TRAILS AND GREENWAYS FOR LIVABLE COMMUNITIES

"MANY OF THE GREEN PLACES AND OPEN SPACES THAT NEED PROTECTING MOST TODAY ARE IN OUR OWN NEIGHBORHOODS. IN TOO MANY PLACES, THE BEAUTY OF LOCAL VISTAS HAS BEEN DEGRADED BY DECADES OF ILL-PLANNED AND ILL-COORDINATED DEVELOPMENT."

— VICE PRESIDENT ALBERT GORE

JANUARY 12, 1999

Vice President Gore described a phenomenon occurring all over the United States: poor community and regional planning has virtually eliminated what so many people desire – beautiful landscapes and open spaces. To counteract the effects of sprawling development, many communities use trails and greenways to curb ill-planned growth and preserve ecologically important areas. The result is a higher quality of life, a healthier environment and more livable communities.

WHAT ARE TRAILS AND GREENWAYS?

Greenways are corridors of protected open space managed for conservation and recreation purposes. Greenways often follow natural land or water features, and link nature reserves, parks, cultural features and historic sites with each other and with populated areas. Greenways can be publicly or privately owned, and some are the result of public/private partnerships. Trails are paths used for walking, bicycling, horseback riding or other forms of recreation or transportation. Some greenways include trails, while others do not. Some appeal to people, while others attract wildlife. From the hills of inland America to the beaches and barrier islands of the coast, greenways provide a vast network linking America's special places.

THE COST OF SPRAWL

For decades, uncontrolled, scattered development has characterized planning all across the United States. Farmland and other open spaces are being paved at an alarming pace.

- Although the population of the Cleveland metropolitan area fell by 11% between 1970 and 1990, developed land increased by 33%.[1]
- Between 1970 and 1990, the population of Chicago's metropolitan area grew by a mere 4%, while developed land increased by 46%.[2]

More communities recognize the detrimental costs associated with sprawl. As a result of poor planning and limited transportation choices, people waste increas-

Development encroaches on valuable farmland and natural areas across the country. Lancaster County was listed among The World Monuments Fund's 1997 "List of 100 Most Endangered Sites." (Photo: Lancaster Farmland Trust)

ingly more time and money running errands and commuting to school and work. In addition, financing sprawling development costs taxpayers money, sometimes creating significant budgetary crises for local governments.

- In a 1998 study, the American Farmland Trust found that children living in scattered developments spend the equivalent of 24 school days commuting to and from school on buses each year.[3]
- A 1992 study by economists at Rutgers University revealed that infrastructure costs related to sprawl, such as roads, water and sewer lines and new school facilities, were going to cost New Jersey residents $1.3 million to keep up with development plans.[4]
- Planners in Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota estimate that $3.1 billion will need to be invested in new sewer and water lines to keep up with projected growth for 2020.[5]
- According to estimates from the Texas Transportation Institute, in major metropolitan areas across the country, the annual cost of congestion per capita resulting from low density development is $650.[6]

THE TIDES OF CHANGE

Local governments unable to ignore the costs associated with sprawl, and citizens alarmed by their diminishing quality of life are calling for an end to sprawl. Many are using trails and greenways to manage development in their communities.

This Jackson, Wyoming trail is one of thousands in the country that allow people to enjoy beautiful rural landscapes. (Photo: Edward T. McMahon)

- On November 3, 1998, voters across the United States approved 72% of 240 ballot referenda to spend more than $7 billion on state and local conservation measures. These initiatives will protect and improve farmland, parks, open space, greenways, historic resources, biological habitats, watersheds and other related environmental enhancements.[7]
- A 1998 report by the Center for the Continuing Study of the California Economy found that conservation of open space and higher density development were essential to preserve a higher quality of life, which is an important factor in attracting employers and employees to California localities.[8]
- A study in Woodbridge, Connecticut showed taxpayers that it was more cost-effective for them to buy a 292-tract of land for open space conservation than to permit new development.[9]

PRESERVING WHAT WE VALUE

Small towns and rural areas are hot spots for vacationers and people in search of a quieter and more peaceful lifestyle. The popularity of these areas often leads to development problems. In response, many communities are using greenways to conserve land and preserve the lifestyles that make their communities so popular.

- Residents of Yampa Valley, Colorado are preserving the Yampa River to protect thousands of acres of ranchland, and they have built the Yampa River Core Trail as part of an urban greenways program.[10]
- All across the country, land trusts are working to protect remaining open space. More than 1,200 land trusts have saved nearly five million acres of wetlands, wildlife habitat, ranches and farms, recreation land and other important areas.[11]
- The Stowe Land Trust has protected over 2,500 acres of land in Stowe Valley, Vermont. Land conservation is important in this popular vacation spot, where tourism thrives on the natural beauty and picturesque town.[12]

EXPANDING TRANSPORTATION OPTIONS

Trails are corridors that connect residential areas with retail areas, neighborhoods with schools, and homes with work. Trails provide safe and pleasant environments for people to commute either to work or to public transit systems. They also encourage people to enjoy the outdoors. If planned properly, they can provide an alternate route for commuting, reducing air pollution and traffic congestion.

- The planned Gwynns Falls Trails is a 40-45 mile loop that will connect 20 neighborhoods to parks and downtown Baltimore, linking the urban center to the suburban counties.[13]
- The Minuteman Trail, a rail-trail located outside Boston, is a popular commuting trail used by bikers and walkers to get to work and public transit stations.

The Walking Magazine selected "America's Best Walking Towns" for their network of sidewalks and trails, aesthetically pleasing walking environments, compact and diverse development and "a culture of promoting walking in citizen activism, civic planning and administration." (Dave McGovern, *The Walking Magazine*, May/June 1998.)

Boston, Massachusetts	Eureka Springs, Arkansas
Boulder, Colorado	Exeter, New Hampshire
Burlington, Vermont	Portland, Maine
Chattanooga, Tennessee	Raleigh, North Carolina
Clayton, California	Washington, DC
Dunedin, Florida	Xenia, Ohio

URBAN REVITALIZATION

One of the greatest challenges for many local governments is revitalizing their cities and attracting people back to the cities from the suburbs. Trails and greenways are valued for their ability to connect people with places and enhance the beauty of urban centers. Famous greenways such as Boston's Emerald Necklace, Washington, D.C.'s Rock Creek Park, and New York City's Central Park are obvious examples of planned greenways that add quality to the lives of those living in these cities. Other cities, such as Providence, Rhode Island and Chattanooga, Tennessee turned industrial blight into beautiful and useful greenways and trails along riverfronts. Plans are underway in Birmingham, Alabama to create a 17-mile greenway encompassing Village Creek, which runs through a primarily abandoned brownfield industrial site. The greenway will include a multi-use trail.[14]

If presented with the option, more people, such as this bicyclist using the Northern Delaware Greenway, would use trails and greenways to commute. (Photo: Edward T. McMahon)

Quality of life truly determines the livability of an area. Americans around the country, from ranchers and farmers to suburban and urban dwellers, are demanding that green places be protected. In order to compete for residents and businesses, local governments realize that conserving open space is a benefit to their communities. Trails and greenways provide the tools for all Americans to shape their communities and retain the level of quality that they desire.

"PEOPLE SAID, 'BUILD THIS TRAIL AND NO ONE WILL COME'...NOW COMMUTERS USE IT EVERY DAY AND FAMILIES COME ON WEEKENDS TO BLADE AND BIKE AND WALK."

— TOM MURPHY, MAYOR OF PITTSBURGH, PA TALKING ABOUT THE ELIZA FURNACE TRAIL.

HELPFUL RESOURCES

Erickson, Donna L. and Anneke F. Louisse. *Greenway Implementation in Metropolitan Regions: A Comparative Case Study of North American Examples.* Michigan: National Park Service, Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program, Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, Southeast Michigan Greenways Project, The Greenway Collaborative, Inc., and the University of Michigan, School of Natural Resources and Environment, January 1997.

Lerner, Steve and William Poole. *The Economic Benefits of Parks and Open Space.* San Francisco: The Trust for Public Land, 1999. www.tpl.org/newsroom.

Sorensen, A. Ann and J. Dixon Esseks. *Living on the Edge.* Illinois: American Farmland Trust, Center for Agriculture in the Environment and Northern Illinois University, March 1998.

The Sierra Club. *The Cost and Consequences of Suburban Sprawl.* San Francisco: The Sierra Club, August 1998, www.sierraclub.org/transportation/sprawl/sprawl_report.

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ENDNOTES:

[1] American Planning Association, "Hot Topics, Paying for Sprawl," www.planning.org/info/sprawl.htm.

[2] A. Ann Sorensen and J. Dixon Esseks, *Living on the Edge*, American Farmland Trust, March 1998, p. 2.

[3] Ibid, p. 5.

[4] Kasowski, Kevin, "The Costs of Sprawl, Revisited" *Development: The National Growth Management Leadership Project Newsletter*, September, 1992. Cited *in Economic Impacts of Protecting Rivers, Trails, and Greenway Corridors*, National Park Service, Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance, 4th edition, 1995.

[5] *The Cost and Consequences of Suburban Sprawl*, The Sierra Club, August 1998.

[6] Donald Camph, "How Sprawl Costs Us All," *STP Progress*, June 1995.

[7] Phyllis Myers, *Livability at the Ballot Box: State and Local Referenda on Parks, Conservation, and Smarter Growth, Election Day 1998*, The Brookings Institution Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy, January 1999.

[8] Steve Lerner and William Poole, *The Economic Benefits of Parks and Open Space*, The Trust for Public Land, p. 4.

[9] Ibid, p. 8.

[10] *Routt County, CO: Holding the Reins*, National Association of Counties, Joint center for Sustainable Communities, www.naco.org/programs/special/center/routt/routt.htm.

[11] Lerner and Poole, p. 24.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Tom Horton, "Can We Grow Smarter," *Land & People*, Spring 1999.

[14] "Village Creek Regains its Status in Birmingham," Environmental Protection Agency, Office of Solid Waste and Emergency Response, Brownfields, www.epa.gov/swerosps/bf/html-doc/ss_brmng3.htm.

Trails and Greenways
CLEARINGHOUSE

ABOUT THE CLEARINGHOUSE: The Trails and Greenways Clearinghouse provides technical assistance, information resources and referrals to trail and greenway advocates and developers across the nation. Services are available to individuals, government agencies, communities, grassroots organizations and anyone else who is seeking to create or manage trails and greenways. The Clearinghouse is a joint project of Rails-to-Trails Conservancy and The Conservation Fund's American Greenways Program.

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