and local government agencies to consider environmental impacts equally with social and economic factors during decision-making and to involve the public in the process. Many projects or activities proposed by a state agency or unit of local government require an environmental impact assessment under SEQRA to identify and mitigate significant environmental impacts. Actions that trigger the SEQRA process involve irrevocable commitment of resources. These actions, such as land acquisition or site clearing, usually occur far along in the trail planning process.

For more information on SEQRA:

New York State Department of
Environmental Conservation (DEC)
www.dec.state.ny.us/website/dcs/seqr



Displays such as this generate lively discussion at an open house.



www.pedbikeimages.org / Dan Burden

Other ways to involve the public

You may want to consider other ways of getting the public involved in addition to meetings, workshops, and open houses. For instance, the committee might send out a survey or create a speakers bureau to present information on the trail project at meetings of local organizations. Paper or on-line newsletters, on-line discussion groups, and websites are also great tools for involving the public.

Trail projects take time to be noticed, understood and embraced by the general public. Thus, it's important to give projects as much visibility as possible. Consider organizing an on-site outdoor event so

people better can better visualize the potential of the trail. Invite specific groups that you would like to see become involved.

Increasing the number of stakeholder interests helps build support for trail projects. If the proposed trail follows an old transportation corridor, hold a corridor history night and ask people to bring pictures and stories or ask someone from the historical society to give a talk on the corridor's history. Provide opportunities for youth involvement, which also tends to involve parents. Invite school and scout groups to help with trail projects and events. Ask school art classes to design posters promoting the trail or a trail-related event.

FROM THE FIELD

Outdoor events spark public interest

Outdoor events are great ways to engender interest in your trail project.

The Hudson River Valley Ramble is an annual trails festival in the Hudson Valley that features walks, hikes, paddles, and pedals. Through a variety of guided outdoor experiences, the Ramble encourages participants to explore the vast riches of the Hudson River Valley. The Ramble is sponsored by the Hudson River Valley Heritage Area and the Hudson River Valley Greenway.

The Canalway Trail Celebration, occurring on National Trails Day (always the first Saturday in June), consists of a coordinated series of local events on the Erie Canalway Trail. Events include history and nature walks, trail clean ups, walks and runs for health, and treasure hunts. Parks & Trails New York, the New York State Canal Corporation and the Canalway Trails Association of New York organize the Canalway Trail Celebration. When complete, the 350-mile Erie Canalway Trail will link the Hudson River and Lake Erie.

