

POLICY RESEARCH & IMPLICATIONS

“Trails can encourage physical activity, protect the environment, and improve community living. All types of communities can benefit from a trail.”

**- Bicycle/
Pedestrian
Coordinator**

Community Trail Development

Summary

To find out how policies play a role in community trail development, researchers with the Physical Activity Policy Research Network (PAPRN) studied six trails located in Hawaii, Massachusetts, Missouri, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Washington. They interviewed people involved with trail development at each site to identify how policy influenced this process.

Findings indicated that several policies positively influenced the development of a trail. Funding policies, land acquisition policies, a community master plan, liability policies and inter-municipal or inter-agency agreements facilitated trail development.



Although many times policies were a positive influence, they also provided challenging

circumstances to community trail development. Examples of policies that were a challenge to the process of trail development were policies on design standards, policies concerning safety, environmental protection policies, operational policies and funding policies. While these policies were necessary, they often required extra time and money to address them. Despite challenges, all trails studied were deemed successful by those interviewed. Communities contemplating trail

development should learn about the policy categories reported here to proactively identify policies that may either facilitate or act as barriers to the development process.

Why Build A Trail?

A multi-use trail can impact individuals and communities in many ways:

- Create opportunities for recreation and alternative transportation
- Positively influence economic and community development
- Encourage physical activity
- Protect the environment
- Improve community living
- Provide a non-motorized means for commuting to and from work, school, or errands.

What policies facilitated trail development in this study?

Federal Funding Policies. All community projects need money. Federal funding policies aided in trail development. For example, national guidelines require that a percentage of funding for all federally funded transportation projects must be dedicated to enhancements such as pedestrian-oriented facilities and rail-trails.

Land Acquisition Policies. Much of the land used for the trails studied was not publicly owned and needed to be acquired or transferred so that trail development could take place. Many used a combination of transfer agreements, donations, and encroachment permits.

Community Master Plans. A master plan is a guide for how and where future development will occur and how to provide public facilities to support this growth. Some communities had a master plan that included provisions for trail or recreation development.

Liability Policies. Policies to overcome liability concerns facilitated trail development. Municipal comprehensive liability policies were often reported as a facilitator to trail development.

Inter-Governmental or Inter-Agency Agreements.

Agreements among agencies or governments involved with trail development facilitated the process. These collaborations pooled expertise and resources, and proactively addressed potential barriers to developing the trail.

What Other Policies Influenced Trail Development?

Design Standards. Trails had to be designed with standards set forth by government or private entities involved. All trails had to comply with Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requirements. Addressing these policies often took time and money, but opened the trail to more user groups. By making a trail wheelchair accessible, it becomes user-friendly to baby-strollers, inline skates, and bicycles.

Environmental Protection Policies. Trails located near a river or creek had to address federal policies on flood plain development. Other trails needed to deal with wetland requirements, water quality issues, and natural resource policies. These standards make the trail a “better fit” with the physical environment, but permits and requirements added time to the already lengthy process of trail development.

“You can have motivated parties who really want to come to a solution but when you start looking at all the contracting laws and all the environmental laws and all the permits you need, it becomes a collision course between time and opportunity.” –Bicycle/Pedestrian Advocate

Maintenance & Safety. The process of developing a trail must also include provisions for maintaining the trail. Two issues surrounding maintenance were important in this study: who will be responsible for maintenance and who will pay for ongoing maintenance.

Fund-Matching Policies. Funding policies that required city fund matching was a barrier to trail development. Also, trail projects had to deal with competing demands for funds and at times, opposition to trail development.

For more information on building a trail in your community see the following websites:

- **Rails to Trails:** www.railtrails.org
- **America Walks:** www.americawalks.org
- **Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU):** www.fhwa.dot.gov



Lessons Learned

1. In order to deal with the politics of trail development, committed people and **collaborative partnerships** are needed. At each study site, one person or a small group of people were the driving force behind the trail initiative.
2. Policy work in trail development requires a team of many players including governmental and private agencies, and community groups. The challenge is in **balancing their different motives to accomplish a shared overall goal.**
3. **Trail development requires perseverance.** In many cases, the trails took almost a decade from planning to completion.
4. **Community involvement is an absolute necessity** for successful trail development. Many of the trails began with community meetings to solicit input from residents. This initial involvement can help address common concerns such as land acquisition, effects on property values, and safety of having a trail near their homes.

This project was conducted by the **Physical Activity Policy Research Network (PAPRN)**. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) created the PAPRN in 2004 to study policies related to increasing physical activity in communities. Additional funding for this study was provided by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Active Living grant.

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