

Planning A Trails Network



Plan for a Network

Trails have become more common throughout Pennsylvania as communities find ways to convert abandoned rail beds, road shoulders or vacant land into pedestrian corridors that provide public recreation while adding business opportunities and value to nearby real estate. Experience has shown that successful trails are built as part of a community network including trails, paths, and sidewalks, rather than just focusing on one trail at a time.

Addressing a Health Crisis for Children

The U.S. Surgeon General has described obesity as an epidemic that is "the fastest-growing cause of disease and death in America." Since the 1960s, the number of overweight children in the U.S. has tripled to 15 percent, largely due to over eating and a lack of exercise. Municipal planning is an effective tool in reversing this trend, since trails are used for the most popular form of physical activity: walking.

Updating Municipal Ordinances

Trail networks begin with updating municipal plans and ordinances such as the comprehensive plan, the zoning ordinance, the subdivision and land development ordinance, and the official map. This planning ensures that trails will be built as part of a well-conceived network that has been reviewed by the public and approved by local officials. Furthermore, trails that are presented in a plan or ordinance are more likely to be awarded grant funding.

Trails, Paths and Sidewalks

A trail network consists of many types of trails and paths that are all linked together. A paved multi-use trail might split into a bicycling path and a gravel walking path. The walking path may link to a sidewalk grid, while the bicycle path might link to a bicycle route on the shoulder of a road. The components of a network can be built separately over many years and linked together over time.

Linking Destinations

People naturally like to have a destination when they walk or ride. Trails and paths should have a destination such as a downtown area or a municipal or County park. Destinations may include restaurants to serve trail users or rest stops with public restrooms. A destination can be a significant scenic view, a train station or a public school. Destinations can also become economic centers serving trail users, thus making a trail project a spur for economic revitalization.

Design, Security and Maintenance

Like any community construction project, trails need to be well designed, well policed and well maintained. They should be well built and consider the needs of handicapped and elderly users. Municipal trails should be designed with public input to ensure that they are safe and can be accessed by emergency vehicles. Funding must also be set aside to maintain the trail according to a management plan in perpetuity. A trail that is well maintained and free of litter will have more users. More users means more eyes to keep watch and deter vandalism or illegal dumping.

Sensitivity to Landowners

Properties near a trail typically have higher real estate values than ones far from the trail. Adjacent landowners should be involved in the design stage of a trail project. They know the neighborhood and can provide valuable design information such as areas that flood during storms. Local planners should also consider planting shrubs or building gates that define private property adjacent to a trail. High fences should be discouraged, since they are visual buffers that may reduce overall security.

Trail Planning: Define your Terms

There is no single official set of guidelines that can be used to define the terms used in trail planning. For this reason it is important for trail planners to come up with their own definitions. However, trail-planning definitions should be consistent with state agencies and other groups that might provide funding for trails. In Chester County the following terms are generally used.



Trail
A paved facility that has multiple uses including walking and bicycling.



Bike Route
A low volume roadway or roadway shoulder that is used for bicycling.



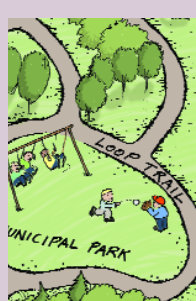
Primary Trail
The major spine of a trail network that serves as a collector for other secondary trails.



Link Trail
A section of trail, which can be quite short, which links two other trails.



Path
A paved or unpaved facility that has only one use, such as a hiking path or an equestrian path.



Loop Trail
A trail that is a closed loop rather than being linear.



Internal Trail or Path
A trail or path that is located within a subdivision, park or preserve.



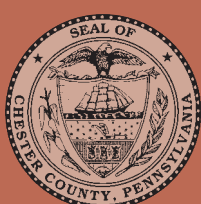
Trail Head
An area with parking and facilities used by trail users to access a trail.

Trail Funding

Trail networks are almost always built over a series of years using a variety of funding sources. A municipality may acquire a trail corridor using a donated rail easement or a gift of land. State or County funds may be used to buy and construct sections of the trail. Homebuilders may build a trail section that links to their subdivision. Non-profit civic groups may build short link trails to connect to larger trails. Even utility companies or PennDOT may offer to build sections as mitigation projects.

Trails in Newly Built Developments

Homebuilders are now building trails within their developments and using trails as a marketing tool to sell their units. Homebuilders should install paved trails and paths rather than using woodchips, which require ongoing maintenance, especially after storms. Municipal planners should require that homebuilders build all trails before or during the construction of the buildings. That way new homebuyers can see the trails that will pass through their community, and not just lines drawn on a plan.



Chester County Board of Commissioners

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Prepared June 2007 by the Chester County Planning Commission in partnership with Chester County Parks and Recreation, Chester County Health Department, and Activate Chester County. Copies of this poster and a trail planning guidebook are available at www.chesco.org/planning.

