



## Urban Trails Building More Active Communities

*An urban trail is a public path that provides a well-maintained corridor through an urban environment. Urban trails allow people to get from one place to another on foot, by bicycle, on roller skates or skateboards, with strollers or in wheelchairs, without feeling any threat from nearby motor vehicles.*

Nearly half of all trips taken in the United States are shorter than three miles<sup>1</sup>—a perfect distance to travel by bicycle or on foot. In many urban areas, however, there aren't enough safe and appealing paths to encourage residents to use active modes of transportation instead of their cars. Urban trails can be a key resource to get people to walk or bicycle more often.

What is an urban trail? An urban trail is a public path that provides a well-maintained corridor through an urban environment. Urban trails allow people to get from one place to another on foot, by bicycle, on roller skates or skateboards, with strollers or in wheelchairs, without feeling any threat from nearby motor vehicles.

What's more, urban trails often provide a greenway that offers other benefits, such as creating a natural storm-water management system, supporting native birds and plants, and providing a nature-oriented respite for children and adults to enjoy.<sup>2</sup>



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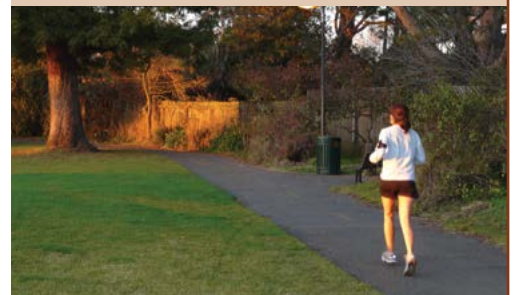
### Benefits of urban trails

Urban trails make walking and bicycling more practical, appealing, and safe. They also encourage active transportation—using physical activity to get where you are going. Among the many benefits of urban trails:<sup>3</sup>

- **Better health.** Americans aren't getting enough physical activity, and the consequences are clear in rising rates of obesity, heart disease, depression, and more.<sup>4</sup> Urban trails offer a free, convenient way for people to make physical activity an integral part of their daily routine, which helps ward off obesity and other chronic diseases while decreasing stress.<sup>5, 6</sup> Less car use also reduces asthma and other conditions related to air pollution.<sup>7</sup>
- **Economic benefits.** Trails revitalize neighborhoods, increase nearby home values, and can bring tourism to an area.<sup>8</sup> They also can benefit local businesses and create jobs.<sup>9</sup> A National Park Service study found that trails in California, Florida, and Iowa pumped millions of dollars into local economies.<sup>10</sup> The Ghost Town Trail in Pennsylvania (see sidebar) brings an estimated \$1.7 million into the local economy from tourism. Similarly, a recent study found that bicycling brings \$1.5 billion to the economy of Wisconsin every year.<sup>11</sup>
- **More choice and more mobility.** Urban trails give people a real choice between walking, biking, taking public transit, and driving. Trails provide a safe way for people, including older adults, children, and people with disabilities, to get where they need to go. For people who don't drive—either by choice or by circumstance—urban trails are an important part of an inviting walking environment that makes it safe and convenient to get around, rather than onerous and dangerous.
- **Better communities.** By increasing the numbers of pedestrians and cyclists, urban trails encourage interaction among neighbors, build community, and decrease social isolation.<sup>12</sup> For example, the Illinois Fox River Trail, 35 miles west of Chicago, has helped convert former manufacturing zones into lush, green, pedestrian-friendly communities with pleasant walkways along the riverbanks, parks, and footbridges.<sup>13</sup>

### The Richmond Greenway

The densely populated, underserved city of Richmond, Calif., is sandwiched between oil refineries and heavy industry, with little open space and few parks.<sup>14, 15</sup> In the early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, a major railroad brought freight and workers to Richmond shipyards and throughout the city. Today, the abandoned railway corridor is being transformed into a vibrant three-mile bicycle and pedestrian trail. The Richmond Greenway brings 32 new acres of open space to the community and provides residents with opportunities to walk, bike, and socialize, as well as to observe wildlife and grow food in nearby community gardens.<sup>16</sup> The completed greenway will connect with other trails and key public transportation access points.<sup>17</sup>



### The Ghost Town Trail

When the coal mining industry of southwestern Pennsylvania collapsed during the Great Depression, rural mining towns of the Blacklick Valley were left with an abandoned railway and a stagnant economy. In the 1980s, local residents advocated to turn unused railway lines into a recreational trail. With the help of a local salvage company, federal funding, and private donations, a 36-mile stretch of railway became a crushed limestone trail that leads through the valley, an area rich with natural and human history. The trail serves an estimated 75,000 annual users and brings an estimated \$1.7 million into the local economy.<sup>18</sup>

- **More sustainable environment.** Studies show that the presence of urban trails actually encourages people to walk or bicycle rather than drive.<sup>20</sup> By reducing the number of miles that people drive, urban trails help limit air pollution, water pollution, and the greenhouse gas emissions that contribute to climate change. Urban trails also can assist in storm-water management by providing natural filtration and storage.<sup>21</sup>
- **Safe bicycling.** Urban trails provide a safe place for children and adults to develop bicycling skills, and significantly increase the numbers of people using bicycles for transportation. For example, one study looked at the impact of bicycle infrastructure improvements made in the Twin Cities during the 1990s. New on-street bicycle lanes and off-street bicycle trails were created to provide improved access to the major employment centers of downtown Minneapolis and the University of Minnesota, which are about one mile apart. The improvements contributed to a 17.5% increase in bicycle commuting.<sup>22</sup>

### Urban Trail Location

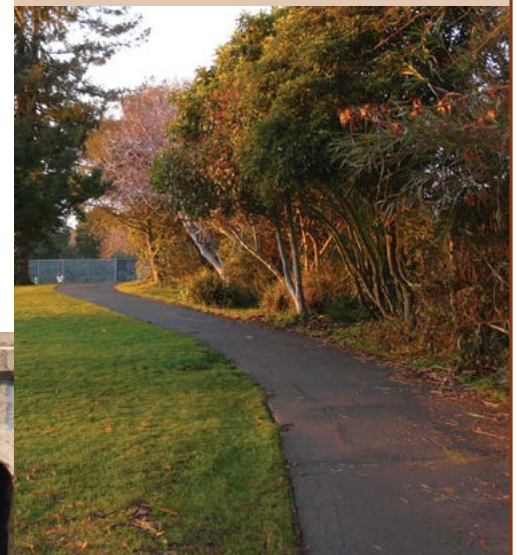
Urban trails are often constructed alongside existing roads, near streams and waterways, and along utility rights of way.<sup>23</sup> Abandoned railroad tracks provide an even better location, avoiding many of the tricky design challenges of these other locations. The most successful urban trails are long, narrow, linear corridors with at least one paved walkway, providing connections between significant destinations such as housing, shopping areas, jobs, and schools.<sup>24</sup>

### Conclusion

In light of the many benefits provided by urban trails, communities should think creatively about how to incorporate these key assets into local neighborhoods.

### Seattle's Chief Sealth Trail

Seattle residents had long pushed for a trail along Martin Luther King Jr. Way, a thoroughfare that runs through low-income neighborhoods on the southeastern side of the city. In 2004, the developer of a light rail project offered to build the trail as a way to recycle excavated soils and rubble from the rail project. The developer saved money by avoiding disposal costs for the materials, and the community gained the long-sought trail. The Chief Sealth Trail is a unique asset that is built almost entirely of recycled materials and provides a valued green space connecting homes, schools, and businesses.<sup>19</sup>



### More Resources

- The Rails to Trails Conservancy works to create trails from former rail lines across the country. They have a rich array of resources, including information on the benefits of urban trails: [www.railstotrails.org](http://www.railstotrails.org).
- American Trails also has a wide variety of resources on urban trails and transportation: [www.americantrails.org/resources/trans/index.html](http://www.americantrails.org/resources/trans/index.html).

- <sup>1</sup> FHWA. *Federal Highway Administration University Course on Bicycle and Pedestrian Transportation: Student Workbook* (second edition). Report No. HRT-05-133. 2006, at p. 34 (citing NHTS 2001). Available at: [www.fhwa.dot.gov/publications/research/safety/pedbike/05085/pdf/combinedlo.pdf](http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/publications/research/safety/pedbike/05085/pdf/combinedlo.pdf).
- <sup>2</sup> American Planning Association. "How Cities Use Parks for Green Infrastructure." Available at: [www.planning.org/cityparks/briefingpapers/greeninfrastructure.htm](http://www.planning.org/cityparks/briefingpapers/greeninfrastructure.htm); Frumkin H, Frank L, and Jackson R. *Urban Sprawl and Public Health: Designing, Planning, and Building for Healthy Communities*. Washington: Island Press. 2004, at p. 139.
- <sup>3</sup> See Wisconsin State Network Plan. "The Benefits of Trails." 2001. Available at: <http://dnr.wi.gov/org/land/parks/reports/trails/benefits.html>.
- <sup>4</sup> Frumkin H, Frank L, and Jackson R. *supra* note 2, at pp. 90-107.
- <sup>5</sup> Estimates of deaths related to obesity place the annual number at around 280,000 deaths. Allison DB, Fontaine KR, Manson JE, Stevens J, VanItallie TB. "Annual deaths attributable to obesity in the United States", *JAMA*. 282:1530-1538, 1999.
- <sup>6</sup> Every additional hour spent in a car is associated with a 6 percent increase in the odds of being obese, while each additional kilometer walked per day correlates with almost a 5 percent reduction in the odds of being obese. Frank L, Andresen M, and Schmid T. "Obesity relationships with community design, physical activity, and time spent in cars." *American Journal of Preventative Medicine*, 27(2): 87-96, 2004; see also U.S. Department of Health and Human Services., *Healthy Lifestyles and Disease Prevention Media Campaign* 13, 2004.
- <sup>7</sup> See Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *Important Asthma Triggers*. Available at: [www.cdc.gov/asthma/triggers.html#outdoor](http://www.cdc.gov/asthma/triggers.html#outdoor) (listing outdoor air pollution as a trigger of asthma).
- <sup>8</sup> Rails to Trails Conservancy. "From Town Trails to TrOD: Trails and Economic Development." 2007. Available at: [www.railstotrails.org/resources/documents/whatwedo/TrailLink%2007%20program\\_Economic%20Develop.pdf](http://www.railstotrails.org/resources/documents/whatwedo/TrailLink%2007%20program_Economic%20Develop.pdf); see also, e.g., Rails to Trails Conservancy. "Trail of the Month: Pennsylvania's Ghost Town Trail." 2011. Available at: [www.railstotrails.org/news/recurringFeatures/trailMonth/index.html?utm\\_source=homepage&utm\\_medium=link&utm\\_term=TOTM\\_bucket&utm\\_campaign=trailink.com](http://www.railstotrails.org/news/recurringFeatures/trailMonth/index.html?utm_source=homepage&utm_medium=link&utm_term=TOTM_bucket&utm_campaign=trailink.com) (study finding that the more than 75,000 annual users of the trail bring \$1.7 million a year into the local economy).
- <sup>9</sup> Rails to Trails Conservancy. "From Town Trails to TrOD: Trails and Economic Development." 2007. Available at: [www.railstotrails.org/resources/documents/whatwedo/TrailLink%2007%20program\\_Economic%20Develop.pdf](http://www.railstotrails.org/resources/documents/whatwedo/TrailLink%2007%20program_Economic%20Develop.pdf); see also Wisconsin State Network Plan, "The Benefits of Trails," *supra*.
- <sup>10</sup> See New York Parks and Conservation Association, Business Council of New York State. *Greenways and Trails: Bringing Economic Benefits to New York*. Available at: [www.geo.hunter.cuny.edu/~mclarke/economic\\_benefits\\_of\\_greenways.pdf](http://www.geo.hunter.cuny.edu/~mclarke/economic_benefits_of_greenways.pdf).
- <sup>11</sup> Grabow M, Hahn M, and Whited M. *Valuing Bicycling's Economic and Health Impacts in Wisconsin*. Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies, Center for Sustainability and the Global Environment, University of Wisconsin Madison. 2010. Available at: [www.bfw.org/uploads/media/Valuing\\_Bicycling\\_in\\_Wisconsin\\_Final\\_Report\\_January\\_2010%5B1%5D.pdf](http://www.bfw.org/uploads/media/Valuing_Bicycling_in_Wisconsin_Final_Report_January_2010%5B1%5D.pdf). See also Bicycle Federation Wisconsin. "Bicycling boosts Wisconsin's economy by \$1.5 billion annually." Available at: [www.bfw.org/education/index.php?category\\_id=4746](http://www.bfw.org/education/index.php?category_id=4746).
- <sup>12</sup> Frumkin H, Frank L and Jackson R., *supra* note 2, at pp. 162-185.
- <sup>13</sup> See Rails to Trails Conservancy. "Trail of the Month: Illinois' Fox River Trail." 2011. Available at: [www.railstotrails.org/news/recurringFeatures/trailMonth/archives/1103.html](http://www.railstotrails.org/news/recurringFeatures/trailMonth/archives/1103.html).
- <sup>14</sup> See Morgan Quitno at [www.morganquitno.com/cit05pop.htm](http://www.morganquitno.com/cit05pop.htm) (ranking Richmond as the 12th most dangerous city in the U.S. overall).
- <sup>15</sup> Richmond has just three acres of open space per 1,000 residents. This is one-fifth the amount of open space recommended by the National Recreation and Park Association. Rails to Trails. *A Quest for Greener Pastures: California's Richmond Greenway*. 2009, p.5. Available at: [www.urbantilth.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/05/2009-green-issue\\_low-res-pdf.pdf](http://www.urbantilth.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/05/2009-green-issue_low-res-pdf.pdf).
- <sup>16</sup> Rails to Trails. *A Quest for Greener Pastures: California's Richmond Greenway*. 2009, p.5. Available at: [www.urbantilth.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/05/2009-green-issue\\_low-res-pdf.pdf](http://www.urbantilth.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/05/2009-green-issue_low-res-pdf.pdf).
- <sup>17</sup> For background information on this project, see TrailLink.com. "Richmond Greenway." Available at: [www.trailink.com/trail/richmond-greenway.aspx](http://www.trailink.com/trail/richmond-greenway.aspx); City of Richmond. "What is the Richmond Greenway Project?" Available at: [www.ci.richmond.ca.us/index.aspx?NID=1118](http://www.ci.richmond.ca.us/index.aspx?NID=1118) (and link to powerpoint presentation); Rails to Trails Conservancy. "Richmond Greenway." 1997-2007. Available at: [www.railstotrails.org/ourwork/wherework/westernalaskahawaii/projects/ca-richmond-richmondgreenway.html](http://www.railstotrails.org/ourwork/wherework/westernalaskahawaii/projects/ca-richmond-richmondgreenway.html).
- <sup>18</sup> Rails to Trails Conservancy. "Trail of the Month: Pennsylvania's Ghost Town Trail." June 2011. Available at: [www.railstotrails.org/news/recurringFeatures/trailMonth/archives/1106.html](http://www.railstotrails.org/news/recurringFeatures/trailMonth/archives/1106.html).
- <sup>19</sup> Seattle Department of Transportation. "Chief Sealth Trail." 2007. Available at: [www.seattle.gov/transportation/chiefsealthtrail.htm](http://www.seattle.gov/transportation/chiefsealthtrail.htm).
- <sup>20</sup> New infrastructure can provide what is known as induced travel demand. See Groth P, Rawlings M, Nadkarni N, Riley M, and Shoup L. "White Paper: Quantifying the Greenhouse Gas Benefits of Urban Parks," *Trust for Public Land*. Aug. 2008. Available at: [www.tpl.org/content\\_documents/GHG%20and%20Parks.pdf](http://www.tpl.org/content_documents/GHG%20and%20Parks.pdf).
- <sup>21</sup> The ecological benefits of green infrastructure, including for storm-water and flood management, are the subject of increasing recognition by planners and environmentalists alike. The EPA catalogues a number of these resources: U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. *Managing Wet Weather With Green Infrastructure: Types, Applications, and Design Approaches to Manage Wet Weather*. Available at: <http://cfpub.epa.gov/npdes/greeninfrastructure/technology.cfm#greenstreets> (see "Green Streets & Highways"). See also, e.g., American Planning Association. *How Cities Use Parks for . . . Green Infrastructure*. Available at: [www.planning.org/cityparks/briefingpapers/greeninfrastructure.htm](http://www.planning.org/cityparks/briefingpapers/greeninfrastructure.htm); EPA-NOAA Smart Growth Implementation Assistance for Coastal Communities For Sussex County, Delaware. *Protecting Water Quality With Smart Growth Strategies and Natural Stormwater Management in Sussex County, Delaware*. 2009. Available at: [www.epa.gov/smartgrowth/pdf/2009\\_0106\\_sussex\\_county.pdf](http://www.epa.gov/smartgrowth/pdf/2009_0106_sussex_county.pdf); National Trails Training Partnership. "Benefits of Trails and Greenways." Available at: [www.americantrails.org/resources/benefits/BenefitsGrnwy.html](http://www.americantrails.org/resources/benefits/BenefitsGrnwy.html).
- <sup>22</sup> Barnes G, Thompson K, and Krizek K. *A Longitudinal Analysis of the Effect of Bicycle Facilities on Commute Mode Share*. 2005. Available at: [www.hhh.umn.edu/img/assets/20163/effect\\_bike\\_facilities\\_mode\\_share\\_krizek.pdf](http://www.hhh.umn.edu/img/assets/20163/effect_bike_facilities_mode_share_krizek.pdf) (full article); see also Barnes G & Krizek K. *Tools for Predicting Usage and Benefits of Urban Bicycle Network Improvements*. Minnesota Department of Transportation, Research Services Section. 2005. Available at: [www.americantrails.org/resources/trans/toolsbikem05.html](http://www.americantrails.org/resources/trans/toolsbikem05.html) (based on same).
- <sup>23</sup> For images of urban trails, see: <http://atfiles.org/files/pdf/EcosUrbanTrails08.pdf>.
- <sup>24</sup> See Groth et al., *supra* note 17; American Planning Association. "How Cities Use Parks for Green Infrastructure," *supra*. Available at: [www.planning.org/cityparks/briefingpapers/greeninfrastructure.htm](http://www.planning.org/cityparks/briefingpapers/greeninfrastructure.htm).



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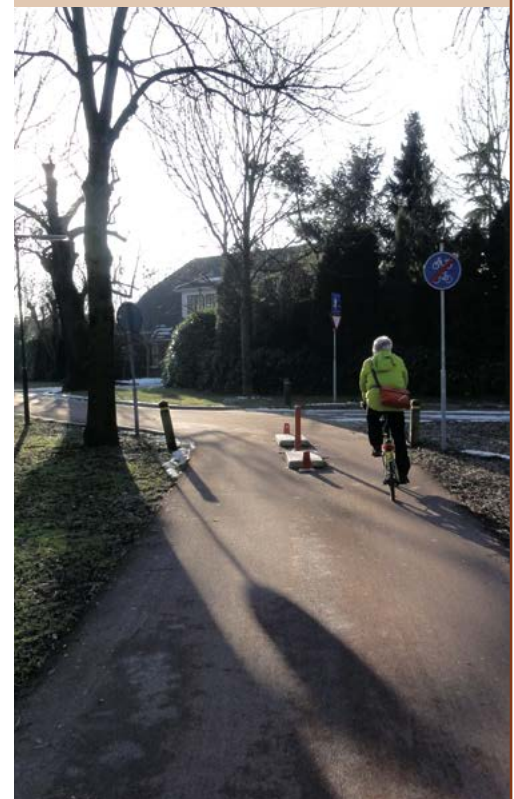
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