



PARKS AND GREENWAYS ARE ESSENTIAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Findings from a Statewide Survey
of 1,502 New York Voters



ABOUT THIS REPORT

Parks and Greenway Trails are Essential Infrastructure is based on a statewide survey of 1,502 likely New York voters on New York State Parks and greenway trails, commissioned by Parks & Trails New York and conducted by Embold Research.

This narrative section of the report synthesizes the survey findings, situates them within New York's conservation tradition, and examines their implications for public lands, transportation, public health, economic development, and community planning. The appendices at the end of this narrative section contain the complete polling results, charts, topline data, demographic crosstabs, and methodology.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For more than a century, New York has demonstrated that conservation and public access to nature are enduring values that transcend political party and geographic region. From the “Forever Wild” protections of the Adirondack and Catskill Forest Preserves to the Environmental Protection Fund, the Empire State Trail, and the overwhelming passage of the 2022 Environmental Bond Act, New Yorkers have repeatedly chosen to protect and invest in state parks and greenway trails.

Today, demand for outdoor recreation has never been greater. State parks welcome nearly 90 million visits annually, and use of greenway trails—defined as shared use paths separated from vehicle traffic specifically designed for non-motorized transportation and/or recreation—continues to grow, with nearly 10 million annual visits to the Empire State Trail alone. Communities across the state increasingly recognize parks and greenways as drivers of economic development, healthier lifestyles, safer transportation, and improved quality of life. Meanwhile, local governments and nonprofits have identified more than 1,000 miles of planned, locally supported off-road greenways ready to advance with strategic investment.

To understand how voting New Yorkers currently view these trends and future opportunities to enhance New York’s public lands, Parks & Trails New York commissioned Embold Research to survey 1,502 likely voters statewide. The findings reveal strong consensus across geography, party affiliation, age, and income: New Yorkers overwhelmingly support investing in parks and expanding trails and connected greenways, and increasingly view these investments not as optional amenities but as essential public infrastructure.

6 KEY FINDINGS

New Yorkers want a future with safer ways to walk, bike, and access the outdoors. The findings show widespread support for expanding greenways and creating a more connected network of parks, trails, and communities.



PARKS HAVE BECOME ESSENTIAL INFRASTRUCTURE

More than three-quarters of likely voters across all party affiliations say access to safe parks and outdoor recreation is important to their quality of life. New Yorkers see parks as places that improve overall health, strengthen communities, and provide opportunities for families to spend time together.



DEMAND FOR THE OUTDOORS HAS OUTPACED SUPPLY

Nearly six in ten New Yorkers want to spend more time in parks and on trails than they currently do. Respondents identified convenience, information, and safe access as the principal barriers to more frequent use.



NEW YORKERS SUPPORT EXPANDING GREENWAYS

Nearly 73 percent of likely voters support expanding New York's network of connected multi-use greenways, with majorities across every region and political affiliation. New Yorkers associate greenways with safer communities, healthier lifestyles, and stronger local economies.



GREENWAYS HAVE AN AWARENESS GAP, NOT A SUPPORT GAP

One of the survey's most encouraging findings is that support for connected greenways far exceeds public familiarity with the concept. While only about 28% of likely voters say they are very familiar with connected greenways, **73% support** expanding them after reading a brief description.



SAFETY IS THE DEFINING PRIORITY

New Yorkers ranked having safe places to walk, run, and bicycle as the most important benefit of an expanded greenway system. **Nearly half of likely voters** have avoided walking or bicycling because nearby roads feel unsafe, and a majority say they would walk or bike more often if protected infrastructure were available.



SUPPORT FOR STREET REDESIGN IS BROAD & BIPARTISAN

A strong majority of likely voters support redesigning streets to provide safer, dedicated space for walking and bicycling alongside car travel. This support holds across regions and political affiliations, reflecting a public that wants a balanced transportation system that safely accommodates multi-modal forms of travel.

WHAT NEW YORKERS ARE SAYING...

We polled 1,502 likely voters in NYS and here's what they said.

77%

say access to safe parks and outdoor spaces is important to their quality of life.



support expanding NY's network of connected multi-use greenways.

47%

have avoided walking or bicycling because nearby roads feel unsafe.

58%

support shifting some transportation funding toward walking, biking, trails, and transit—**80% among Democratic voters.**

59%

want to spend more time in parks and on trails than they currently do.



A TRADITION OF CONSERVATION. A VISION FOR CONNECTION.

For more than a century, New York has sustained something increasingly rare in American public life: a durable, bipartisan commitment to protecting public lands and expanding access to the outdoors.

That tradition runs from the establishment of the nation's first state park at Niagara Falls in 1885, through the "Forever Wild" provision of the State Constitution adopted in 1894, the creation of Catskill Park in 1904, the Environmental Protection Fund created under Governor Mario Cuomo in 1993, Governor George Pataki's Clean Water/Clean Air Bond Act and major Adirondack and Hudson Valley land acquisitions, and onward to the overwhelming 2022 approval of the \$4.2 billion Clean Water, Clean Air, and Green Jobs Environmental Bond Act, the largest in New York history, passing roughly two to one. Each of these achievements earned support across political parties and geographic regions, reflecting a deeply held belief that New York's natural landscapes are a shared public trust.

Today, New York stands at another pivotal moment. State parks welcome nearly 90 million visits a year. Communities across the state have embraced greenways as tools for economic development, safer transportation, and climate resilience. The Empire State Trail has proven that connected infrastructure generates substantial returns, welcoming nearly 10 million visits annually. And yet

significant gaps remain: millions of New Yorkers still lack safe places to walk, run, and bike close to home, and hundreds of communities remain unconnected to the statewide trail network.

Against this backdrop, Parks & Trails New York commissioned Embold Research to survey 1,502 likely voters between May 7 and May 14, 2026. The results provide one of the most comprehensive snapshots to date of how New Yorkers think about parks, trails, greenways, active transportation, and the role of public investment in connecting communities.

PARKS ARE ONE OF THE FEW ISSUES THAT UNITE ACROSS PARTY LINES

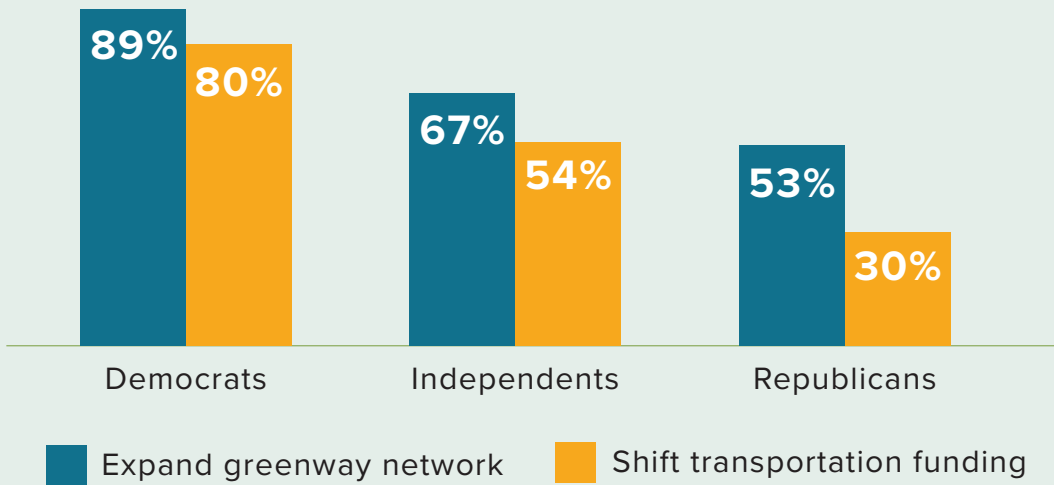
While Democrats predictably rate access to parks and outdoor recreation very highly, Republicans also overwhelmingly value them.

- 82% of Republicans say access to safe, well-maintained parks is very or extremely important.
- 74% of Republicans also say safe places to walk and bike are important.

SUPPORT FOR STREET REDESIGN IS BROAD & BIPARTISAN

Not all trail investment questions poll the same way, and the difference is instructive. A majority of Republicans (53%) support expanding New York's greenway network, alongside 67% of independents and 89% of Democrats, proof that trail expansion itself is a genuinely bipartisan position.

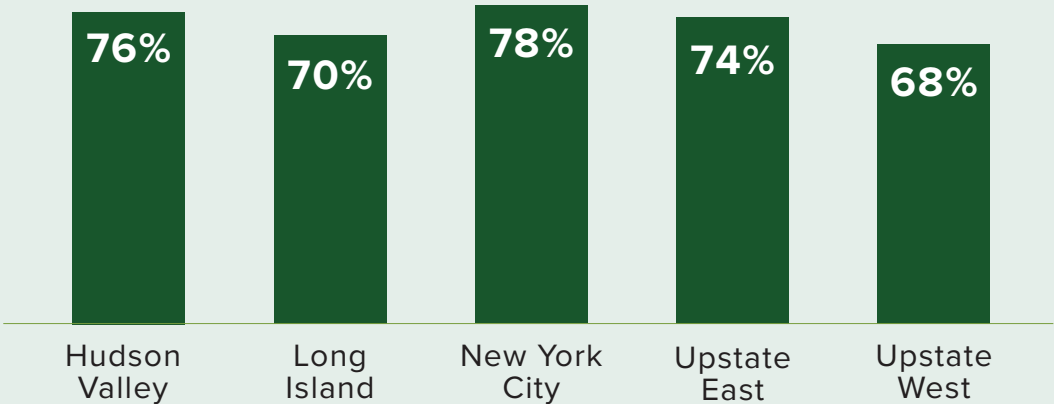
Shifting transportation funding away from roads is a different story. Support drops sharply among Republicans (30%) while remaining strong among Democrats (80%) and independents (54%). The strategic takeaway: lead with the trail investment itself, where the coalition is real, rather than a broader funding reallocation argument that fractures along party lines.



SUPPORT SPANS EVERY REGION

This is not a downstate or New York City initiative. Support for expanding the greenway network clears two-thirds of voters in every region of the state: Hudson Valley (76%), Long Island (70%), New York City (78%), Upstate East (74%), and Upstate West (68%).

That statewide consistency is a strong answer to the assumption that trail investment is a niche, regional priority. It isn't. It's a statewide mandate.



DEMAND FOR THE OUTDOORS HAS OUTPACED SUPPLY



The survey confirms what New Yorkers intuitively understand: state parks and greenway trails are essential to everyday life, not peripheral amenities.

More than three-quarters of likely voters describe access to safe, well-maintained parks and outdoor recreation as very or extremely important to their quality of life. This appreciation extends well beyond recreation. New Yorkers see parks as investments that improve physical health, strengthen mental well-being, support families, and create opportunities to reconnect with one another and with nature. These sentiments were especially strong among younger New Yorkers and New York City residents, who were particularly likely to describe parks as places that help them manage stress and improve emotional health.

Importantly, this support is not limited to frequent outdoor enthusiasts. Many respondents who visit parks only occasionally expressed a strong desire to go more often, suggesting that demand for outdoor access now significantly exceeds available opportunity. **The strongest support came from communities that have historically had the least: BIPOC New Yorkers, younger adults, urban residents, and households earning under \$100,000 consistently placed the highest value on access to safe parks and outdoor recreation, reinforcing research showing that park and greenway trail investment can help close long-standing disparities.**

The survey also identifies persistent barriers. Respondents cited lack of time, limited information about nearby opportunities, and concerns about safe and convenient access as the most common obstacles to more frequent park use. These findings point to the importance of not only building parks and trails, but also improving safe and convenient transportation connections to them, enhancing programming, and ensuring they are

welcoming to people of all ages and abilities. Parks are increasingly recognized as everyday civic infrastructure: places where families gather, neighbors walk, commuters travel safely, and residents find respite from the demands of modern life.

Over the past decade, outdoor recreation in New York has been transformed from a leisure activity into an essential part of daily life. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated a shift already underway: state parks continue to see record visitation, trail networks remain busier than ever, and the public's appetite for outdoor access has not receded with the pandemic itself.

Yet, even with this growth in usage, the survey reveals that significant unmet demand persists. Nearly six in ten likely voters say they would like to visit parks and outdoor spaces more often than they currently do. This finding cuts across every demographic group, and it points to a clear conclusion: access—not interest—is the limiting factor. **The most commonly cited barriers were practical: not enough time, limited information about nearby parks and trails, and challenges related to convenience and getting there safely.**

Proximity matters as much as destination. While iconic parks and landscapes remain treasured, New Yorkers are equally interested in high-quality outdoor spaces close to home. Local parks, neighborhood trails, greenways, waterfront paths, and rail trails all play an essential role in making outdoor recreation a regular part of daily life. Meeting growing demand will require not only preserving existing public lands, but actively expanding the network of greenways and trail connections that bring those lands within reach of millions more residents.



GREENWAYS AS PUBLIC INFRASTRUCTURE

For decades, trails and greenways were categorized primarily as recreational amenities. That categorization no longer fits how New Yorkers think about them nor how communities use them. Greenways connect neighborhoods to schools, downtowns, parks, waterfronts, transit, and employment centers. They provide safe corridors for daily travel. They are increasingly understood as a core component of the infrastructure that supports healthy, economically vibrant, and resilient communities.

The survey reflects this evolution. Nearly three-quarters of likely voters support expanding New York's network of connected multi-use greenways, with strong majorities across every region and every major demographic group. When asked what they hoped to gain from an expanded network, respondents placed safe places to walk, run, and bicycle at the top of the list—followed by tourism, economic development, or environmental benefits. Improved health, better mental well-being, and stronger connections between neighborhoods and destinations followed closely. **New Yorkers are not thinking about greenways as recreational destinations. They are thinking about them as everyday infrastructure that supports daily life.**

The survey also identifies a significant gap between demand and reality. Nearly half of respondents have avoided walking or bicycling because they considered nearby roads unsafe, and a majority say they would walk or bike more frequently if protected facilities were available. The barrier is not a lack of interest, rather the absence of safe infrastructure. Greenways address that gap directly by providing dedicated, low-stress corridors that remove conflicts with automobiles while linking neighborhoods to destinations people use every day.

Expanding the Empire State Trail

AN OPPORTUNITY TO ADDRESS VOTER DEMAND FOR SAFE GREEN SPACES

Stretching 750 miles from New York City to Canada and Albany to Buffalo, The Empire State Trail has become both a nationally recognized recreational destination and an active transportation corridor. Parks & Trails New York's recent Economic Impact of the Empire State Trail Report documents \$1.87 billion in annual economic output, nearly 10,000 jobs, and approximately 10 million visits per year—alongside improved public health, increased tourism, and stronger local businesses.

Beyond the Empire State Trail, New York communities have identified nearly 1,000 miles of additional greenway projects with the potential to extend this value across the state. These projects share something important beyond their scale and geography: they emerged through local planning processes, not top-down directives. Counties, municipalities, nonprofits, and community advocates have spent years building support, completing studies, and positioning projects for construction. Many are ready to move forward as funding becomes available, from closing dangerous gaps that still force trail users onto high-speed highways, to connecting communities that sit near the trail but remain unlinked to it, to advancing major regional corridors on Long Island, in Western New York, and across the Hudson Valley and Central New York. Together, they represent a community-driven infrastructure opportunity of a kind New York rarely sees, one that would extend the everyday benefits New Yorkers already associate with greenways to millions more residents across the state.



SAFETY IS THE DEFINING PRIORITY

Greenways are only part of the picture. Even a well-connected greenway network depends on the streets around it: most trips begin and end on a sidewalk or a roadway, and many of the community connections identified in the greenway pipeline will require on-street facilities such as protected bike lanes, pedestrian refuges, and safer crossings to actually reach the trail. New Yorkers increasingly view walking and bicycling, whether on a dedicated trail or a city street, not as recreational activities, but as essential components of a safe, modern transportation system. Respondents consistently identified safe places to walk and bicycle as their top priority, ahead of tourism, economic benefit, or environmental value, and that priority extends well beyond greenway corridors to the streets and roads New Yorkers navigate every day.

Among the nearly half of voters who have avoided walking or biking due to unsafe roads, most say they would do so several times a week if safer facilities existed.

Support for greenways and street redesign is broad and bipartisan. A strong majority of likely voters favor redesigning streets and roads to provide dedicated, protected space for walking and bicycling alongside automobile travel, a consensus that holds across regions, income levels, and political affiliations. New Yorkers are not asking to eliminate cars from the equation. They are asking for a more balanced transportation network, one where greenways and safer on-street facilities work together, that safely accommodates everyone, whether they walk, bike, drive, or take transit.

That support extends to funding. Most voters favor directing a greater share of transportation dollars toward walking, bicycling, trails, and public transit. Support levels vary by age and political affiliation, but the overall result is unambiguous: most New Yorkers see active transportation

infrastructure, both on and off the road, as a legitimate, and currently underfunded, part of the state's transportation system.

This consensus arrives at a pivotal moment. The New York State Department of Transportation is developing its Active Transportation Strategic Plan, intended to establish a long-term vision for improving conditions for people who walk, bicycle, roll, and access transit. Implemented with strong leadership, measurable standards, public accountability, and sustained investment, the Plan has the potential to become one of the most significant transportation policy initiatives in a generation, directing state investment toward connecting communities to parks and trails, improving safety on state highways and Main Streets, and making active transportation a routine consideration rather than an afterthought.

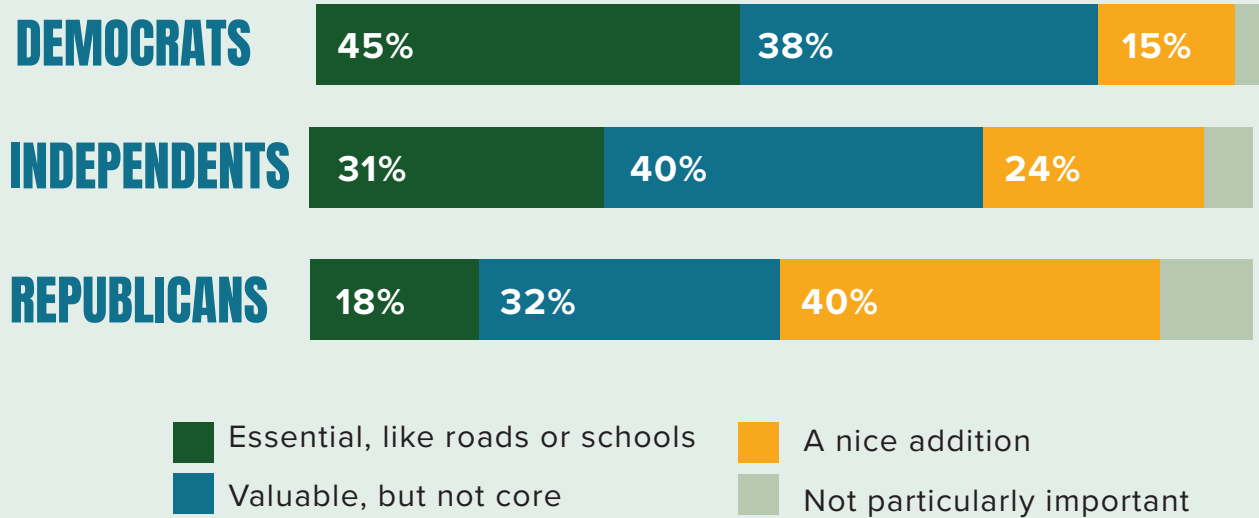
These investments are not solely transportation projects. They improve public health by encouraging routine physical activity, strengthen local economies by increasing access to business districts and tourism destinations, reduce household transportation costs, and create communities that are more attractive places to live and work. Few public investments, greenways among them, produce comparable returns across as many policy objectives simultaneously.

47%
have avoided walking or bicycling
because nearby roads feel unsafe

PARKS AS INFRASTRUCTURE, NOT AMENITIES

New Yorkers no longer think of parks and greenways as optional amenities. Across the state, 68% of likely voters describe them as either essential to daily life, on par with roads and schools, or valuable and important, well ahead of the 26% who still see them as a nice-to-have.

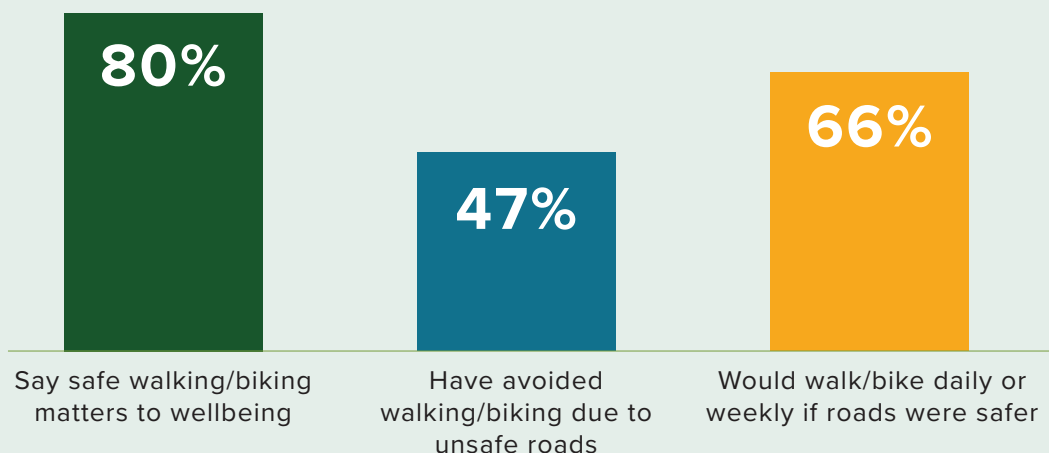
That view is strongest among Democrats, 45% of whom call parks and greenways essential infrastructure, but it isn't confined to one party. A majority of independents (71%) and half of Republicans (50%) also place parks and greenways at the essential or valuable level, even though Republicans are the only group where a plurality (40%) still see them mainly as a nice addition. The infrastructure framing has real room to grow across the aisle, not just within it.



THE SAFTEY GAP

This is the clearest finding in the survey: the barrier isn't interest, it's infrastructure. 80% of voters say safe places to walk and bike matter to their wellbeing, but 47% have avoided walking or biking because nearby roads felt unsafe.

Among voters who'd feel safer with better infrastructure, 66% say they'd walk or bike daily or several times a week. Closing that gap doesn't require convincing New Yorkers to change their habits; it requires building the infrastructure that already-willing New Yorkers are waiting for.





IMPLICATIONS FOR STATE POLICY

1. PUBLIC DEMAND HAS OUTPACED EXISTING INFRASTRUCTURE

The survey documents a growing mismatch between what New Yorkers want and what the current system provides. Nearly six in ten want to spend more time outdoors and in parks. Nearly half have avoided walking or bicycling due to road safety concerns. Among those, a majority would do so regularly if protected infrastructure were available. New York's challenge is no longer generating interest in outdoor recreation or active transportation, it is building the infrastructure needed to support demand that already exists.

Strategic investment in off-road greenways offers an exceptional return. The Empire State Trail returns \$5.43 for every public dollar invested (PTNY, 2026). Off-road segments generate four times the economic impact of comparable on-road ones. The more than 1,000 miles of locally identified, community-supported greenway projects across the state represent one of New York's greatest current opportunities to improve safety, strengthen local economies, and expand access to nature.

Realizing this opportunity will require coordination across state government. Just as multiple agencies came together to build the Empire State Trail, the next generation of greenway investment will depend on continued leadership from the NYS Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation; the Department of Environmental Conservation; the State Department of Transportation; Empire State Development; the Canal Corporation; the State Department of Health and the State University of New York. Each has a distinct role to play in delivering infrastructure that advances economic development, public health, environmental stewardship, and quality of life together.

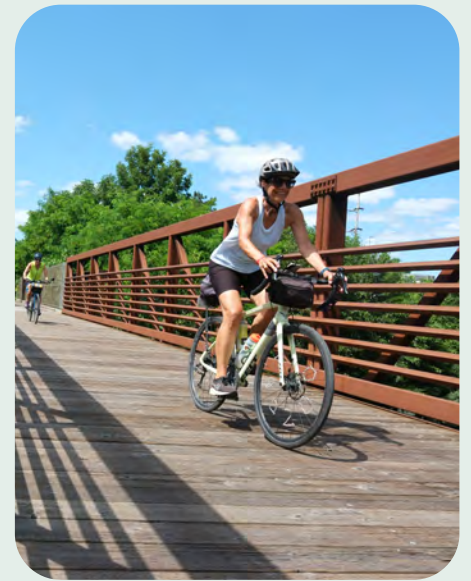


2. PARKS & GREENWAYS ARE ESSENTIAL PUBLIC INFRASTRUCTURE

The most consequential implication of this research is that New Yorkers no longer see parks, trails, and greenways as discretionary amenities. Throughout the survey, respondents associated these investments with public safety, physical and mental health, economic vitality, transportation choice, environmental stewardship, and quality of life. Like roads, bridges, sidewalks, and transit systems, greenways provide lasting public value while serving multiple purposes simultaneously. They deserve to be funded and evaluated accordingly.

3. ACTIVE TRANSPORTATION HAS ENTERED MAINSTREAM

Walking and bicycling are no longer niche activities. New Yorkers see them as practical, everyday forms of transportation that deserve safe, well-designed infrastructure. And they support street redesign to make that possible. The Department of Transportation's Active Transportation Strategic Plan, if published with ambitious goals and sustained investment, has the potential to be one of the most consequential transportation initiatives in decades. It should strengthen connections between neighborhoods, schools, parks, downtowns, and transit; improve safety on state highways and local streets; and make active transportation a routine element of state planning rather than a supplemental consideration.



4. NEW YORK IS WELL POSITIONED TO LEAD THE CHARGE

New York has already proven it can build outdoor infrastructure at scale, with a State Park system drawing nearly 90 million visits a year and an Empire State Trail generating \$1.87 billion annually, yet states with far smaller economies, including Utah and Virginia, are now moving faster on new greenway investment, and municipal parks, the most frequently used outdoor infrastructure in daily life, remain under-resourced even as 77% of voters call park access essential to their quality of life. New York has the capacity and the proven track record to lead on all three fronts at once: major state capital funding for the next generation of greenways, continued investment in the State Park system, and new resources to close the municipal park gap. The public is ready, the projects are identified, and the economic case is proven; the only question is whether New York will act with the urgency that smaller states already have.



METHODOLOGY

This report is based on a statewide survey commissioned by Parks & Trails New York and conducted by Embold Research between May 7 and May 14, 2026. Embold surveyed 1,502 likely New York voters online using a representative sample drawn from across the state. Responses were weighted by age, gender, race and ethnicity, education, geographic region, and voting behavior. The modeled margin of sampling error is ± 2.7 percentage points; margins may vary for individual subgroups.

Survey topics included: use of parks and outdoor recreation areas; attitudes toward parks, trails, and public lands; walking and bicycling behavior; transportation priorities and street design; public safety; greenway expansion; and the economic and community benefits of parks and trails. Where appropriate, survey findings are supplemented by data from The Economic Impact of the Empire State Trail Report, published by Parks & Trails New York in partnership with LaBella Associates in 2026, and publicly available information on New York's transportation, parks, and environmental initiatives.

A more detailed presentation of the survey methodology can be found in the appendix.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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