

2026 WESTERN NY TRAIL TOWN PROGRAM MANUAL

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About the Western NY Trail Town Program

A Trail Town is more than a destination with access to trail-based services, amenities, and facilities. It's a community that recognizes the value of the trail and has committed its time and resources to foster a "trail culture" by making improvements to processes, policies, and physical infrastructure.

Recognition as a "Trail Town" signifies a community-wide commitment to the trail and network of recreational assets. The Western NY Trail Town program, managed by Parks & Trails New York (PTNY) and sponsored by the Ralph C. Wilson Jr. Foundation, will offer technical assistance to select communities along the Genesee Valley Greenway State Park (GVGSP) that demonstrate a commitment to pursuing planning, policies and programs that will enhance the connection between the community's recreational assets, the downtown district, and the business community for the benefit of visitors and residents alike. The support and resources provided by PTNY will help each community meet key goals and educate community leaders, residents, and others on the benefits of embracing outdoor recreation as a driver of economic growth and community building. Once certified, Western NY Trail Towns will qualify for funding through the Western NY Trail Town grants by having completed the Trail Town planning process, and will be in a position to pursue other future funding opportunities.

For more background information on the history of the Genesee Valley Trail Town program, please see the publication, [Genesee Valley Trail Town Handbook \(2023\)](#).

Please note that the WNY Trail Town program is distinct from the Genesee Valley Trail Town initiative. Communities interested in using the Genesee Valley Trail Town logo or brand, or using the Explore Genesee Valley platform should contact [Letchworth Genesee Valley Partnership](#).

Background

The Genesee Valley region offers unique outdoor recreation opportunities for residents and visitors. Full of bucolic landscapes, historic villages, towering waterfalls, forests, glacially-carved gorges, lakes, and rivers set between Niagara Falls and the Finger Lakes Region of Western New York, these regional assets serve as economic drivers.

The GVGSP, a 90-mile linear park on a former canal and rail corridor, and Letchworth State Park, a 14,427-acre state park, are major area attractions. Further complementing these assets, a new 40-acre State Park centered on the iconic High Falls and Genesee River in Downtown Rochester is now underway. While GVGSP is not yet complete as an off-road trail, significant progress is being made to make improvements and fill in gaps in the network. Letchworth State Park, the "Grand Canyon of the East," boasts year-round environmental education opportunities, 66 miles of hiking trails, three waterfalls, and camping and lodging options. Both GVGSP and Letchworth State Parks open up linkages between neighboring communities and offer connections to other long-distance trails, including the Empire State Trail, the proposed Southern Tier Trail, and the

cross-Pennsylvania border Triple Divide Trail System. The new High Falls State Park in Rochester will offer public access to river, gorge, and waterfall landscapes, and connect the Greenway to Rochester's waterfront, drawing in new audiences and visitors. More than a dozen communities surrounding these assets feature their own unique landscapes, including forest preserves, farms, lakes, river access, and wildlife management areas.

Trail Town programs across the country demonstrate the valuable relationship between communities and neighboring greenways, blueways, and other recreational assets. Outdoor enthusiasts, both residents and visitors, are drawn to trailside and parkside communities to refuel and rest up; spending money at local businesses in the process. Whether they are spending the night in a historic bed & breakfast or filling up on donuts at the local bakery, all visitors are in need of services while touring the region.

Trail Town programs support local tourism by offering a platform for community members to talk about the importance of fostering pride of place, supporting local economies, and creating safe places for both visitors and residents to recreate. Through the creation of a "trail culture," communities start to see the trail as part of their community's identity and view the success of the trail as an integral part of their community's success.

This guide outlines a step-by-step process for PTNY and participating trail town communities to help transform communities into places where a "trail culture" drives decision-making, investments, and future planning efforts.

Goals

Participation in this program will enable each community to think about achieving long-term goals as a result of its dedication to the program objectives. The following goals are intended to serve as long-term targets for trail towns:

- Make communities more trail-user friendly.
 1. Increase the frequency with which residents and visitors walk or bike both on and off the trail
 2. Embrace the trail as a core asset around which future planning and investment should be oriented
- Help communities realize economic benefits of outdoor recreation assets
 1. Increase the number of outdoor users who spend money either at retail businesses or at a bar or restaurant as part of their trip
 2. Increase the number of outdoor users who choose the community for an overnight stay

Objectives

To reach these long-term goals, the Trail Town program uses specific targeted strategies to achieve the following objectives. While the strategies are organized under the primary objective they seek to achieve, many of the strategies will help to accomplish several of the objectives simultaneously.



NETWORK: Form a network of individuals (including, but not limited to, representatives of the municipality, engaged residents, volunteers, members of the business community, representatives from outdoor recreation, historical groups, library associations, or conservation groups) dedicated to the Trail Town vision

Strategies:

- a. Form a Trail Town steering committee and delegate roles
- b. Engage with the greater community and invite them to learn more about the Trail Town effort



RESEARCH: Conduct research and assessment to identify each Trail Town's strengths and areas for improvement, as well as understand current use of the trail

Strategies:

- a. Participate in and help coordinate an in-person Bike Around assessment and public Placemaking Workshop to evaluate the existing strengths and areas for improvement, to be hosted by each Trail Town and facilitated by Parks & Trails New York
- b. Conduct and share a Trail Town Community Survey



PROMOTION: Increase the availability of information about the Trail Towns as destinations

Strategies:

- a. Update municipal websites and community resources with information on recreational opportunities
- b. Work with the business community to enhance their online presence as needed



ADVANCEMENT: Establish a plan and process to guide continued work toward Trail Town goals beyond the direct assistance provided by PTNY

Strategies:

- a. Develop and adopt a Trail Town action agenda, which will outline short and long-term priorities as well as a plan for implementation, to be prepared jointly between PTNY and the Trail Town steering committee
- b. Participate in virtual and in-person networking events with other Trail Towns

Trail Town Framework

Trail Towns are places where trail users can find the amenities and services they need, where they can safely travel by foot or by bike around the community (often their primary mode of transportation), where they can find information out about what's around them, and where the community is welcoming and has a unique sense of character. Thriving, vibrant Trail Towns are successful because they exhibit four key qualities and invest in these areas:

1. Trail-oriented services and amenities

Visitors that come to explore the outdoor recreation opportunities can find exactly what they need, whether they're just passing through, spending a few hours exploring, or staying the night.

- Components:
 - Restrooms & drinking water
 - Bike amenities
 - Overnight accommodations - indoor lodging and camping
 - Food and drink - especially local fare
 - Attractions/destinations
 - Information center

2. High-quality and safe bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure

Pedestrians and cyclists can safely travel around the community, both on the trail and off the trail to explore other parts of the community

- Components:
 - Well-maintained trail
 - Connecting trails
 - On-road connections to points of interest

3. Wayfinding and informational resources

Information is crucial for introducing potential visitors to the community or encouraging residents to get out and explore their own trails, be it ahead of time trip-planning resources or signage and welcome centers that help direct visitors and residents on the ground.

- Components:
 - Pedestrian scale wayfinding signage
 - Online & print promotional materials

4. Welcoming atmosphere and unique community character

Successful Trail Towns embrace and showcase what makes them unique, highlighting local history, culture, events and food. Visitors get to know what makes each town along the trail unique, and have more incentive to visit– and spread the word. Residents for their part get to share the best parts of their community and gain an enhanced sense of local pride.

- Components:
 - Welcoming and maintained streetscape and storefronts

- Festivals, events & programs
- Public art & history
- Volunteer presence

5. Trail-Friendly municipal plans & policies

Trail-friendly municipal plans and policies integrate outdoor recreation, trail access, and active transportation into the community's long-term vision. By maintaining up-to-date planning documents and adopting policies that prioritize safety, connectivity, and the protection of natural and cultural assets, municipalities create an environment where trail use is supported and encouraged.

- Components:
 - Up-to-date plans & policies that support and protect outdoor recreation and heritage assets (e.g. comprehensive plans, complete street policies, Vision Zero policies, speed management policies, etc.)
 - A common vision and cohesive working relationship among municipality, community groups and businesses.

Applying to the Western NY Trail Town Program

Process Overview

The Trail Town program is an official designation available through a certification process with guidance provided by Parks & Trails New York. A certified Trail Town benefits from partner resources and support, regional grants, name-brand recognition, and other long-term benefits.

In order to become certified, a community must be accepted to participate in an approximately year-long technical assistance program as a “provisional trail town.” The selected communities will work with PTNY to develop a network of groups and individuals committed to the Trail Town initiative, conduct research and assessment, and develop and adopt an action agenda to guide future Trail Town work. The program is not intended to be onerous, so the program focuses on proven strategies that provide volunteers and municipalities with the tools to embrace and benefit from their location along a long-distance trail.

Upon completion of the Trail Town program and adoption of the Trail Town Action Agenda, the participating communities will be publicly designated as an official Trail Town and will be eligible for PTNY’s Western NY [Trail Town grants](#). The Action Agenda is peer reviewed by PTNY and local partners. It is expected that the Town Board will vote on approval for adoption upon completion.

Eligibility

Eligible applicants include Towns located adjacent or located less than one mile to the GVGSP. If you have questions about eligibility, please contact Erica Schneider at eschneider@ptny.org.

Application Materials

Municipal Resolution

To demonstrate that the municipality supports participation in the Trail Town program, **a municipal resolution (preferred) or a letter on official letterhead from the mayor or supervisor in support of the application** will be required.

[Sample Municipal Resolution](#)

[Sample Letter from Mayor/Supervisor](#)

Letter of support from a community organization

In addition to municipal support, the municipality must demonstrate that they have the support of at least one community partner (non-profit or other community organization) willing to commit time and resources to the Trail Town planning process. PTNY will require a letter of support demonstrating this commitment from the identified partner organization.

Partner organizations in the past have included:

- Bicycle/pedestrian advocacy groups

- Main Street Associations
- Lions Clubs
- Rotary Clubs
- Friends groups of regional parks or trails (including groups like Friends of the Genesee Valley Greenway, Friends of Letchworth State Park, Letchworth Genesee Valley Partners, and Genesee River Wilds)

Online Application

Towns are invited to apply using a [web-based application](#) to receive technical planning assistance through the Trail Town program. Note that this application requires the creation of an account to log into PTNY's online grants and programs application. For questions about using this software to apply for the Trail Town program, please contact Erica Schneider at eschneider@ptny.org.

Applicants will be asked to outline how they currently create a trail-friendly atmosphere, providing information about the following Trail Town components:

- Proximity and access to the GVGSP.
- Inventory of recreational opportunities in the Town or nearby.
- Bike parking.
- Publicly accessible restrooms and drinking water (can be a business whose restrooms are open to the public and/or that offers access to water to the public.)
- Overnight accommodations that are welcoming to outdoor recreationists (this can be hotels, motels, bed & breakfasts, short-term rentals, or camping areas.)
- Food and drink (can be a grocery or convenience stores, cafes, or restaurants that welcome outdoor recreation visitors.)
- Information on the community (can be a visitors/welcome center, chamber of commerce, library, or village hall, or a regularly updated trail-oriented bulletin board or kiosk.)

The application will also require prospective Trail Town communities to address the following questions about Trail Town Preparedness:

- Proposed Trail Town steering committee, including potential committee members, along with their contact info (email preferred), the organization, if any, that each member represents.
- What makes the community unique among trailside communities, including notable attractions in the community, or notable festivals and events that currently serve or could potentially serve as a draw for visitors.
- Plans, planning initiatives or projects conducted or underway in the community, especially work that integrates or supports the growth of a trail culture (Comprehensive Plans, NY

Forward or DRI applications, Brownfield Opportunity Area Plans, Local Waterfront Revitalization Plans, or others)

- Trail-friendly or active transportation policies or ordinances in place or being pursued by the municipality or municipalities, such as a complete streets ordinance, Vision Zero policy, or 25 mph municipality-wide speed limit.
- Challenges or barriers to creating an enhanced connection between the community and its outdoor recreation assets, or to drawing outdoor recreation visitors
- Goals and aspirations for participating in the Trail Town program.
- Why now is an ideal time to participate in the Trail Town program.
- An explanation of how a Trail Town effort in the community would incorporate historically underserved populations, such as low-income neighborhoods, communities of color, people with physical or intellectual disabilities, older adults and/or people with limited English proficiency.

Note that the of the application is not intended to be a comprehensive list of assets present in the community. Rather, the application should demonstrate what assets, attractions, or other factors make the community unique and suited for participation in the Trail Town program.

PTNY will evaluate submissions based on the extent to which they meet the Trail Town criteria, as well as the quality of the responses to the open-ended questions.

Important Pre-Program Dates

December 2025	Online application opens
February 16, 2026 @ 11:59 PM	Application period closes
Late February	Interviews as needed
Mid-March	Trail Town notified of selection

2026 Western NY Trail Town Program Outline

PTNY will provide direct assistance to the selected applicant in 2026, guiding each through a series of strategies designed to create a sustainable process of advancing each Trail Town as a community with high quality of life for residents and services and amenities for visitors. Work will result in an action agenda, to be adopted by the provisional trail towns at the end of the program. The action agenda will include an existing conditions analysis informed by the Trail Town application and participatory workshops and will identify both short and long-term priorities. The action agenda will conclude with an implementation strategy, developed by the Trail Town committee for accomplishing these priorities, enabling the community to pursue Trail Town goals in subsequent years.

Throughout the duration of the program, the selected community will be considered a “provisional Trail Town,” although for the purposes of this manual, they may be simply referred to as “Trail Towns.” Upon completion of the program and the adoption of the action agenda, the participating communities will then be certified as Trail Towns. The following pages outline the main program elements and activities that will make up the rest of the year. They are organized essentially by timeline, but it should be noted that some efforts may overlap.

Important Program Dates (subject to change)

Early Spring	Steering Committee Formation (virtual meeting with PTNY upon acceptance)
Spring	Trail Town Orientation (In-person)
Early Summer	Bike Around Assessment (In-person)
Summer	Community Trail Town Survey (remote)
Late Summer/Early Fall	Placemaking Workshop (In-person)
Fall	Action Agenda Development (remote)
Late 2026	Action Agenda Adoption (remote)

Steering Committee Formation (Early Spring)

Trail Towns will be responsible for conducting the necessary outreach identified during the orientation to form their steering committee, starting during the application process but continuing throughout the program. Potential groups to include in the steering committee are trail or recreation groups, business owners, chambers of commerce, merchant associations, community organizations, Main Street organizations, town council and officials, county

government, and interested citizens/advocates. At this point, it is also wise to consider the roles that each committee member will take on. The Trail Town committee should plan on meeting approximately once per month May-December.

At minimum, there should be 5-10 volunteers, made up of the following representatives:

- **A primary contact** with PTNY (most likely the person that led the application submission)
- **A steering committee coordinator** (who may be the same person as the primary contact)
- **A business liaison.** This person (who is likely a business owner themselves) will be responsible for coordinating with local businesses or Chambers of Commerce.
- **A promotion and marketing liaison.** This person will be responsible for or help with communicating about the Trail Town effort and events to the general public and the media
- **Events liaison.** This person will be responsible for assisting with planning the logistics of in-person events, including the Placemaking and Bike Around Workshop and the Cycle the Erie Canal celebration

These positions may overlap, or they may end up being committees, but thinking about them early on will help set the committee up for success.

Trail Town Orientation (Spring)

To kick off the program, PTNY will host an orientation for interested community members, community groups, business owners, and local leaders to introduce the concept of Trail Towns and outline what will be entailed during the rest of the year to reach certification. This meeting may be either in-person or online.

Bike Around Workshop (Early Summer)

The Trail Town, in partnership with PTNY, will host, promote, and participate in an in-person Bike Around assessment to identify the Trail Town's strengths and areas for improvement through the lens of a visiting trail user, to be led by Parks & Trails New York during the summer.

The Bike Around Assessment will take place the morning following the Placemaking Workshop. The goal of the Bike Around is to help the Trail Town experience their community from a visiting cyclist's perspective. The route of the Bike Around will take riders from the trail to the business district and any other identified points of interest, and finally back to the trail. The ride is intended to be conducted at a slow pace to allow for observation and assessment and will include many opportunities to stop and discuss specific elements or conditions of the built environment, including trail or road surface, wayfinding signage, litter or debris, pedestrian and bike infrastructure, and other amenities and services for cyclists. The ride will finish around lunchtime so that the group can convene at a local establishment to debrief and discuss what they experienced.

PTNY will propose a route, but the Trail Town steering committee will be responsible for reviewing the route to ensure that it is a reasonable and safe ride for all involved, and hits the major points of interest. The steering committee will also be responsible for coordinating a location to have lunch and debrief after the ride.

Trail Town Community Survey (Summer)

PTNY will create a survey and invite residents, trail users, business owners, and visitors to share their insights on the community's top assets, including important places, businesses, events, and outdoor recreation experiences. Survey respondents will also be able to identify gaps or areas for improvement and contribute ideas for enhancing the town's trail connections, amenities, and overall visitor experience.

The online survey will feature opportunities to map points of interest, highlight issues or needs in specific locations, and provide input on the community's unique identity within the broader regional trail network. Feedback gathered through this survey will be combined with insights from the in-person workshop to help guide future Trail Town planning and investment. The Trail Town committee will be responsible for distributing the survey and ensuring it reaches the greater community.

Placemaking Workshop (Late Summer)

The Trail Town, in partnership with PTNY, will host, promote, and participate in an in-person Placemaking Workshop. This workshop will take place in the evening and kick off with an introduction to the Trail Town model and a background on outdoor recreation tourism. From there, the workshop will serve as an opportunity for participants to brainstorm the community's top assets (places, businesses, events, and experiences), and gaps or areas for improvement. There will also be opportunities for the community to refine its unique identity within the regional context.

All are welcome to join the placemaking workshop, and it is recommended that the Trail Town steering committee advertise the opportunity to anyone interested in participating in the effort. The Trail Town steering committee will be responsible for coordinating the venue for the placemaking workshop (a library or other community space is recommended), and for promoting the opportunity to the community.

The Action Agenda (Fall)

Action Agenda Development (Fall)

Based on data gathered from the application, placemaking workshop and bike around, PTNY will develop an action agenda that includes an analysis of existing conditions and a list of long- and short-term priorities tailored to each community. During this process, PTNY may need to reach out for more information or clarification on certain subjects. When the draft priorities are complete, PTNY will provide the steering committees with the action agenda for feedback, as

well as provide an “Implementation Worksheet,” which will help the committee think through how the recommendations will be implemented. The committee will be required to identify what entity will be responsible for the effort after this year, who will be the primary contact with PTNY, how progress on the priorities will be tracked, and how the action agenda will be adopted. This strategy will then serve as the final section of the action agenda.

Finalization of the action agenda (Late 2026)

Upon submission of the implementation worksheet, PTNY will include this language into the final action agenda. The final version of the action agenda will then be returned to the Trail Town steering committee for approval.

Action Agenda Adoption and Promotion of Designation (Winter/Spring 2026)

Once the final Action Agenda is in the hands of the Trail Town, the steering committee must then pursue a commitment on behalf of the municipality to make an effort to carry out the recommendations. The specific strategy will be identified in the implementation worksheet completed as part of the Action Agenda development, but in most cases it will be a municipal resolution. This type of public commitment will be the last component of the program, taking the community from a provisional Trail Town to an officially designated Trail Town. This will be a cause for celebration and the Trail Town steering committee should communicate it to the world. In instances where a committee is unable to secure a municipal resolution, PTNY should be notified to identify an alternative outcome. A press release and social media posts that outline some of the Trail Town’s victories and high-priority next steps should be developed and published. The trail towns are also encouraged to hold a public press event in the spring, which PTNY would make every effort to attend and help make a success.

Benefits of Becoming a Trail Town

Short-term Benefits of becoming a Trail Town

Materials and tailored technical assistance to conduct assessments and evaluate opportunities.
In-person workshops facilitated by PTNY including a Placemaking Workshop and Bike Around assessment
Access to a network of other Trail Towns for sharing of successes and strategies for overcoming challenges
Preparation of a Trail Town Action Agenda by PTNY in collaboration with Trail Town committee
Eligibility for PTNY’s Trail Town grants and other grant related assistance

Long-term Benefits of becoming a Trail Town

Increased visitation by outdoor enthusiasts to the community and local businesses, boosting the local economy
Increased pride of place and historic preservation
More active and healthy community
Higher quality of life for residents and a more desirable place to live

For More Information Contact:

Erica Schneider

Policy and Planning Manager

Parks & Trails New York

(518) 218-6539

eschneider@ptny.org

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About Parks & Trails New York

Parks & Trails New York (PTNY) is New York's leading statewide advocate for parks and trails, dedicated since 1985 to improving our health, economy, and quality of life through the use and enjoyment of green space. PTNY works to expand, protect, and promote a network of parks, trails, and open spaces throughout our state for use and enjoyment by all. For more information, visit www.ptny.org.