



Multi-use Trails —Ensuring Successful Regional Planning

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Local agencies throughout the state are recognizing the significance of trail linkages from downtown centers, community destinations or from residential areas – as functional transportation routes and for their highly sought after recreational and health benefits. For many of these communities, a multi-use trail system functions as a recreational amenity that serves a wide range of users — equestrians, bicyclists, walkers, joggers, in-line skaters, children in strollers, people using mobility devices (such as wheelchairs), cross country skiers, hikers, wildlife viewers, and anglers.

Many local governments are noting an increase in user demands for developing multi-use, regional trails that in addition to providing recreational experiences and places to exercise also serve as important transportation linkages. It is well known that properly located trail systems can buffer adjoining land uses and help define and shape community boundaries. In addition, urban trails benefit the local economy by attracting tourists from outside of the region.

The trail system, if planned carefully, will assist to reduce traffic congestion, promote energy conservation, and improve the regions air quality.

A successful example of the regional planning approach is the highly acclaimed Jediah Smith Memorial Trail (American River Park Parkway) in Sacramento County. This 32-mile miniature road winds from Folsom to downtown Sacramento and connects to several other trail systems in the Sacramento region.

Another example of a well-thought out regional trail system is the Monterey Bay Coastal Trail. Twenty-nine miles in length, it winds through several Monterey County communities – Pacific Grove, Monterey, Sand City, Marina, and Seaside. The Monterey Peninsula Regional Park District embarked on an ambitious course to acquire the abandoned Southern Pacific Railroad right-of-way that ceased serving the peninsula in the 1950s. Today the asphalt trail allows for the casual walker and wildlife viewer to the more intent bicyclist on his or her way to work in downtown Monterey.

The California Department of Parks and Recreation administers many grant funds; check out www.parks.ca.gov or call the Office of Grants and Local Assistance, (916) 653-8057 for more information.

Fortunately, potential funding is available to regional planners through Proposition 12 and Proposition 40, the Environmental Enhancement and Mitigation Program (EEMP), National Recreation Trail Program (NRTP) and TEA-21. In addition, grant programs under the Habitat Conservation Fund (HCF) and the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) are available. Projects that show a direct linkage to other trail systems often rate more favorably than those submitted as stand-alone trails.

What makes a regional multi-use trail successful?

The answer: Good, solid planning started well in advance.

A well designed trail decreases long-term maintenance costs and protects natural and cultural resources. The most successful multi-use regional trails are located along corridors that have the same trip origins and destinations as



Trail planners should consider linking neighborhoods, parks, and open space areas with schools, business sites, employment centers, and other regional destinations.

motorists. For example, bicyclists and walkers generally need to get to and from the same facilities, community service areas (e.g., libraries, schools, shopping centers), and places of work as those using cars or taking public transportation. Of course, access, climate, and the perceived safety of the trail user will affect the success of the trail.

Many local recreation and park agency planners have worked hard to create trail systems that meet the recreational and destination needs of a diverse and insistent population. New trails may be so popular that they will fill to capacity within a few years after opening, leaving trail operators at a loss to accommodate the flood of users. Other aspects change as well, including the equipment and needs of the trail user. In the mid-1980s, mountain bikes and in-line skates introduced a whole new set of opportunities and user needs. Today, planners are learning more about the special needs of those using scooters, skateboards and racing wheelchairs. Undoubtedly the future will present new recreational variations not even considered today.



Three Stages of Regional Trail Planning

Trail planning can be divided into three distinct and fundamental stages:

1. Visualizing the "Trail Plan"

This early in the planning phase, technical matters such as identifying the general location of the trail corridor, agencies that would be involved, potential funding sources, trail layout, design, and trail use are carefully analyzed. Do remember to include ADA trail standards for pedestrian use trails; check out www.access-board.gov/PUBS/outdoor-rec-rpt.htm for more information. Community participation is absolutely vital and will help to create a sense of community ownership of the project (more on this below). To be effective, regional planners must use trail user studies and seek community input at public meetings.

A general time frame for developing a simple trail plan can be as lengthy as 24 months, depending on the complexity of the situation.

2. Developing and Retaining Community Partnerships

After the initial planning process, the master trail plan will need to be incorporated into the community's general plan. It is very important to form a coalition of diverse groups of citizens and potential trail users early on, preventing any one group from taking ownership of the project. Experienced trail planners know that broad-based support is needed to:

- Provide a better understanding of the needs of the community;
- Understand different user groups interests and concerns;

- Develop compromises among groups that have different priorities, needs, and interests; and
- Generate ideas for its design, location, and uses.

When a city or county agency decides to amend its general plan to include a regional master trail plan, it will develop and follow a set of planning procedures in accordance with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). The purpose of these procedures is to identify and disclose to decision-makers and the general public the potential environmental consequences of adopting the master trail plan. CEQA is most effective and efficient when the public is actively involved.

3. Going for it – Implementing the plan

Issues such as liability, CEQA compliance, easements, operation and management policies (adopt-a-trail, organizing volunteer maintenance programs, jurisdiction, and management of various segments of the trail) are the focus of this planning phase.



It is critical to develop a detailed feasibility plan on how to obtain financing to ensure that a trail plan will be implemented following its inclusion in the general plan. Solid planning and allocated funding go hand-in-hand. A winning grant application includes proof that all aspects of technical planning and community partnerships are covered.

Finally, here are the “Top 10 Tips for Successful Trail Planning” (many of these suggestions are from the Department’s *“Guidelines for Incorporating Trails into General Plan,”* 1990).

The following are recommendations for the initial stages of trail planning that will likely result in increased usefulness and enjoyment of future trails:

1. Trails and staging areas need to be easily accessible to the public in order for the trails to receive high use.
2. Trail systems should connect existing open space areas and community recreational amenities, employment centers and shopping areas.
3. The plan should provide a regional approach (linkages) if possible in order to provide neighboring communities with guidance in their trail planning process.
4. Trail design should be incorporated into plans for natural drainage channels, street rights-of-way, and landscape corridors, power right-of-ways, levees, and other open spaces.
5. A recreation needs analysis (a survey of local attitudes and opinions toward leisure activities) should be conducted in order to determine the recreational preferences and the transportation needs of the area.
6. Trail plans should list priorities for implementing new trails and take into consideration previously constructed trails and regionally planned trails.
7. Trails that are accessible to the disabled or are at least barrier-free should be clearly designated on maps and with signs.

8. Trail plans should be incorporated into plans for new transportation structures such as roads, bridges, and overpasses.
9. When possible, trail systems should offer loops, allowing the individual to avoid backtracking.
10. Trail design should consider aesthetic, educational, scientific, historical, scenic and cultural features of interest.