



The Path to Success

A Review of Leading Practices for Developing
Regional Trail Systems: Executive Summary

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

The Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation (RCWJRF) is interested in building livable communities in Southeast Michigan through investments in trails, parks, and green design. An important part of this work is expanding trail opportunities across the region. The foundation commissioned Public Sector Consultants (PSC) to research leading practices utilized in regions across the country that have developed best-in-class trails systems. This effort builds on a corollary cataloging project that collected information about public and private entities involved in park and trail development and management in Southeast Michigan to identify strengths and opportunities for improvement in the region. This research will inform how the foundation can maximize its investments and make the greatest impact in Southeast Michigan.



SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

Six communities from across the country with best-in-class trail systems and management models were analyzed to identify common trends that lead to successful trail development and determine whether their approaches can be replicated in Southeast Michigan. This research included a focus on how philanthropy can affect change and maximize its investment. The communities included within the study are:

- Cleveland, Ohio
- Grand Traverse, Michigan
- Midland, Michigan
- Northwest Arkansas
- Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
- Twin Cities, Minnesota

Each region evaluated has a unique landscape of community characteristics and organizations with varying levels of capacity and interest in trails development. Organizational structures have emerged in each region that reflect and respond to these differences. While each region is distinct, many common themes emerged as leading practices for consideration for regions seeking to transition from having a series of independent and disconnected trails to an integrated regional trail system. These key findings are described briefly below and in greater detail starting on page ten. Profiles of each region are provided in Appendix A.

Philanthropy often plays a key role in developing regional trails systems. In all but one of the regions evaluated, philanthropic organizations played a leading role. Foundations often participated by serving as a convener of trail organizations, incenting efficiency and collaboration among trail- and transit-oriented organizations, and building regional capacity through strategic grantmaking.

Mapping existing and planned trails is a critical first step. Every region went through a process of mapping all existing trails and planned trails that have been vetted through a formal planning process, such as a master plan, comprehensive plan, or transportation plan. Each region then used this information to inform priority setting for future investments and to identify where connections are necessary.

Trail organization consortiums guide development and implementation of regional trails systems. Metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) are a common partner, especially in larger metropolitan areas. Most regions involved multiple stakeholders to develop consensus-based trail priorities. These often were led by governmental and nongovernmental trail- and transit-oriented organizations. Consensus-based planning efforts help to establish a consortium of trail organizations that shepherd implementation of the regional trail system. Partners are cognizant of their respective roles (funding, advocacy, planning, etc.) and complete tasks without duplication or overlap of efforts to the extent possible. Notably, some regions are becoming more intentional about expanding public engagement activities early in the process to build support at the neighborhood level and proactively keep matters of equity front and center.

In most regions, especially the larger metropolitan areas, the MPO often plays a large role in the trail organization consortium. However, in these cases, the specific activities for each MPO vary. Some support planning efforts and serve as a convener, others are a gatekeeper to implementation resources, and one even serves as the fiduciary of foundation funding for trail development.

Regional trail systems are intended to serve multiple purposes—transportation is often a central component. Each region discussed how its trail system serves multiple purposes, including recreation, quality of life, health benefits, water protection, etc. Notably, every region has designed its trail system to provide a transportation benefit. Trail systems are also intentionally designed to connect important nodes within the community, such as schools, residential centers, and employment centers, as well as cultural and environmental assets.

Cohesive branding yields dividends. Regions that have branded their regional trail system see greater results. Cohesive branding yields multiple benefits, including building a common sense of identity among trail partners, improving communications/public relations, and building support for funding requests.

Long-term maintenance funding is a concern for most regions. Establishing endowments can help address these concerns. Many regions expressed similar concerns as Southeast Michigan partners regarding maintenance expenses. Many internalize the general maintenance expenses within the owner or managing entity's operating budget. One community established an endowed fund administered through the local community foundation to provide sustainable funding.

CONCLUSION

The six regions included within the analysis are at different points in the development cycle of a regional trail system. No single funding model, management approach, or governance structure emerged that works best in all cases. Each region studied has entities with differing capacities and interest in trail development and management. Organizational structures that emerged in each region reflect and respond to these differences. Despite these differences, however, most regions with best-in-class trail systems have progressed down a similar path to success.

Regions with best-in-class trail systems often begin with many uncoordinated trail- and transit-oriented organizations developing significant but disconnected trail systems that do not advance a shared regional vision. Often, there is a tipping point at which funders observe that these trail groups compete for limited trail development dollars and inefficiently allocate resources. In response, a community convener, generally philanthropy in partnership with the MPO, convene leading trail- and transit-oriented organizations to evaluate opportunities to collaborate and establish shared priorities. Concurrently, all completed and planned trails in the region are integrated into a single map that is used to support these planning efforts and identify new routes and set shared priorities. This process often results in the formation of a standing trail organization consortium, comprising governmental, nonprofit, and philanthropic organizations, committed to the development of a regional trail system. Once the plan is in place and the consortium established, partners turn to building out the regional trail system, often leveraging foundation dollars to secure significant state and federal funding. In all but one region, philanthropy was an active partner at every step in this process.

Many of the organizations and individuals representing regions included in this study expressed interest in engaging with peers in other parts of the country that work to advance regional trail systems. Opportunities may exist to form a peer learning group among these and other regions.



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