

# **Grand Plans, Trails to Nowhere**

An Analysis of Multi-Use Trails in Saratoga Springs, NY

Nate Blanks '13, Sarah Marks '13 and Dan Raudonis '13

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Professors Bob Turner and Josh Ness

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## **Introduction**

America is experiencing a growing demand for trails that create recreational and social spaces as well as commuting opportunities in a vehicle-dominated system. As much as half of all households in the United States wish they lived in a walkable urban space, but only about five to ten percent of all urban places are considered walkable, or able to satisfy most of peoples' needs within a half-mile radius (Leinberger, 2008). To address this demand, cities across the country from Jackson Hole, Wyoming to Bentonville, Arkansas have implemented extensive and celebrated trail networks (Olson, 2013). One popular form of these trails, known as multi-use trails, are paved or gravel paths that can be used for a wide variety of recreational and transportation activities such as biking, running, skiing, and in some cases snowmobiles and ATVs. Multi-use trails have seen an explosion in popularity in recent years. The Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, a prominent trail advocacy group, estimated only 200 known multi-use trails existed nationwide in 1986, compared to over 1,600 today (About Us, 2013). These trails have been built in communities ranging from large cities like Seattle, WA to small cities like Breckenridge, CO and are becoming more popular every year.

### *Benefits of Multi-Use Trails*

This growth in popularity is partially due to changes in how trails are perceived. While most communities previously saw trails as a luxury, they are now beginning to recognize a growing body of research that demonstrates considerable benefits associated with trails that make them an integral part of urban development. Specifically, trails stimulate the local economy, entice homeowners to settle in a community, and provide a safe and healthy means of transportation.

Trails attract tourists to a community, injecting money into the local economy and spurring economic development. A 2006 Outdoor Industry Foundation study found that “‘active outdoor recreation’ contributes \$730 billion annually to the U.S economy, supports 6.5 million jobs, and generates \$88 billion in annual state and national tax revenue” (American Trails Organization, 2006). Much of this growth is driven by tourists visiting trails from out of town. For instance, after the opening of Leadville, Colorado’s 12-mile Mineral Belt Trail, sales tax revenues increased by 19%, and many restaurants and hotels reported visitors coming specifically due to the trail. Similarly, the Katy Trail in Dallas, Texas generates approximately \$2 million for the local economy from the roughly 300,000 people who visit it yearly (Rails To Trails, 2013). The economic benefits of trail construction make it more appealing for communities to build trails and to expand upon existing trail networks.

The rise of trail networks has also been seen as a way to draw residents to a community. According to the National Association of Homebuilders, “trails consistently remain the number one community amenity sought by prospective homeowners” (Macdonald, 2011). Residents living next to trails have noticed positive impacts from their close proximity, including health benefits, recreational opportunities, and the chance to get in touch with nature (Sjoquist, 2003). As a result, real estate agents use proximity to trails as a selling point, and being located close to trails helps raise property values (AHS; Sjoquist, 2003; Cortright, 2009). Communities that have built trails have seen this demand manifest itself in an improved real estate market. One study along Wisconsin’s Brown County Mountain Bay Trail found homes that were for sale along the trail sold in a shorter amount of time and at an average price of 9% higher than similar homes not along the trail (Wisconsin, 1998). These studies show that trails can add economic value to

communities in a multitude of ways, from bringing in visitors to raising property values in the town.

Lastly, communities are increasingly integrating trails into their transportation networks as a safer and healthier form of transportation. This change in infrastructure is driven by resident demand for improved bicycle and pedestrian facilities. A 1992 study found that “more than half of America's 82 million cyclists would pedal to work if there were safe bike paths or bike lanes on roads and highways” (Kahlenberg, 1992). Since then, cities around the country have improved their bicycle facilities and commuters have responded. The 2010 Census found that the share of Americans commuting by bike grew by 47% from 2000-2010 (The League of American Bicyclists). Bicyclists are not the only ones who have benefited from this change in philosophy. A vast network of trails ensures safer routes for pedestrians and children, who can use the paths to get to school and other destinations (Macdonald, 2011). Providing non-motorized transportation options can also have a myriad health benefits, including reducing obesity and type II diabetes (City of Seattle, 2007). For these reasons, cities are creating bike plans for their communities, and non-motorized transportation are beginning to factor into development strategies.

#### *Challenges for Building Multi-Use Trails*

Despite the potentially positive impacts of multi-use trails, some communities have been reluctant to build trail networks due to concerns such as minority opposition and funding constraints. While studies show that multi-use trails are often viewed positively by residents, they are sometimes opposed by a minority of those living adjacent to the project, especially during the planning and implementation process. Trail development often runs into issues with “not in my backyard” responses, characterized by unwillingness on the part of individuals to

support a policy that benefits the public at the cost of their own interests (Hermansson, 2007). Residents living in close proximity to trails often worry that the increased traffic near their area could lead to more litter and higher crime rates, along with a reduction in property values (Turco et al. 1998). Proponents of trails note that these fears are often unfounded, and many studies support this notion. Regardless, it is necessary to recognize the difficulties that such perceptions create. For planning new trails, “resistance from even a few opponents can result in both bureaucratic inactivity and financial difficulties” (Flink et al. 2001). Consequently, some communities are wary of building new trails for fear of upsetting the neighboring landowners. However, once the trails are built, residents are often very pleased with the trail and enjoy having it in such close proximity, where it is easily accessible.

Funding has also been a significant barrier to trail development in communities because trails often represent a significant financial investment for a community. After the initial cost of purchasing the land, the cost of building a trail can vary based on a variety of factors, including whether the trail needs to be cleared, what surface is being used to pave the trail, and who is doing the construction (North Bonneville Shoreline Trail Master Plan). For some materials, these costs can range from \$80,000 per mile for soil cement to \$1.75 million per mile for boardwalks (“Trail Surfaces”). Physical obstacles such as rivers, major roads, and highways require additional funding for crosswalks, bridges, underpasses, and other infrastructure. Moreover, after the trail is built there are constant maintenance requirements from repaving to clearing debris. Ultimately, however, trails struggle to expand because they are not considered a priority. To be granted funding, trails must compete with other city projects, including roads and highways, which are seen as more vital and therefore more likely to be funded. As a result, trails development are commonly limited by the availability of funding.

### *Multi-Use Trails in Saratoga Springs*

When creating trails, cities often weigh the potential or perceived benefits of trails against other municipal priorities and the fear of public backlash. This can often result in failed or underwhelming trail networks. In Saratoga Springs, a city of 26,586 (2010 Census) located in Saratoga County, NY, city leaders have recognized trails as a key component of development, but the city's actual commitment to constructing trails has not matched its rhetoric. Saratoga County had an annual population growth rate of 10.7% from 2000 to 2010, making it one of the fastest growing counties in New York (Green Infrastructure Plan, 2006). This high growth rate, combined with seasonal tourism, makes Saratoga Springs a seemingly ideal place for multi-use trails.

As early as 1997, city officials announced their hopes for an eventual 50 to 100 mile town wide trail system (Getting around, 1997). More recently, the 2006 Green Infrastructure Plan encouraged the county to place an increased focus on trails and protecting open space (Green Infrastructure Plan, 2006). The city's Comprehensive Plan, last updated in 2008, puts an emphasis on sustainability, and directs city officials to "encourage non-motor vehicle connectors - sidewalks, walking trails and bicycle paths - to promote interaction among the various neighborhoods" (Comprehensive Plan 2008). Private interests have also recognized the importance of trails in the development of the city. In its 2011-2014 strategic plan, the Saratoga County Chamber of Commerce listed the development of a linked hiking/biking trail system as one of its priorities and its president recently called trails "one of the pieces that provides that balance between economic development and quality of life" (Saratoga County Chamber, 2011; McCarty, 2013)

However, actual trail development has been slow. The city currently only has two paved multi-use trails usable by bikers and pedestrians: Railroad Run (0.5 mi) and Spring Run (1.5 mi) (Shown in Figure 1). These two trails are separated by miles of roads that are unsuitable for bikes, rendering the trails impractical for long-distance travel. The city has had more success creating unpaved nature trails, but these are similarly disconnected. Thus, despite the city's aspirations, trail development has not lived up to the expectations.

### *Evaluating Multi-Use Trails*

It is unclear why Saratoga Springs has been unable to achieve its vision for more trails. In order to answer this question, this study analyzes the implementation of multi-use trails in Saratoga Springs by studying past and current efforts to create trails. While our primary focus is the city of Saratoga Springs, we did look to the county for greater perspective and context. By studying existing trails in Saratoga Springs and Saratoga County, we hope to determine the major barriers to trail implementation in Saratoga Springs and how they can be overcome. Ultimately, the findings of this study will offer recommendations for better implementation and management of both existing and future trails in Saratoga Springs.

One such trail is the Saratoga Springs Greenbelt plan that Alta Planning is currently developing. The plan calls for a ten mile looped trail around the city, connecting locations such as Skidmore College, Saratoga Spa State Park, and the YMCA with existing trails and downtown Saratoga Springs (Shown in Figure 2). This plan could have an incredibly positive impact on the city; it would allow for easier transportation opportunities, which would greatly reduce the amount of cars traversing downtown, and would better connect the existing trails. Our hope is to use the conclusions at the end of this study to aid in the planning and creation process of the Greenbelt Plan.

## **Methods**

In order to make a thorough recommendation for future projects, we had to look to a variety of sources to find information. We talked with a multitude of decision makers and arranged their points by theme. These decision makers included city and county planners, government supervisors, a Department of Public Works (DPW) commissioner, and non-profit trail advocates. Additionally, we spoke with various homeowners and businesses along the Zim Smith and Railroad Run trails. They provided us with specific information regarding the positives and negatives in being located adjacent to multi-use trails. We also studied the history of four multi-use trails in the county. This research provides insight into what types of trails have been constructed, when they were completed, how they were funded, and how long they are. By incorporating these case studies and trailside interviews, we can compare decision maker perceptions of how multi-use trails get done with the historical and current realities. Combined, these sources of information allow us to understand the process of trail creation independent of individual bias.

## **Results and Discussion**

### *Perceptions of Decision Makers*

The planning and implementation of multi-use trails involves many different stakeholders and parties coming together to make them a reality. We met with a number of decision makers involved in the process of multi-use trail creation, including government officials, both current and retired, members of nonprofits, and private trail advocates. Typically, our semi-structured interviews lasted anywhere from a half hour to two hours and we tried to balance asking purposeful questions with maintaining an open dialogue. Despite talking with people of differing positions, all the questions focused on barriers to trail implementation, benefits and drawbacks of

the trails, as well as the public interactions with the process. More specifically, three questions remained consistent: 1. Do you think Saratoga County/Springs has a successful trail network? 2. What are the barriers in the way as well as opportunities for implementing more multi-use trails? 3. How would you gauge the public perception surrounding multi-use trails in the county/city? These questions provided us with information to compare and contrast the different decision makers' opinions.

We also attended a wide variety of city meetings, ranging from Saratoga County City Council meetings to Sustainable Saratoga meetings. By doing so, we were able to engage with community members in an open forum, acquire new contacts, and discuss our project with people we would not otherwise meet. During both our structured interviews and informal conversations, we paid special attention to response bias considering our position as college students and outsiders.

We also drew upon past trail implementation research to influence our questions. From these conversations, we have recognized five major themes that are important in the trail implementation process: planning, public/private partnerships, government will, funding, and public opinion. Most decision makers agreed successful trails had elements of proper planning and partnerships, as well as public engagement. Meanwhile, government will, public opposition, and funding were seen as common barriers to trail creation. Furthermore, nearly everyone we spoke with was positive about the current situation, saying there has been a great deal of progress in the last 10-15 years, and were optimistic about the future of multi-use trails.

### Planning

Planning is important in the trail process because it serves both as a means of engaging outside parties and as a tool for incrementally progressing trail creation. Trail creators believed

that trails had a better chance of succeeding if there was a documented plan outlining where the trail would go. One of the leaders of the Greenbelt Plan, Jeff Olson, believes that a plan helps to build a coalition between public and private support because it puts out an idea that everyone can latch on to (Olson, 2013). If a plan is adopted, then the planning board must consider it publicly, allowing for greater citizen involvement (SWNA, 2013). Allowing citizens and outside parties to get involved can dispel the fears of the unknown that surround trail development, resulting in a much smoother process.

Establishing a plan also facilitates land acquisition and trail construction. Planning allows non-profits like Saratoga PLAN, along with city and county officials to communicate with key landholders to gain permission to put part of the trail on their property (SWNA, 2013). As land along a proposed trail route becomes available for sale, trail creators can be ready to purchase it or place an easement upon it, allowing for future trail development (Gordon, 2013). Because of this, creators can work incrementally to progress the trail forward as lands become available and opportunities arise. Unfortunately, more often than not, well established plans are not created, and the ones that do exist leverage small improvements. Andy Fyfe, of Saratoga PLAN explains, “No one plans adequately, they just want their name in the paper,” and trails suffer as a result.

### Public/Private Partnerships

Partnerships between the government, the private sector, and the nonprofit sector were seen as an important facilitator for trail creation and maintenance. To acquire land for trails, the county often works with electric companies, sewage companies, and railroad companies to secure right-of-ways and occasionally to clear land (Veitch, 2013). This cooperation allows the government to acquire land and construct trails for much less cost than if it were to act independently. Nonprofits such as Saratoga PLAN have also been a key part of trail development

efforts. PLAN organizes a trail committee that meets monthly, bringing together government officials, citizens, and members of horse and snowmobile groups. By providing this forum, Saratoga PLAN allows a space to force planning, build public support, and keep trails on the public agenda. Public-private partnerships continue to be important after the trail has been constructed. Snowmobile clubs have been instrumental in winter maintenance for trails in the county, providing the service at no cost to the government (Veitch, 2013). Partnerships allow trail creators to make progress beyond the government's capacity.

### Government Will

Government will was seen as a major barrier to trail creation, despite recent changes in how trails are being perceived. According to Matt Veitch, County Supervisor for Saratoga Springs, "a lot of times in government when you're doing something new you get a lot of resistance because it's not what they're used to be doing" (Veitch, 2013). Big, innovative ideas, like trails, represent dangers to Saratoga politicians and they want to see other communities do it first before taking on this perceived risk. Jim Letts, CEO of the Saratoga YMCA and prominent trails advocate, noted that the city government was initially reluctant to support trails and was only willing to do so once they witnessed their success in other communities (Letts, 2013). In many cases, this reluctance is caused by fears of public backlash, while in others it is simply a matter of not wanting to spend the money.

Ultimately, trails are undervalued by the leaders of government, who continue to view them as a luxury instead of as a driver of economic growth. Though he considers himself a proponent of trails, former planner Larry Gordon subscribes to this view, saying "open space is a luxury and economic development is more important than open space" (Gordon, 2013). This

idea, which views funding trails and promoting economic development as mutually exclusive, often results in the failure of trails at the expense of other projects.

### Funding

Because multi-use trails are not considered a priority on the municipal and county level, funding was cited as another issue facing trail creation. Consequently, much of the funding for trail projects would need to come from state and federal grants, placing trails in direct competition with other, higher priority transportation projects. According to Larry Gordon, every year the number of competitors for these grants grows, while the pool of grant money diminishes (Gordon, 2013). Kate Maynard, principal planner for Saratoga Springs, explained that there are currently significant infrastructure needs in the state, including many roads built back in the 1930s that are in need of refurbishment (Maynard, 2013). Therefore, funds are spent preserving old infrastructure, not creating new infrastructure.

Despite the lack of funds, many trail advocates remained optimistic that funding could be acquired. Jeff Olson is adamant that “funding will find the good ideas,” and that it is important to plan first and worry about funding later (Olson, 2013). Similarly, Maynard believes that there are numerous sources of money and that it is important to attempt to draw from as many sources as possible in order to improve the odds of receiving funding (Maynard, 2013).

### Public Opinion

Often public opinion was viewed as a double-edged sword when it came to trail creation. On the one hand, in the words of Kate Maynard, “if there is sufficient public support, it can push decision makers to take action.” Many of these trails are devised by local citizens who volunteer their time over the years. Groups like Saratoga PLAN have very few full time employees so they rely on community members to influence particular stakeholders. Zimri Smith, whom the Zim

Smith trails is named after, dedicated much of his life to historic preservation and trails, and helped gain momentum for future trails by taking action like starting the Friends of Saratoga Battlefield group (Post, 2012).

On the other hand, decision makers often have a perceived notion that the public is generally hesitant to support trails due to issues like privacy, safety, and financial reasons. This belief is founded in some truth, as the Southwest Neighborhood Association (SWNA) explained, some community members view trails as a waste of money, worry that they would raise their property taxes if built, and are scared trails will attract undesirables (SWNA, 2013). Although most residents are in favor of trails, a few concerned members of the public can resist efforts to establish trails, making it more difficult to acquire land or raise funding. Planners and decision makers in favor of trails believed that, despite these initial misgivings, negative perceptions often change once trails are constructed. Andy Fyfe expanded this point, stating, “People are initially hesitant about trails near them, but often request access to them after seeing their success” (Fyfe, 2013). It is therefore seen as important to reach out to members of the public to assuage their fears.

Instead of relying on inaccurate perceptions to guide action, decision makers should measure public opinion by surveying or interviewing homeowners adjacent to trails. Saratoga PLAN conducted a survey in 2006 focusing on open space and development. In it, of the 1,000 Saratoga County residents polled, 70% reported the protection of open space as very important (Saratoga PLAN, 2009). However, there has not been a study focusing specifically on trails, and city and county officials can easily point to the many nature trails as examples of protecting open space and providing recreational opportunities, but they also serve as an excuse for not building a more extensive multi-use trail network.

### *Homeowner Interviews*

Homeowners and businesses who are located directly along the trail have the most frequent interactions with the trails, and therefore, their opinions should be highly regarded and acknowledged by decision makers. Unfortunately, we have found that their opinions and concerns are often unanswered and unresolved. Because their voices frequently go unacknowledged when it comes to making decisions on trail, we decided to keep their perceptions separate. Their ideas and concerns are incredibly important and they gave us some great feedback for improving the trails.

In order to understand the impact trails have on the people who live near them, we interviewed fifteen homeowners who live near the entrance, middle, and end of the Zim Smith and Railroad Run trails. We used Google Maps and Google Earth to identify homes directly adjacent to the trail. We then dropped off sixty letters in mailboxes along the Zim Smith trail and a further 30 in mailboxes along the Railroad Run trail explaining our project and asking for their feedback (see Appendix A and B). Semi-structured interviews were conducted over the phone and by email and lasted between five and thirty minutes. We are keeping the identity of the homeowners we spoke with anonymous. The perception of the homeowners along the Zim Smith Trail and Railroad Run varied from very positive to very negative, but the vast majority of residents enjoyed their location adjacent to the trail.

Regardless of age, most of the homeowners use the trail multiple times a week and see it as a tremendous social benefit, bringing families and friends together. As one man along the Zim Smith Trail said, “I enjoy the trail, I like the hustle and bustle of people always going by” (Resident 2). The most common activities cited included biking, walking, running and snowmobiling, but four wheeling and even dog sledding were mentioned too. Others along Zim

Smith, enjoyed using the trail to get to hotspots like The Mill, a bar and restaurant that is located directly next to the trail that attracts many snowmobilers and bikers. For residents along Railroad Run, they mentioned how the trail enables them to walk to restaurants downtown and other destinations like the YMCA. Some people changed their perceptions over time; one resident told us, “at first I thought it would be bad idea for strangers in backyards and so on, but as time went on it became a more positive thing for the community” (Resident 3). Only two residents moved into their homes after the construction of these trails, but one of them did say they “thought of it as great positive when purchasing the house, and the whole family uses it together” (Resident 1).

Some residents we spoke with had negative opinions as well. Many felt that, while they were assured during the planning process that their opinions would be taken into consideration, but once the trail started being built, their voices were not heard. One homeowner who lives at the trailhead stated, “It’s convenient to get on, but it was badly planned. It should have been thought out better” (Resident 4) Additionally, she mentioned that, “although we didn’t want to put a fence in our yard, we had to due to safety concerns for our children. A lot of people park on our lawn as well, and we have had the call the police a few times to make them move.” There have also been issues with littering, and many complained that snowmobilers are on the trail late at night, often until 2 AM, which causes disturbance among homes that lie directly on the trail. For the most part, though, the major complaints came from people located at the trailhead as opposed to along the trail.

We also asked for their suggestions on how to make the trail better. Some of the sections are gravel, and most agreed that the unpaved sections should be paved. The first section of the trail does not allow snowmobiles, and one of the residents who lives at the trailhead and snowmobiles said “it would make him happiest if they just opened up that section for

snowmobiles” (Resident 5). Others suggested putting bathrooms along the trail, and one homeowner suggested having a table set up along the trail once a year to take suggestions on how to improve the trail. Along Railroad Run, in addition to connecting to the state park, one resident would like to see “doggy dropping bags and receptacles available for people who walk their dogs along the trail” (Resident 1). Some suggestions, particularly involving snowmobiles, may be difficult to resolve due to their contentious nature, but the majority of problems and suggestions stated could be resolved with better communication with government officials. Issues like faulty mile markers and a lack of trees along Railroad Run are very fixable problems. One Railroad Run resident explained he and his neighbors would be happy to purchase maple trees to make the trail more attractive if there was a public-private partnership with the city to maintain the trees, but currently there is no discussion amongst these groups (Resident 6).

Speaking with these residents gave us insight into the reality of trail implementation. Residents constantly use the trail with their families or friends to get outside and enjoy the trails. Furthermore, many studies highlight the economic benefits like increased property value, and although we have small sample size, our resident responses echo this benefit. For example, people use the trails to get to places like restaurants, or use their outdoor equipment like bicycles, and the Railroad Run trail was a major factor to one couple’s reasons for buying a house where they did. Again, communication needs to improve greatly to fix the problems we heard, but if government officials recognize the benefits multi-use trails in Saratoga have, they will likely do a better job of reaching out. These interviews show decision makers should not fear public opposition, but rather consult with residents to avoid it.

### *Perceptions of Business Owners*

Research from other communities suggests that businesses stand to profit from trail development. To evaluate this claim, we spoke with seven businesses that are located along the Zim Smith and Spring Run trails, as well as realtors and developers in the Saratoga Springs Community. We also spoke with Elevate Cycles, which, although not located adjacent to the trail, is close to both the Spring Run and Railroad Run trails, and has many customers who use Saratoga's multi-use trails.

Five businesses, (the Mill, Stewarts, the Lake Ridge Restaurant, EBI, and Elevate Cycles) felt they received a significant amount of business from trail users. The Mill gets snowmobilers during the winter months and bikers during the spring, summer and fall months, and felt that the trail is a great source of business. They even expressed interest in expanding their use of the trail. As one employee said, "We want to incorporate it more, maybe do a fundraiser or ride on the trail" (The Mill). This statement proves that there must be better partnerships and communication when it comes to trail planners and the landowners adjacent to the trails because there are wonderful opportunities worth exploiting. Stewarts felt even more positive about the trail; during the summer months, bikers stop in for ice cream constantly, however, they get a lot of business from other users, like snowmobilers, throughout the year. The Lake Ridge Restaurant felt that bikers come in for lunch mostly, however, they didn't see a large economic impact from trail users. The woman we spoke with did say she likes to go for walks on the trail after work, however, she didn't think that any other of her employees used the trail. EBI felt they got a decent amount of business from trail users, mostly from pedestrians and people walking their dogs. They said pedestrians mostly purchase water, however some purchase alcoholic and nonalcoholic beverages, often in conjunction with the hot dog stand located in the parking lot.

While other businesses didn't receive economic benefits from the trail, they still had positive opinions of the trail. DIT Prints said their employees use the trail for fun and they like watching the horses go by. Their one complaint was that the snowmobiles are loud, a complaint we heard from homeowners as well. The Round Lake Village Inn didn't have any opinions either way about the trail; the employees didn't use it and didn't think any of the people who stay at the inn are interested in it, however, they didn't have any negative opinions about the trail either.

Our conversations with realtors suggest that trails are not being used as a selling point to prospective residents. One development, in particular, seemed well poised to take advantage of its proximity to trails. The Elms at Saratoga is located directly next to the Railroad Run trail, with many houses having backyards bordering the trail. Despite this fact, there is no mention of the trail on the development's website, and the lead realtor for the project mentioned that trails were "not something that has ever been a topic of discussion with those [she has] ever worked with" (Amsler, 2013). This mindset was not limited to the Elms, but seemed to be part of a Saratoga Springs-wide trend. Other real estate agents we talked to, including representatives from Roohan Realty and Prudential Manor Homes Realty, had not previously used trails as a major selling point when working with customers and seemed to have little awareness of their value to customers (Clark, 2013 ; Bonacio, 2013).

This undervaluing of trails may be beginning to change, however. Developer John Witt of Witt Construction considered himself a big supporter of trails, both nature and multi-use. In the past, he donated land that would become a part of the Spring Run trail, and he attends Saratoga PLAN trails committee meetings (Witt, 2013). He cited numerous reasons for supporting trails, including their popularity among prospective homebuyers and financial incentives for donating land as a developer. Similarly, a recent email sent out to supporters of the

Greenbelt Plan suggested that Sonny Bonacio, one of the largest developers in Saratoga Springs “loves the idea,” and that the plan has “his full support” (Letts (b), 2013). Thus, even though there is not widespread support for trails among realtors, many developers are beginning to see the benefits of trail creation.

Developers, realtors, and businesses alike showcase the opportunities trails in Saratoga present. Future studies should try to quantify these economic benefits, but from our interviews, it is fair to say, like many studies suggest, that trails are an economic driver. Food and beverage businesses appear to benefit the most, but if the trail system is expanded and connected in the future, it will increasingly become a destination for more visitors and homeowners. Too often, trails are seen as a luxury in the eyes of the decision makers, when they actually bring in revenue while protecting land and providing a place for the community to come together.

#### *Historical Case Studies*

We conducted four case studies of the planning and building of Zim Smith, Railroad Run, Spring Run, and the proposed Geyser Road trail to understand how the decision makers’ perceptions of trails compare to the historical reality. To do this, we read and analyzed many different types of historical archives, including annual reports of organizations involved in the planning and implementation process (including Saratoga PLAN and Wilton Wildlife), past plans and records for existing trails, as well as newspaper articles and other media related to the trails. By looking at the historical records we were able to get a better sense of what is involved in the planning and implementation process, as well as how the public has responded in the past to the trails in the county.

The Zim Smith Trail is the most celebrated trail in Saratoga County, and is the one trail in all of New York to be named a national recreation trail. Spring Run and Railroad Run are the

only multi-use trails in Saratoga Springs. Lastly, the Geyser Road trail is a proposed idea from 2000 and has yet to be built. The combination of a nationally recognized trail with two fragmentary multi-use trails, as well as an incomplete one, provide a robust test of the elites' perceptions about planning and building a trail network.

### The Zim Smith Trail

Considered the backbone of the Saratoga trail network, the Zim Smith trail is the longest trail in the county. Stretching ten miles from Ballston Spa to Halfmoon, the land that is now the Zim Smith Trail was bought by the county in 1968 as a sewer line along an abandoned portion of D&H Railroad. In 2002, the county was awarded federal TEA-21 (the Transportation Equality Act for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century) funding to pave sections of the Zim Smith Trail. The Transportation Program under TEA-21 awarded \$985,420 in federal money, which was matched by \$246,355 in local funds, making the project total \$1.2 million (TEP, 2006).

Within a few years of the trail's construction, planners sought to expand it further. In 2006, there were plans proposed to extend the Zim Smith trail over the county water line. Water committee chairman and Malta Town Supervisor Ray Callanan, rejected Supervisor Sausville's suggestion to extend the Zim Smith trail as part of the water project. Callanan noted that the trail would complicate and slow down the water project as well as face public opposition. Instead of asking the citizens what they thought, he did not even allow for a vote on the matter (Kinney, 2006).

Despite this setback, the trail continued to be developed. In 2007, improvements were made along the trail with the help of a federal grant. Jason Kemper, the Saratoga County Planning Director, stated that many sections of the trail were overgrown or just dirt, and a construction company was hired to fix many of these sections (Kinney, 2007). By 2010, a two-

mile section stretching from Underpass Road to Oak Street in Ballston Spa was added. This was funded with both federal and county money, with the county paying for about one third of the trail, and the rest under the Department of Transportation's Recovery Act (Hornbeck, 2010). The county had budgeted approximately \$1.1 million, however, the project was significantly under budget (Planning Board Minutes, 2009).

In the future, there is hope that the trail will connect to the Saratoga Spa State Park and then on to Railroad Run. Part of the reason for this is due to the fact that a key landholder, who has the opportunity to connect Spa trails with Zim Smith, is vehemently opposed to a trail running through his property (SWNA, 2013). There are also plans to extend the trail south towards Mechanicville, however, plans have been halted because costs are looking higher than expected. Officials had been hoping that the New York State Electric and Gas Corp's plan to build a transmission line parallel to the trail would take care of much of the clearing for the extension, however plans changed and now the county must find alternative ways to clear the path (Cignoli, 2012). Because of this loss of labor, Ed Kinowski, the Stillwater Supervisor, said the county would have to find new sources of funding, including grants and re-applying for state funding. Unfortunately, the project still hasn't happened, and as Kinowski stated, "[it's] all predicated on funding" (Cignoli, 2012), a trend that has been all too common when it comes to building trails.

The Zim Smith case study highlights critical opportunities and challenges for trails. In terms of funding, money came mostly from federal funds but also the county. Equally important is the fact that the project came in under budget. Costs being higher than budgeted is one of the main reasons the proposed extension to Mechanicville has been stalled. Taking advantage of other plans was another central theme within this case study. Lastly, the original construction of

the Zim Smith occurred at a time when the county was more rural, so the trail did not go through an extended amount of properties. Today, however, there is a key piece of land that could connect the Zim Smith with Saratoga Spa State Park, but a landholder opposes the trail running through his property, and this is putting a block in the whole process.

### Spring Run Trail

The Spring Run Trail runs along the springs from Congress Park to High Rock Park and is over one mile long. Early efforts to create the trail were led by the Open Space Project, the predecessor to Saratoga PLAN, and the trail was incorporated in the city's 1994 Open Space Plan. In 1998, two public meetings were held to discuss the creation of the trail, each attended by hundreds of people (Diakopoulos, 2005). For the most part the project was well received, although Alane Chinian, former director of PLAN, mentioned public interest had waxed and waned for a while. Later in 1998, Mayor O'Connell listed Spring Run as one of the top ten priorities for the city. In 1999, the Open Space Project received a Federal Rails to Trails grant to push this plan forward, but the land had yet to be secured. In 2002, no progress had been made, but the trail was listed as an important project in the updated 2002 Open Space Plan.

Finally, in 2005 five parcels of land were purchased and awaited city council approval. Five land purchases made this possible, including 0.14 acres from Saratoga Quality Hardware, 0.02 acres from Allerdice, 2.55 acres from Excelsior Park LLC, 3.72 acres from the Gaffney's owners, as well as 15.57 acres from PLAN (Diakopoulos, 2005). Still, progress was slow as the City attorney had to have lengthy negotiations and surveys with certain landowners on complex parcels. In addition, they found steel barrels with at least one containing diesel fuel, in turn requiring more documents and environmental investigations on the land. Funding eventually

came in 2010 from a \$1.6 million grant from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, which Mayor Scott Johnson helped secure (Daley, 2010; Diakopoulos, 2005).

Despite plans to connect Spring Run with the recreational facilities on Weibel Avenue, the Northway continues to be a major barrier. In order to expand, the city would need to build a passage under or tunnel over the highway, which would be very costly (Maynard, 2013). As a result, progress to extend the trail has largely been halted.

On the surface, the development of Spring Run seemed to follow the important steps outlined by the decision makers. The trail was put into a formal plan early on, public support was leveraged, numerous administrations considered it a priority project, and funding was secured from outside sources. Yet, it still took 14 years from the trail's original concept for it to be completed and after costing more than \$1.6 million, the 1.5 mile trail dead ends at the northway, failing to link to the ice rink and mall area. The case of Spring Run illustrates that even when all seems to go according to the formula, it takes a considerable amount of time to plan and construct a trail. Political will seemed to ebb and flow over the life of the project, and public interest followed suit because the political system responds slowly to their requests. Early on the trail experienced a flurry of support, from both the government and the citizenry, but it was more than eleven years before any land was actually purchased to construct the trail. In particular, Spring Run appears to have been held up by a lengthy process of land acquisition and a lack of funding for construction. After land was acquired, it was still five more years before funding could be secured, illustrating that funding can often be a major barrier to trail creation.

#### Railroad Run Trail

Railroad Run, located in Saratoga Springs, was first built in 1996 using state grant money (Brady, 2003). The half-mile trail was constructed by the city's Department of Public Works and

includes two parallel paths, one asphalt, one gravel (Brady, 2003). In 2002, the Saratoga Open Space Project received a \$100,000 federal grant to allow the city to extend the trail an additional half-mile to the Saratoga Spa State Park (Crary, 2003). At the time, the city did not have the land to make it happen, so the money lay in reserve. In 2005 the YMCA deeded the land to the city, allowing for an extension of the trail, but it has not been able to connect to the State Park as it is blocked by Route 50 (McCord, 2005). Homeowners are looking for this expansion as well. As one resident who lives directly on the trail said, “We’d love to see the trail connect to the park over Route 50. That’s something that has been in the works for some time” (Resident 1).

Recently, the state Department of Transportation has agreed to fund a crossing with a light at the intersection, allowing the trail to connect to the park (Letts, 2013). The YMCA worked closely with the DOT and State Park in order to make this a reality. Railroad Run is a prime example of how partnerships and incremental progress can aid in the development and expansion of trails.

#### Geyser Road Trail Proposal

The Geyser Road Trail is a proposed 2.8-mile path beginning on the Milton-Saratoga City line and continuing along the north side of Geyser Road eventually connecting with the Railroad Run Trail. According to Matt Veitch, Geyser Trail Chairman Supervisor, the idea originated and plans began informally in 2000. The main group responsible for working to make the trail a reality was the Southwest Neighborhood Association (SWNA), a homeowner’s association from the area.

The SWNA raised money from a variety of sources including NYS Parks and Recreation, state funds, and donations from private businesses, in order to pay for a conceptual plan for the trail. Of this, \$25,000 came from state funds secured by Assemblyman Jim Tedisco in 2006, \$5,000-\$10,000 was invested in an application for matching grants from the NYS Parks and

Recreation, and more than \$10,000 was raised by Ball Metal Container Corporation (French, 2008). After receiving the funds, the SWNA hired Greemen-Perdersen Inc to create the Conceptual Plan for the Geysers Road trail in 2009, costing the organization \$21,000 (French, 2008).

The project has also made efforts to take advantage of opportunities. In 2010, the Geysers road bridge over Canada Pacific railroad was replaced and because SWNA, along with Veitch and Yepsen, negotiated with DPW and Saratoga County, space was allocated for the trail on the bridge by DPW and the County (Donges, 2010). This proves that having a plan in place and paying attention to events along the proposed routes can help the trail process progress faster (Shown in Figure 3).

In 2013, Saratoga Springs Capital Budget allocated \$200,000 to create an engineering plan for the trail. Because the budget has been tight for the past few years, the money came from leftover funding for the Spring Run Trail (McCarty, 2013). It was not until these funds were secure that the engineering plan could commence, four years after the conceptual plan. According to Matt Veitch, it's all about getting the necessary documents in place in order to make this project shovel ready. Mayor Scott Johnson reiterated this lesson, saying "Unless you are at a certain engineering point — where you are so-called shovel ready — you miss a lot of opportunities" (McCarty, 2012). He added that they learned a lot from Spring Run, which had to be shovel ready before receiving federal stimulus funds that contributed 95% of the money (McCarty, 2013).

This trail is seen as a priority because of its location. Approximately 20% of Saratoga Springs residents live in the Geysers Crest area and this trail could give them the opportunity to travel downtown without a car to places like the State Spa and the YMCA (McCarty, 2012).

Moreover, Geysers Road is extremely busy with limited sidewalks, which is especially problematic for kids living near the Geysers Road Elementary School. Over half of the students live within one mile of the school and the nearby Geysers Park, but unfortunately cannot walk or bike there because of the unsuitable conditions of Geysers Road (McCarty, 2012). In 2013, NYSDOT awarded the city \$246,617 in Federal Safe Routes to School funding for sidewalk, crosswalks and a pedestrian signal on Geysers road. These sidewalks will be on the south side of the road while the multi-use trail will remain on the north side. Construction is expected to commence in Fall 2013 and finish in Spring 2014. As a result, an estimated 60% of the school's roughly 400 students will be able to either walk or bike to school, a significant step forward for a place that previously did not allow children to walk or bike to school because of safety concerns (DeMars, 2013).

The case of Geysers Road illustrates many of the key components of trails development. The initial planning for the trail was almost entirely driven by nonprofits and private citizens, lead by the SWNA. During these early stages, partnerships were also key in securing funds. Trail planners relied heavily on donations from multiple sources, including public and private entities, to create the initial concept plan for the trail. The city government has also shown a willingness to fund plans for the trail, but it is still unclear whether they will be willing to fund the construction of the trail or whether they will wait on federal funds to become available. Despite the support the trail has received, it has still been 13 years in the making, with no timeframe for completion, illustrating once again that trail projects tend to take a prolonged amount of time.

#### Case Study Conclusions

As all of these case studies show, multiple factors must align for trails to be successful. Trails that have been successful have progressed incrementally, as was the case for the Zim

Smith and Railroad Run Trails, which were expanded after their initial construction. To make this possible, it was necessary to have a plan, which decision makers correctly identified as one of the main contributors to a trail's success. As the Spring Run Trail shows, partnerships make the process move along much faster. As with any project, funding is required and can always be a hurdle. Trails often benefit from multiple sources of funding, and again, partnerships are helpful in this area as well. For the Geyser Road trail, public engagement is a huge contributor; the SWNA has been an invaluable component in making the trail progress and gain momentum.

## **Conclusions**

### *Summary of Findings*

Many factors must be in place for a trail to be effectively implemented. There needs to be a proper plan in place, partnerships between different people and organizations, public support, and mostly importantly government will to build and fund trails. From our talks with decision makers, homeowners and businesses, along with our historical studies, we have determined that a number of changes need to be made if more trails are to be constructed in the future.

Planning is a crucial component to trail development, but planning is not enough. As we saw from the Spring Run example, despite having a plan in place, the trail took fourteen years to be constructed. Additionally, the plan for Geyser Road started thirteen years ago, yet there is still no trail. Both of these examples prove that even with a solid plan, trails can remain undeveloped for many years. However, plans have been immensely useful in the past as a means of securing land, but trail creators should not assume that the existence of a plan will guarantee the construction of a trail in a timely fashion.

Partnerships were essential in the creation of many trails, though trail creators could do a much better job of reaching out to businesses in the community. The opinions of businesses

along the Zim Smith and Spring Run trails show us that the business community needs to be more involved and acknowledged when the trail is being implemented. Communication is key, and better communication could lead to more effective partnerships. As The Mill told us, they would love to have events using the Zim Smith Trail, however, due to a lack of communication, these events have not happened. Similarly, real estate agents do not seem to be aware of the marketability of trails, despite many studies that show them to be an attractive amenity.

Although many decision makers we spoke to worried about public support among homeowners living adjacent to trails, we found that many were supportive of trail efforts. They had many positive opinions of the trails, saying that they use the trail for leisure and transportation, and enjoy being able to interact with and watch other users along the trail. However, their praises did not come without complaints. Many had safety concerns, although for the most part they said nothing had ever happened. They also had noise and littering complaints. Much of this could be solved with improved communication between trail creators and residents. Some of the residents we spoke to felt as though they had not been adequately consulted when the trail was being put in. It is important to improve this communication in the future, as one or two people in opposition can stymie a project, leading to plans staying dormant for many years.

Trails development in Saratoga Springs has been completely reliant on federal and state funding. Every trail we examined, with the exception of Geysers Road, has received some level of federal or state funding to be completed. In many cases, waiting on grant funding to become available causes trails to take much longer than originally intended. The Spring Run trail, for example, had to wait for five years after the land was purchased to receive federal funding for its construction. This heavy reliance on federal and state funding is partially due to the government not viewing trails as an important aspect of development. The government is not opposed to trail

creation, but does not consider them enough of a priority to secure local sources of funding. However, as we have found, trails are an essential benefit to communities, are enjoyed by both residents and businesses, and should no longer be viewed as a luxury.

### *Recommendations for the Greenbelt Plan*

Despite these challenges, there has been a lot of progress that must be acknowledged. Jeff Olson and his team at Alta Planning have an impressive plan for Saratoga Springs. The proposed Greenbelt is a ten mile loop around the city, which would greatly improve the transportation system currently in place in the downtown area. It would provide an accessible, alternative way to get to and from downtown Saratoga and would drastically reduce the congestion and traffic happening throughout the city, especially during the summer months. The plan is in place, and from the turnout at the two open town meetings about the plan, there is a lot of community support, and many different organizations have pledged their support for the plan.

However, based on our findings we believe that the Greenbelt Plan must address the issues that have plagued previous trail efforts, particularly funding and communication. The most recent federal transportation bill, MAP-21, reduces funds for trail creation by 26% and gives communities the ability to allocate trail funds to other projects instead (“Federal Funding”). Due to this reduction in trail creation funds, planners for the Greenbelt Plan must find local sources of funding in order to facilitate its development. As we have seen from other communities implementing trails, there are a variety of innovative ways to fund trail creation locally. For example, the Howard W. Peak Greenway Trail System in San Antonio received funding from a percentage of the sales tax put aside for multi-use trails (Howard W. Peak, 2011). The Adopt-A-Foot program in Westerville, Ohio is another example, where citizens can purchase a foot of a new trail, creating better citizen involvement while putting trail creation in

the minds of government actors (Adopt a Foot, 2008). In 2008, a two-day music festival was held in Susanville, California, and all of the proceeds were donated to a Trail Endowment Fund to rebuild a bridge along the Bizz Johnson Trail (Acquisition, 2013). These are just a few examples of creative ways to tackle the funding issue associated with building trails.

As the plan begins to develop, it will also be important for the trail planners to work closely with landowners and businesses to ensure that their needs are met. Past trail efforts have been hindered by a lack of communication, so it is vital that the greenbelt take the needs of landowners and businesses into account. The Greenbelt has done a good job thus far of engaging the public through open meetings, but it is vital that this engagement continue throughout the process. If the supporters of the plan take these two lessons to heart, they will have a much easier time of making it a reality.

#### *Recommendations for Future Study*

There is still much to be learned about the trail process in Saratoga. Future studies should focus on more in-depth analysis of resident and business perceptions. In addition, a survey of trail users should be conducted to determine how much usage the trails get, and the opinions and recommendations of trail users who do not live directly on the trail. A better understanding of the economic impact of trails specifically in the Saratoga area could provide a greater incentive for government officials to construct more trails and see them as a benefit to the community.

## **Acknowledgements**

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## **Appendix A: Zim Smith Resident Letter**

Dear Resident(s),

We are a group of senior Environmental Studies students at Skidmore College who are studying the creation and usage of bike/walking trails in the Saratoga County community. In our interviews with policy-makers, they have emphasized the importance of residents' opinions. Given your close proximity to the Zim Smith trail, the longest and most used public trail in Saratoga County, your input is extremely valuable.

We are interested in hearing what your experience has been like living next to the Zim Smith trail and we would greatly appreciate you taking the time to speak to us, either over the phone or in person at your convenience.

We would use your input to compare public opinions with government, non-profit, and businesses experiences with multi-use trails. The interviews would be completely confidential. If you are interested, please contact us at 508-215-9109 or [smarks@skidmore.edu](mailto:smarks@skidmore.edu).

If you have any questions about the project, you can also contact our Environmental Studies Professor, Bob Turner, at 580-5251.

Thanks, and hope to speak with you soon,

Sarah Marks, Dan Raudonis, Nate Blanks  
Skidmore College Class of 2013

## **Appendix B: Railroad Run Resident Letter**

Dear Resident(s),

We are a group of senior Environmental Studies students at Skidmore College who are studying the creation and usage of bike/walking trails in the Saratoga County community.

In our interviews with policy-makers, they have emphasized the importance of residents' opinions. Given your close proximity to the Railroad Run trail, your input is extremely valuable.

We are interested in hearing what your experience has been like living next to the Railroad Run trail and we would greatly appreciate you taking the time to speak to us, either over the phone or in person at your convenience.

We would use your input to compare public opinions with government, non-profit, and businesses experiences with multi-use trails. The interviews would be completely confidential.

**If you are interested, please contact us at 860-817-9849 or [smarks@skidmore.edu](mailto:smarks@skidmore.edu).**

If you have any questions about the project, you can also contact our Environmental Studies Professor, Bob Turner, at 580-5251.

Thanks, and hope to speak with you soon,

Sarah Marks, Dan Raudonis, Nate Blanks  
Skidmore College Class of 2013

## Figures

Figure 1: Saratoga Springs Multi-use Trails (from left: proposed Geyser Road Trail, Railroad Run, and Spring Run)

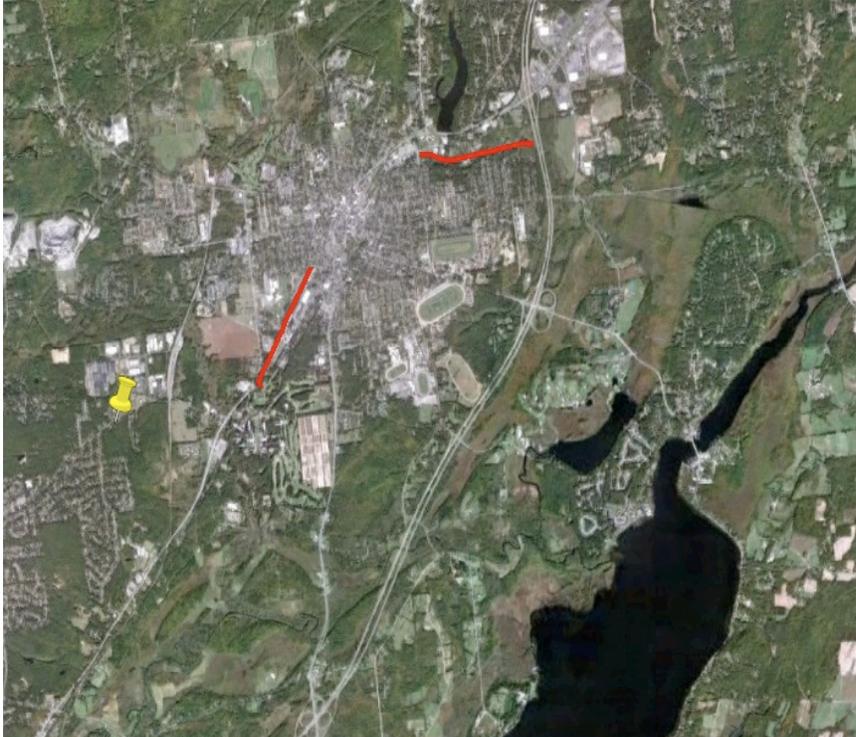


Figure 2: Greenbelt Trail Concept

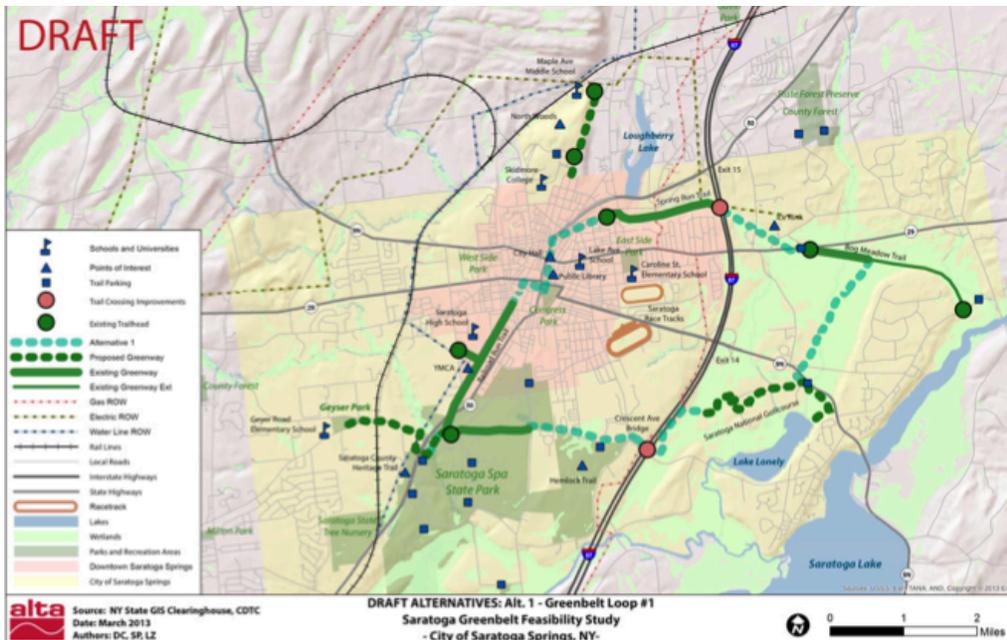


Figure 3: Geysers Road Bridge

