



MOPAC East Trail Extention Research Report 2025

Course:
CRPL 840 Planning Methods and Analysis
Fall 2025

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CHAPTER 1

Community Profiles and Development History

Overview

This chapter examines how the MoPac Trail, a former Missouri Pacific Railroad corridor, shapes contemporary community conditions and planning priorities in Cass County, Nebraska. Focusing on Elmwood, Wabash, and the peer communities of Walton, Eagle, South Bend, Louisville, and Springfield, the study asks: (1) How have demographic, housing, business conditions, and pedestrian/bicycle traffic changed in these towns since the trail's development? and (2) In what ways does trail planning align with broader goals such as sustainable growth, connectivity, and local economic revitalization?

A mixed-methods approach combines analyses of Census and American Community Survey (ACS) data, housing studies, and trail-planning documents with field surveys of trail users, stakeholder interviews, and site observations. The findings reveal shared rural trends—aging populations, auto dependence, and constrained housing supply—alongside place-specific dynamics where trail proximity, events, and amenities generate meaningful but uneven economic activity. Eagle and Elmwood, for example, leverage the MoPac through recurring community cycling rides and local businesses,

while the unfinished Wabash–South Bend gap limits corridor-wide mobility and investment.

The chapter concludes that the MoPac functions as both recreational infrastructure and a regional connector whose future depends on closing network gaps, linking trail access to town centers and new housing, and elevating local storytelling and volunteer stewardship. Strategic alignment with comprehensive plans and targeted funding can help ensure that the trail advances rural mobility, housing options, and economic resilience across the corridor.





Community Profiles and Development History

Introduction

The MoPac Trail follows the former Missouri Pacific Railroad line that once linked Lincoln with Omaha. When the line was abandoned in the 1980s, the corridor could have been lost to private ownership, but local groups pushed for a different future. Rails-to-Trails Conservancy notes that the MoPac “became an early example of a rail-trail conversion in the Great Plains.”¹ However, the work took years and depended on steady community involvement rather than a single transformative moment.

Elmwood appears often in accounts of the trail’s creation. Residents there helped maintain interest when the trail idea still felt uncertain. One name that comes up is Elaine Hammer, whose influence is evident in both local memory and the existing trail landscape. The BicycLincoln history series explains that Hammer “dedicated her time to the MoPac corridor long before the trail was complete,” and that her commitment helped keep the project moving.² Her impact is also recorded on the Elaine Hammer Bridge, where the marker de-

scribes her as “a strong supporter of recreation and community life in Cass County.”³

The trail surface extended east out of Lincoln in the 1990s and early 2000s, placing Elmwood and Wabash in a new role. Elmwood, roughly halfway between Lincoln and Omaha, offers a small-town center and a park system that often appeals to trail users. Research on rural trails notes that long-distance corridors draw visitors who provide “meaningful but often overlooked spending in nearby towns.”⁴ National outdoor recreation reporting reaches a similar conclusion and states that recreation-based travel now represents “a central pillar of rural economic activity.”⁵ These findings suggest that Elmwood could gain even more from the trail with improved connections, more precise wayfinding, and amenities that help visitors navigate the area.

Wabash marks the end of the finished limestone trail. Beyond the village, the route turns onto gravel roads and passes through missing segments. The BicycLincoln account puts it plainly: “The MoPac still stops short of the

¹ Hanna Thompson, “Nebraska’s MoPac Trail East and West,” Rails to Trails Conservancy, May 12, 2015, <https://www.railstotrails.org/trailblog/nebraskas-mopac-trail-east-and-west/>.

² Trail Ramblings: The MoPac Trail From Rail To Limestone. – BicycLincoln, December 25, 2018, <https://www.bicyclincoln.org/2018/12/25/trail-ramblings-the-mopac-trail-from-rail-to-limestone/>.

³ “Elaine Hammer Bridge Historical Marker,” accessed December 11, 2025, <https://www.hmdb.org/m.asp?m=287949>.

⁴ Rails-to-Trails-Conservancy FACT SHEET October 1 and 2003, “Economic Benefits of Trails and Greenways,” Rails to Trails Conservancy, n.d., accessed December 11, 2025, <https://www.railstotrails.org/resource-library/resources/economic-benefits-of-trails-and-greenways/>.

⁵ Outdoor Industry Association, The Outdoor Recreation Economy (2017), https://outdoorindustry.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/OIA_RecEconomy_FINAL_Single.pdf.





Community Profiles and Development History

Introduction - Continued

Platte River,”⁶ and this gap interrupts what would otherwise be a continuous corridor from Lincoln to South Bend and beyond. Research on rural bicycling and walking shows that broken routes reduce use. Flusche writes that “network gaps are among the biggest deterrents for rural riders,” especially for older adults or less experienced cyclists.⁷ The missing Wabash–South Bend segment remains a central challenge for planners and advocates alike.

Demographic patterns highlight why access matters for these communities. According to the American Community Survey, Elmwood and Wabash show aging populations, limited transportation options, and high levels of vehicle dependence.⁸ The Federal Highway Administration argues that “walking and bicycling networks are essential in small towns where distances are short, and transportation choices are few.”⁹ Public health research reinforces this idea. State policy documents make the same point in different terms. Nebraska’s Statewide Com-

prehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan states that long-distance corridors like the MoPac “create essential connections between rural communities.”¹⁰ The unfinished section between Wabash and South Bend fits directly within these statewide priorities.

This chapter examines how trail access aligns with the needs of people in Elmwood, Wabash, and neighboring trail communities and rural areas. The MoPac Trail supports recreation and short-distance mobility, but access points and facilities vary across the corridor. Through demographic analysis and spatial mapping, this chapter identifies areas with strong access, areas that need improvement, and how the trail’s future development can support both residents and regional goals. The work of individuals such as Elaine Hammer played a key role in shaping the trail’s early years, and current planning efforts will determine how the corridor continues to serve these communities.

⁶ Trail Ramblings.

⁷ Rails-to-Trails-Conservancy REPORT January 1 and 2011, “Active Transportation Beyond Urban Centers Report,” Rails to Trails Conservancy, n.d., accessed December 16, 2025, <https://www.railstotrails.org/resource-library/resources/active-transportation-beyond-urban-centers-report/>.

⁸ “Elmwood Village, Nebraska - Census Bureau Profile,” accessed December 11, 2025, https://data.census.gov/profile/Elmwood_village,_Nebraska?g=160XX00US3115430; “Cass County, Nebraska - Census Bureau Profile,” accessed December 11, 2025, https://data.census.gov/profile/Cass_County,_Nebraska?g=050XX00US31025.

⁹ “Small Town and Rural Multimodal Networks,” U.S. Department of Transportation, December 2016, https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/environment/bicycle_pedestrian/publications/small_towns/fhwahep17024_lg.pdf.

¹⁰ “SCORP,” Nebraska Game & Parks Commission, n.d., accessed December 11, 2025, <https://outdoornebraska.gov/about/community-resources/community-plans/scorp/>.





Community Profiles and Development History

Research Questions

The MoPac Trail's evolution—from a historic rail corridor that shapes settlement patterns to a recreational asset linking Lincoln, Omaha, and the small towns between—raises important questions about how this infrastructure influences local communities today. Elmwood and Wabash have played central roles in the trails' development. As the trail expanded through the 1990s and early 2000s, Elmwood and neighboring towns entered a new planning context in which recreation, mobility, and rural economic resilience became increasingly interconnected. This research examines how the MoPac Trail continues to shape local conditions and community trends along the corridor. Two central questions frame the analysis:

Question 1

How have the demographic, housing, business conditions, and foot/bike traffic changed in Elmwood, Walton, Eagle, Wabash, South Bend, Louisville, and Springfield after the construction of the MoPac Trail?

Question 2

In what ways does trail planning in Elmwood or other peer cities align with or complement broader community goals such as sustainable growth, connectivity, and local economic revitalization?

Together, these questions link the MoPac Trail's development history with present-day planning considerations. By examining both community conditions and the relationship between trail access and broader local goals, this research seeks to clarify how the MoPac Trail continues to influence rural mobility, economic opportunity, and quality of life.



Community Profiles and Development History

Methods

This study uses a mixed-methods approach to evaluate how the MoPac Trail influences demographic, housing, business, and mobility conditions in Elmwood and its peer communities. The methods include secondary data collections from available resources as well as primary data collected through stakeholder interviews and a site survey.

Secondary Data Collection

1.1. Demographic, Housing, and Business Profiles

- Data from the U.S. Census Bureau and American Community Survey were compiled for Elmwood, Walton, Eagle, Wabash, South Bend, Louisville, and Springfield. These indicators – population size, age structure, race/ethnicity, income, housing values, rent levels, and employment trends – were compared across the corridor to identify shared patterns and place-specific conditions. This analysis provides a baseline for evaluating how trail access and use may relate to community change.

1.2. Trail Purpose, Operations, and Regional Context

- Documents from the Lower Platte South Natural Resources District (LPSNRD), Nebraska Trails Foundation, Great Plains Trails Network, Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, and the Great American Rail-Trail initiative were reviewed to understand the intended function of the trail, its role in recreation and economic development, and the trail conditions such as surfacing, amenities, maintenance, and existing gaps, including the Wabash-South Bend gap. Regional planning frameworks were also used to evaluate how the MoPac Trail aligns with statewide goals for connectivity, access, and active transportation.

Primary Data Collection

2.1. Field Surveys of Trail Users

- Trail user surveys were conducted along the MoPac East Trail, particularly in Elmwood, Eagle, Wabash, and Lincoln, to document user characteristics and perceptions. Survey topics included: frequency and purpose of trail use; user age, residency, and travel mode; perceived community benefits (connectivity, business activity, safety, recreation); desired improvements and amenities.

2.2. Stakeholder Interviews

- Interviews were conducted with local government leaders, business owners, event organizers, trail managers, and nonprofit partners. Interviews explored perceptions of trail impacts, stewardship challenges, economic opportunities, and community priorities for future connectivity. These insights directly inform the evaluation of how trail planning aligns with community goals.



Community Profiles and Development History

Methods - Continued

For the analytical approach, data from all sources were synthesized to address the two guiding research questions:

1. How have demographic, housing, business conditions, and foot/bike traffic changed in MoPac Trail communities after trail development?

- Quantitative data were compared across communities, while field surveys and observations provided a qualitative context regarding mobility patterns and business activity.

2. In what ways does trail planning in Elmwood and peer towns support community goals such as sustainable growth, connectivity, and economic revitalization?

- Policy review, stakeholder interviews, and spatial analysis were used to evaluate alignment between trail development, local planning priorities, and regional mobility strategies.

Findings

These findings synthesize quantitative community profiles, qualitative insights from stakeholders, and fieldwork observations along the MoPac East Trail. Together, these results illustrate how demographic change, housing conditions, business activity, and trail use vary across the seven communities—Walton, Eagle, Elmwood, Wabash, South Bend, Louisville, and Springfield. The findings demonstrate shared rural trends, such as aging populations and reliance on personal vehicles, as well as place-specific dynamics shaped by local economies, amenities, and proximity to the trail. Trail user survey results and stakeholder perspectives further reveal how MoPac serves as a recreational asset, an emerging mobility corridor, and an economic contributor to towns with distinct identities and planning priorities. These combined findings directly address the guiding research questions by showing how the MoPac Trail interacts with community conditions today and how future extensions or improvements may support broader local and regional goals.



Image: "Aerial View of Walton." Homes.com, <https://www.homes.com/local-guide/walton-ne/>. Accessed 19 November 2025.

WALTON

Community Profiles & Development History

History

Walton, established in the 1870s along the Missouri Pacific Railroad, developed as a small agricultural and rail-adjacent community east of Lincoln. Its origins as a rail-linked settlement shaped both its early growth and its long-term relationship to regional transportation networks. Today, Walton's location along the MoPac Trail places it within a new mobility and recreation corridor, making it an important case for understanding how small rural communities respond to shifting transportation patterns, demographic change, and emerging trail-based economic opportunities. The following findings outline Walton's population trends, housing conditions, business activity, and transportation patterns, highlighting how these factors intersect with the presence and use of the MoPac Trail.



Demographics

Walton is the 5th biggest town among seven towns that cross by the MoPac East Trail, with its total population gradually growing to 624 in the last 5 years.¹²

In particular, there was a significant increase in Walton's population between 2022 and 2023, with an increase of about 31.7%. The population aged 65 and over accounts for roughly 26.6%, representing the highest percentage among all towns and more than 1.5 times the rate in the state of Nebraska (16.4%).¹³

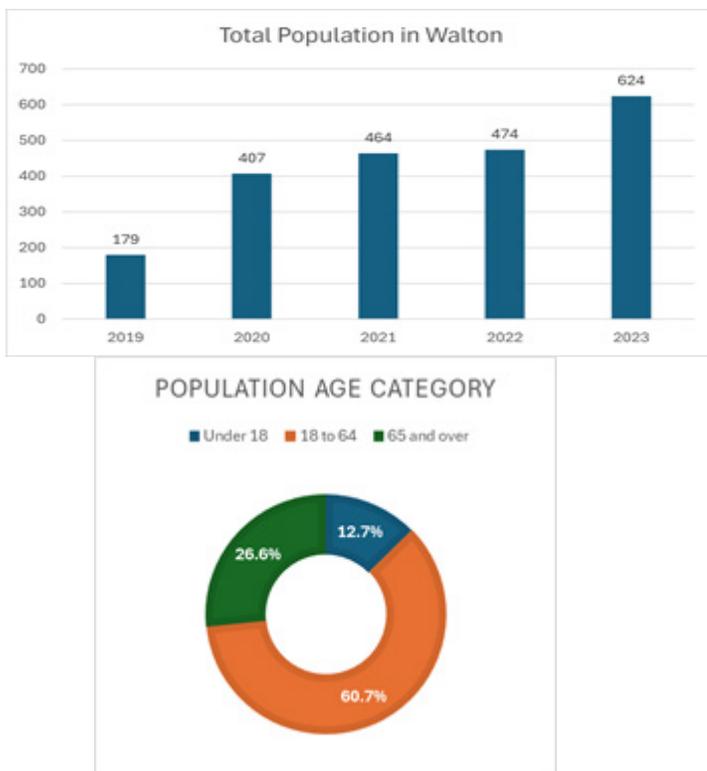


Figure 1.1. Population of Walton, NE.
 Source: ACS 2023 5-year summary (The American Community Survey)

When examined by age range, the 60 to 64 years group makes up a noticeably large portion of the overall population, while the entire 60s age group accounts for about 48.7% of the total. This figure is over four times higher than Nebraska's rate of 11.8%.¹⁴

In terms of the ethnic and racial composition in Walton, the total population consists of mostly White (92.0%), accounting for 574 out of 624 people. This figure is similar to the rate of Cass County, while about 20 percent higher than the state of Nebraska's (76.2%). In addition to the White population, the community includes small proportions of Black or African American (5.4%) and two or more races (2.6%).¹⁵

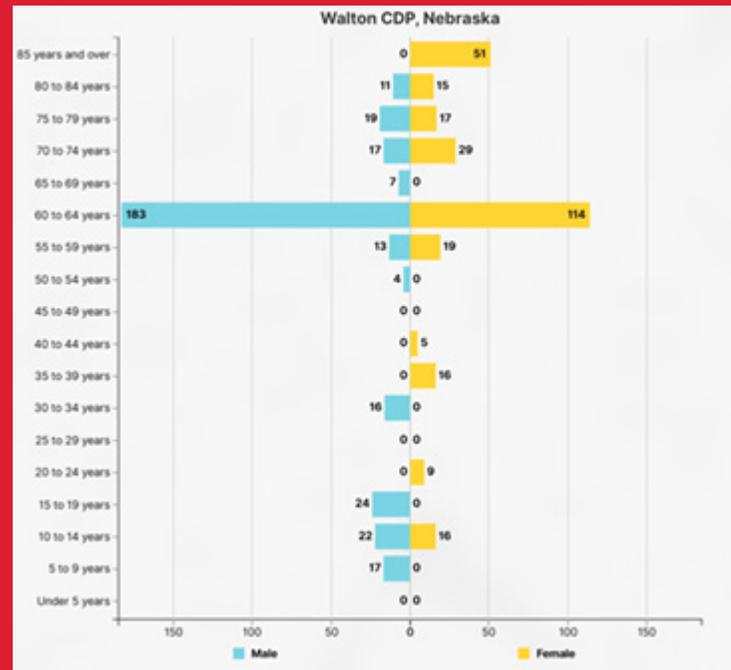


Figure 1.2. Population Pyramid for Walton, NE.
 Source: 2019-2023 ACS 5-Year Estimates Subject Tables.

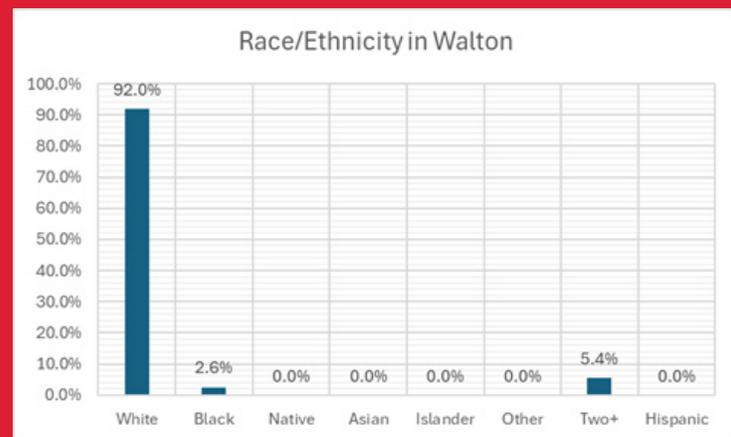


Figure 1.3. Population by Race/Ethnicity in Walton, NE.
 Source: 2019-2023 ACS 5-Year Estimates, Table B03002

¹² "Walton CDP, Nebraska - Census Bureau Profile," Populations and People, accessed December 11, 2025, https://data.census.gov/profile/Walton_CDP,_Nebraska?g=160XX00US3151280#populations-and-people.

¹³ Populations and People, "Walton CDP, Nebraska - Census Bureau Profile."

¹⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, Age and Sex, American Community Survey, ACS 5-Year Estimates Subject Tables, Table S0101 (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2023), <https://data.census.gov/table/ACSST5Y2023.S0101?g=160XX00US3151280>.

¹⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, Race, Decennial Census, DEC Demographic and Housing Characteristics, Table P8 (2020), <https://data.census.gov/table/DECENNIALDHC2020.P8?g=160XX00US3151280>.

¹⁶ "Walton CDP, Nebraska - Census Bureau Profile," accessed December 11, 2025, https://data.census.gov/profile/Walton_CDP,_Nebraska?g=160XX00US3151280#housing.



WALTON



Business

In the village of Walton, the total number of citizens employed is 393. Walton experienced a 15.6% growth rate in citizen employment in 2019-2023. Breaking this down by employment sector: 72.30% of people are employed in transportation, 5.09% in sales, 4.83% in health diagnostics, 4.07% in office and administrative support, 4.07% in food preparation and service, 3.05% in management, 2.29% in personal care, and 2.04% in personal finance. Although these occupations are common among employed community members, most residents are employed outside the village. Walton itself does not have any businesses within the village limits, despite some being listed under Walton addresses. Even so, the trail creates potential for new business activity in the area and has already contributed to economic activity nearby. There is a particular opportunity for a business that serves users of the MoPac Trail.¹⁶

Walton demonstrates distinctive commuting patterns from other towns along the MoPac East trail. Among the 393 working individuals in 2023 (2019–2023 ACS 5-year estimates), a noticeable share (72.3%) worked from home, which is more than seven times the share in Cass County (10.9%) and the state of Nebraska (10.0%). However, the remaining working population (27.7%) drove alone to work, with a mean travel time of 15.7 minutes. This rate is about one-third of the rate in Cass County (78.6%) and the state of Nebraska (77.3%).¹⁷

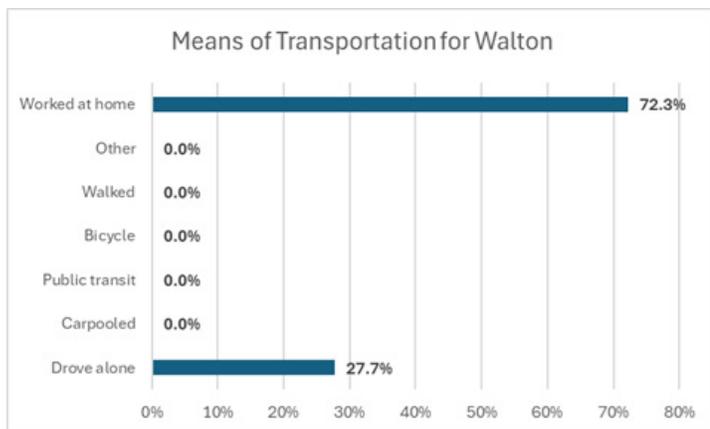


Figure 1.4. Means of Transportation to Work in Walton, NE.
Source: 2019-2023 ACS 5-Year Estimates, Table B08006

Housing

Walton is a small, rural community east of Lincoln with a surprisingly high-value housing market. The median home value is \$491,100, and 95.7% of households are occupied. The Mopac Trail East runs from Lincoln through Walton toward Wabash, and around 95.7% of households are owner-occupied. This proximity to the trail can increase recreation value and boost desirability for buyers seeking outdoor amenities.¹⁸

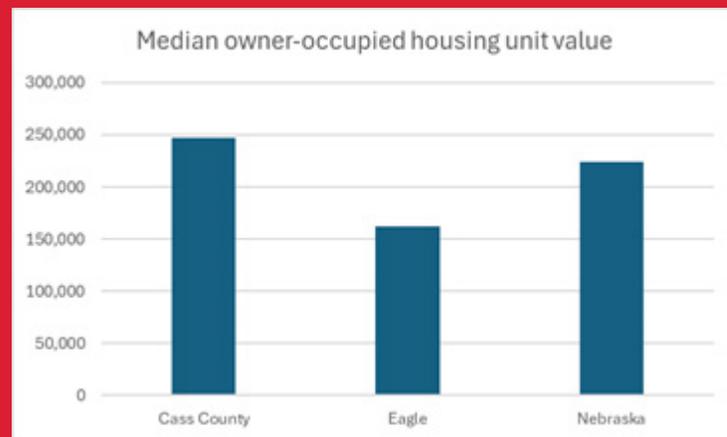


Figure 1.5. Median unit value in comparison to Nebraska & Cass County.
Source: 2019-2023 ACS 5-Year Estimates, Table DP04

¹⁶ U.S. Census Bureau, Selected Economic Characteristics, American Community Survey, ACS 5-Year Estimates Subject Tables, Table DP03 (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2023), <https://data.census.gov/table/ACSDP5Y2023.DP03?g=160XX00US3115430>.

¹⁷ U.S. Census Bureau, Commuting Characteristics by Sex, American Community Survey, ACS 5-Year Estimates Subject Tables, Table S0801 (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2023), <https://data.census.gov/table/ACSST5Y2023.S0801>.

¹⁸ “Walton CDP, Nebraska - Census Bureau Profile,” accessed December 11, 2025, https://data.census.gov/profile/Walton_CDP,_Nebraska?g=160XX00US3151280#housing.



Image: Johnston, Barbara “Aerial View of Eagle.” Snyder & Associates, <https://www.snyder-associates.com/webinars/nebraska-infrastructure-project-funding-overview-and-case-study/>. Accessed 19 November 2025.

EAGLE

Community Profiles & Development History

History

Eagle was incorporated in 1891 following a near-unanimous local petition, reflecting the community’s early civic engagement and shared vision for growth.¹⁹ Soon after incorporation, residents established key public institutions—including a village board, town hall, and small jail—that formed the foundation of local governance. Positioned along regional transportation routes, Eagle grew as a small but connected community, shaped by both its agricultural surroundings and its role as a local service center.

¹⁹ “History,” Village of Eagle, accessed December 11, 2025, <https://eaglene.gov/history>.



Demographics

The total population of Eagle is 1,089 in 2023, ranking 3rd among the seven trail towns. There has been a steady upward trend of population growth over the past five years, showing an increase from 900 in 2019 to 1,089 in 2023, with a slight decrease in 2022 before rising again in 2023.²⁰

From the perspective of population distribution by age range, Eagle has the lowest proportion of older adults (aged 65 and over) with 7.9%, which is less than half the rate in Nebraska (16.4%) and Cass County (18.3%). The working-age population between aged 18 to 64 years accounts for 69.7%, a higher share than the average rate across the six towns (60.8%), except in Wabash. This figure is also about 20 percent higher than the rate in Nebraska (59.0%).

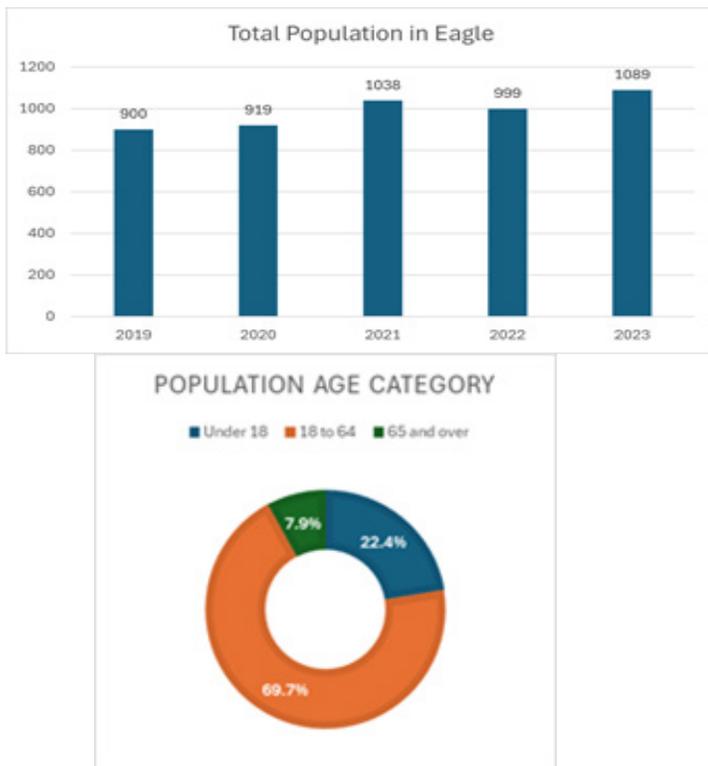


Figure 1.6. Population in Eagle, NE.
 Source: ACS 2023 5-year summary (The American Community Survey)

Within the working-age group, both the 45 to 49 and 20 to 24 year groups account for significant shares, with a larger proportion of females than males. The female population also outnumbers the male population in the youth group.

When it comes to racial and ethnic composition in Eagle, like other towns, the White population accounts for a predominant proportion (94.6%). Yet, Eagle remains less diverse, with a low share of Hispanic residents (3.8%), people of two or more races (1.3%), and individuals of some other race (0.4%).²¹

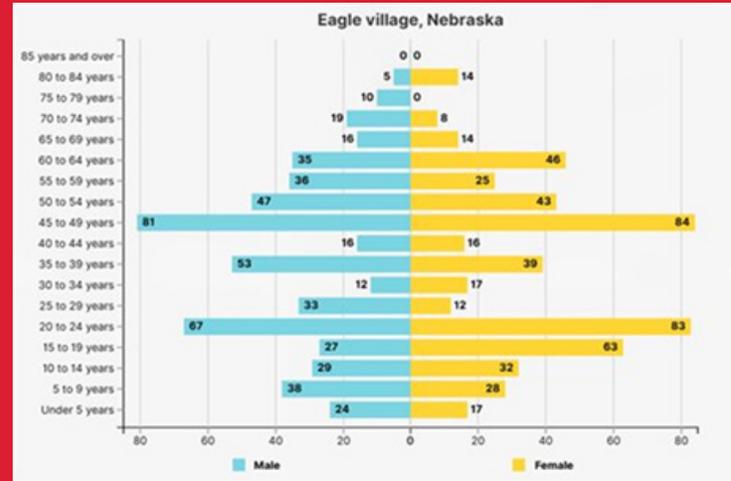


Figure 1.7. Population Pyramid for Eagle, NE.
 Source: 2019-2023 ACS 5-Year Estimates Subject Tables.

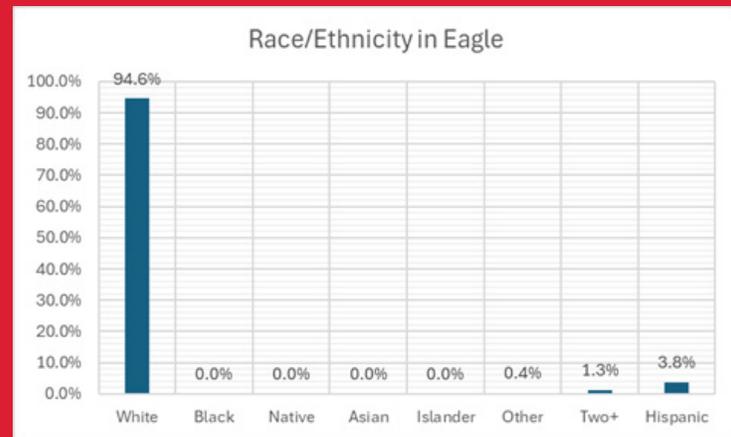


Figure 1.8. Population by Race/Ethnicity in Eagle, NE.
 Source: 2019-2023 ACS 5-Year Estimates, Table B03002

²⁰ "Eagle Village, Nebraska - Census Bureau Profile," accessed December 11, 2025, https://data.census.gov/profile/Eagle_village,_Nebraska?g=160XX00US3114100.

²¹ U.S. Census Bureau, Race.



EAGLE

Business

Business in the city of Eagle has seen a significant increase in popularity due to the MoPac trail. The most significant of these is the local bar, Bailey's Local, which hosts a Tuesday night nacho bike ride where riders from Lincoln ride to Eagle to eat and have drinks. This is consistent throughout the summer, and the bar has seen an increase in its customer base on Tuesdays during the warm season. There is also a Dollar General and a Casey's gas station in the town, both of which have seen economic growth resulting from the introduction of the MoPac Trail.

After speaking with the Deputy Clerk of Eagle, Terry Caddy, he confirmed that MoPac has had a positive influence on the economy and businesses in town. When asked, "Does the MoPac trail have an economic influence on the village?" Terry replied, "Yes, there is a strong influence during the summer when, for a few days a year, there are group bike rides. There is a weekly meeting with bikers on Tuesday nights at the local bar. This even brings all kinds of people from Lincoln to Eagle to ride, eat at the bar, drink, and

then ride back together. There are also a Casey's general store and a Dollar General in the town, which benefit from the bike riders who ride into town and then go to these two stores for food and beverages."

With the population of Eagle set to double in the next 25 years, the MoPac trail has become influential in the newly developed and developing neighborhoods. The trail connects towns such as Lincoln and Eagle, offering better relationships with surrounding cities and towns. The new developments have even built sidewalks to the trail. These new introductions contribute positively to the local economy and businesses.

The MoPac Trail has a notable influence on the town of Eagle. While it is not as heavily used as an intra-city trail, it remains a valued amenity, and city staff consistently emphasize the benefits it has brought to the community. Although at first this trail was a point of contention with some believing the easement denied farmers' land that could otherwise be planted, the trail now



Business - Continued

brings people to the local businesses who wouldn't otherwise make the trek. It is also evident that this trail serves as a connection between towns, villages, and cities even as far as connecting Lincoln to Omaha.

After speaking with Terry, we see opportunities to expand the MoPac Trail's impact in these rural areas. There is also a horse trail which follows along the MoPac trail, and there is potential to advertise this and further develop the trail as an opportunity for horse riders to make the trip from Lincoln to Omaha on horseback. We could also encourage campsites along the trail, which would encourage more people to ride the trail further and turn this trip into an extended experience. This additional intrigue and encouragement for trail users would result in further stimulus for businesses.

Most of the working population in Eagle commuted by driving alone (78.1%), showing a similar level of dependency on personal vehicles to Cass County (78.6) and Nebraska (77.3%).²² Eagle represented the highest carpooled rate among the seven towns, with a 1.5 times higher rate than that in Nebraska (8.5%) and Cass County (7.9%). However, the other means, such as walking, bicycle, and public transit, weren't considered to be critical commute modes for residents.



Figure 1.9. Employment Occupations for Eagle, NE.
 Source: 2019-2023 ACS 5-Year Estimates

Housing

Eagle's housing stock is mainly dominated by single-family homes that reflect its small-town character. The median house value is around \$161,800 as of 2023, with a median gross rent of \$737. Housing is desirable in Eagle due to its location, price, and the Waverly School District. Interestingly, the majority of the land within and adjacent to Eagle may be reserved for housing due to 91% of residents working in either Lincoln or Omaha. In relation to the Mopac trail, it presents an opportunity for connectivity. The village is considering completing a walkability/connectivity study to determine the most critical pedestrian routes in town.²³ This is an effort to identify sidewalks or an alternate pedestrian path that could be repaired or replaced. This will no doubt help the residents' standard of living in the village.

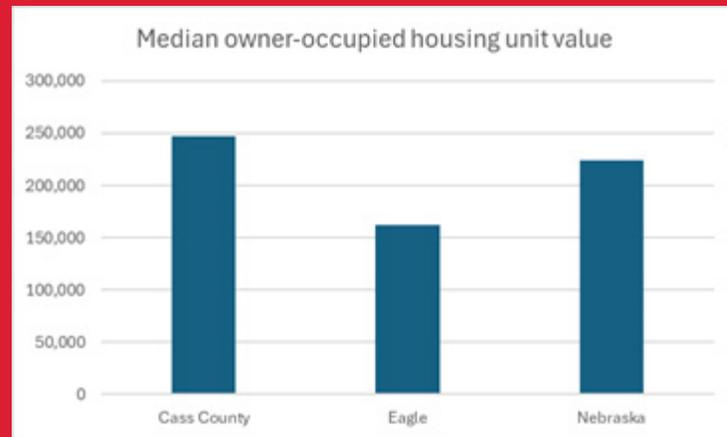


Figure 1.10. Median unit value for Eagle in comparison to Nebraska & Cass County.

Source: 2019-2023 ACS 5-Year Estimates, Table DP04

²² U.S. Census Bureau, Commuting Characteristics by Sex.

²³ EAGLE, NEBRASKA COMPREHENSIVE DEVELOPMENT PLAN UPDATE 2018 TO 2028 (2018), https://eagle.ne.gov/documents/191/Eagle_Comprehensive_Plan_-_Final_1-18-19.pdf.



Image: "Aerial View of Elmwood." Zillow, https://www.zillow.com/homedetails/209-E-D-St-Elmwood-NE-68349/97078616_zpid/. Accessed 19 November 2025.

ELMWOOD

Community Profiles & Development History

History

Elmwood, founded in 1868 and historically organized around its early post office, has long been shaped by the movement of people and goods along regional transportation routes. Its position between Lincoln and Omaha has given the community a distinct small-town identity supported by local institutions, a connected park system, and steady residential activity. Today, Elmwood's role along the MoPac Trail reinforces that legacy, positioning the village as both a local hub and a destination for trail users. The following community profile examines Elmwood's demographic trends, housing characteristics, and business activity to better understand how the community is evolving and how the trail contributes to ongoing economic and social conditions.



Demographics

From 2019 to 2023, the total population of Elmwood gradually increased except for the year 2020. As the 4th largest town among the seven, the total population reached 765 by 2023, increasing from 701 in 2020.²⁵

Elmwood represents the lowest percentage of the working-age population between the ages of 18 and 64, which is less than half of the total population (49.3%).²⁶ This figure is also lower than the rates in Cass County (58.1%) and Nebraska (59.0%). This indicates comparatively greater dependency pressures on working-age groups from younger and older groups. The population under 18 in Elmwood (30.2%), however, indicates a relatively higher rate than both Nebraska (24.7%) and Cass County (23.6%).²⁷

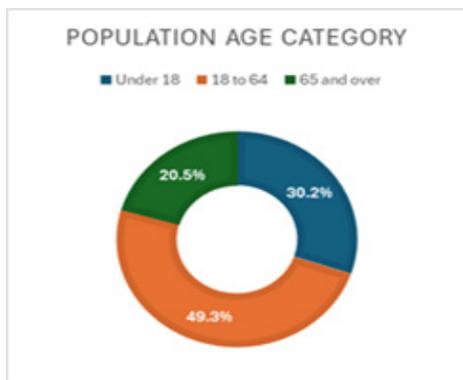
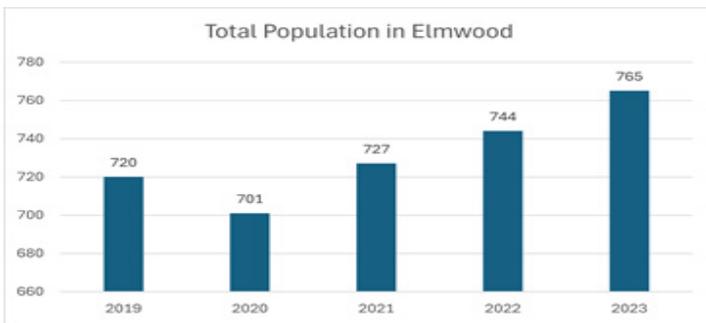


Figure 1.11. Population in Elmwood, NE.
Source: ACS 2023 5-year summary (The American Community Survey)

When examined using the population pyramid of Elmwood, the youth cohort aged under 19 accounts for almost one-third (33.1%) of the total population, totaling 253 out of 765. This represents the strong presence of a younger demographic in the Elmwood community. In the 5 to 9 years group, the male population outnumbers the female population by approximately 1.5 times. Also, the female population significantly outnumbers males in specific age cohorts, such as the 30 to 34-year and 40 to 44-year groups.

Elmwood has the highest share of White residents among the seven towns, at 98.0% (750 out of 765). This figure is about 1.3 times the rate in Nebraska (76.2%) and slightly outnumbers that of Cass County (92.3%).²⁸ However, the population doesn't include any individuals from Black or African American, Asian, Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander, Some Other Race, or Hispanic. And only 4 American Indian and Alaska Native residents (0.5%) were identified, along with 11 people (1.4%) of two or more races.

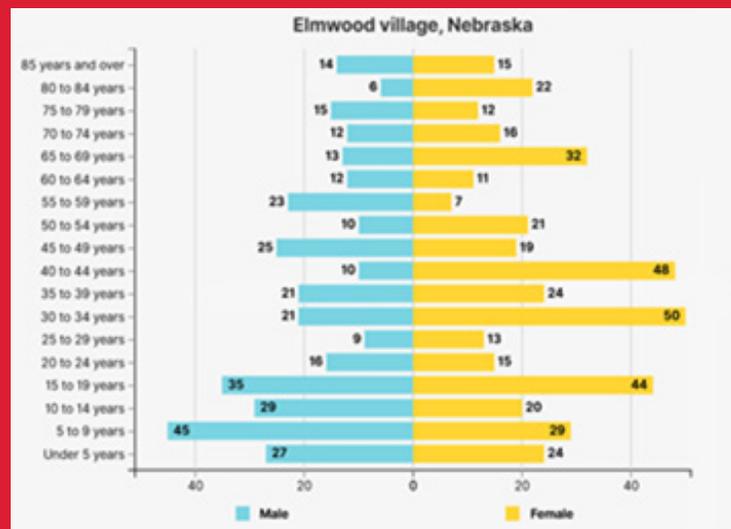


Figure 1.12. Population Pyramid for Elmwood, NE.
Source: 2019-2023 ACS 5-Year Estimates Subject Tables.

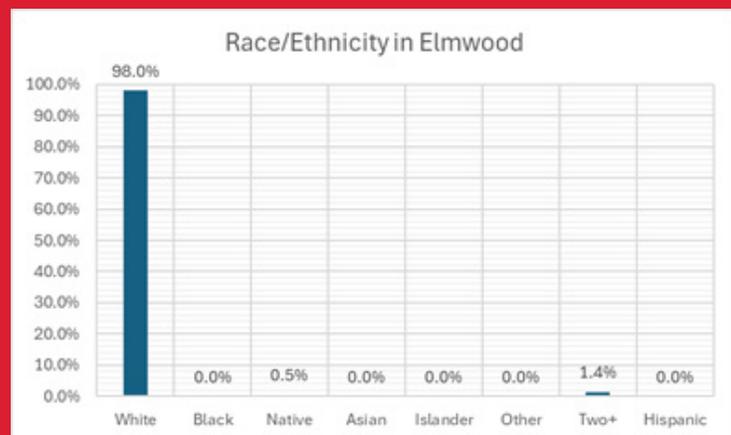


Figure 1.13. Population by Race/Ethnicity in Elmwood, NE.
Source: 2019-2023 ACS 5-Year Estimates, Table B03002

²⁵ "Elmwood Village, Nebraska - Census Bureau Profile.

²⁶ U.S. Census Bureau, Age and Sex.

²⁷ U.S. Census Bureau, Census Business Builder (n.d.), accessed November 15, 2025, <https://cbb.census.gov/>.

²⁸ U.S. Census Bureau, Census Business Builder.



ELMWOOD

Business

General business statistics for the Village of Elmwood include 689 total employed, and a growth rate of 7.1 percent in employment in the village from 2019 to 2023.²⁹

Most of the employed residents who live in Elmwood work outside of Elmwood. Out of the 765 total citizens in the village, 375 members of the population in Elmwood are in the labor force who are 16 and over, and the mean travel time to work is 31.1 minutes.³⁰

The MoPac trail has a positive impact on the Village of Elmwood, as confirmed in an interview with Village Clerk/Treasurer Alicia Greise. When asked, “Does the MoPac trail have an economic influence on the village?” Alicia replied, “Yes. There is a Pie Ride event in the community that they look forward to, where a local business owner bakes both pies and pizzas for bike riders. There are other various events throughout the biking season...” Alicia continued, demonstrating an appreciation for the MoPac trail’s influence on local business, “This trail started as an issue, which local landowners contested. It has since become a point of attention, encouraging events such as the Pie Ride. The community is much more accepting of the trail now, and the trail will continue to be a point of emphasis for the town

and the village office moving forward.” Alicia mentioned that she herself enjoys the fun of the pie ride and that it encourages local economic activity.

“The trail has offered locals a healthy alternative for recreation. This influence on the local economy is significant. The town businesses have seen additional economic activity as the trail has gained popularity,” said Alicia. Alicia sounded welcome to the potential for more events and use of the trail in the Elmwood area. It is a good amenity for the town, and with the excitement surrounding the Pie Ride, it was clear that more activity around the trail was welcome. Alicia noted that extending the trail will keep bicyclists from having to ride on the highway, which is dangerous. The trail also crosses high-speed roads, which are often hazardous due to traffic.

Elmwood also has a few unique trail-adjacent features, including an Airbnb and a home located directly next to the MoPac Trail, where the driveway intersects with the trail itself. According to the Airbnb owner, the trail attracts a group of riders who return annually and stay at the property. This illustrates another way the MoPac Trail contributes to local economic activity.

²⁹ U.S. Census Bureau, Selected Economic Characteristics.

³⁰ “DP03: Selected ... - Census Bureau Table,” accessed December 11, 2025, <https://data.census.gov/table/ACSDP5Y2023.DP03?g=160XX00US1948720>.



Business - Continued

Kurk Shrader, the owner of a local thrift shop in Elmwood, “Bits and Pieces,” said that although there has been a recent decrease in business and services, there is a positive influence on the local economy resulting from the MoPac trail. When asked if any businesses are associated with the trail, he recognized that “Many have benefited [from the trail], including the Market-to-Market Relay and Harvest Moon Hustle. It provides opportunities for civic groups and activities (races, Pie Rides, etc.) [The] Bike Rack and University Outdoor Adventure Center have [bike] rentals—there’s the Elmwood Pie Ride, Tuesday night Nacho Ride, Great plains Trail Network, Nebraska Trails Foundation, Mopac Alliance, and Bike Walk Nebraska.”

Kurk, when asked, “How has the trail affected the community so far?” responded, “We run an Airbnb. We often have guests bring their bikes and use our apartment as their ‘home base’ while visiting. We have been able to enjoy events like the Pie Ride even though we don’t ride bikes. We are involved with non-profits that have generated over \$1,000 per Pie Ride as our fundraisers. There were seven [rides] this year.”

There is a positive overall impact on the village of Elmwood from the MoPac trail. Commuting patterns in Elmwood are heavily dominated by single-occupancy vehicles, showing 82.6% of the employed population drove alone to work.³¹ This share slightly outnumbers the rates in Cass County (78.6%) and Nebraska writ large (77.3%). Other means of transportation, such as carpooling (3.9%)

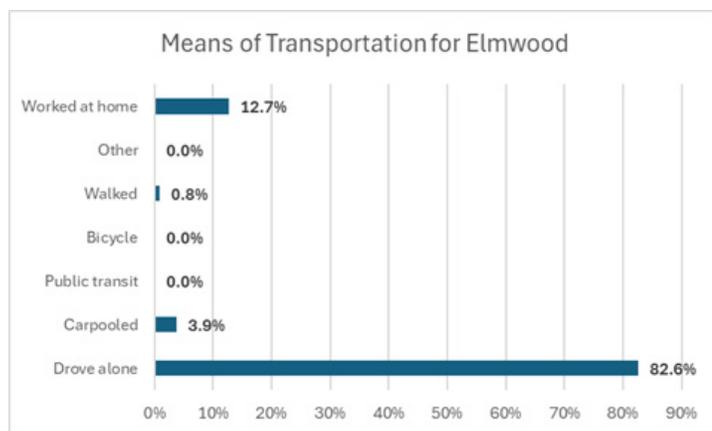


Figure 1.14. Means of Transportation to Work for Elmwood, NE.
 Source: 2019-2023 ACS 5-Year Estimates, Table B08006

Housing

Elmwood’s median home value is around \$193,487, with a gross rent of \$845. The conversion of the old Missouri Pacific rail corridor into the Mopac Trail brought renewed attention to Elmwood’s properties. Of 310 estimated housing units in Elmwood, 299 are occupied.³²

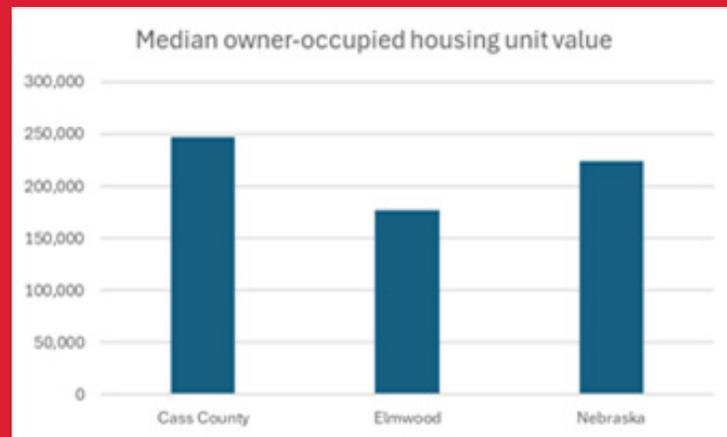


Figure 1.15. Median unit value for Elmwood in comparison to Nebraska & Cass County
 Source: 2019-2013 ACS 5-Year Estimates, Table DP04

³¹ U.S. Census Bureau, Commuting Characteristics by Sex.
³² U.S. Census Bureau, Selected Housing Characteristics, American Community Survey, ACS 5-Year Estimates Subject Tables, Table DP04 (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2023), <https://data.census.gov/table/ACSDP5Y2023.DP04>.



Image: North on Elm Street, Jared Winkler - Own work, Created: 6 May 2017

WABASH

Community Profiles & Development History

History

Wabash is an unincorporated community in Cass County and serves as the current eastern terminus of the MoPac Trail. The community likely adopted its name from Wabash, Indiana, and its early history is marked by the establishment of a post office in 1886, which operated until 1965.³³ As a small rural settlement without municipal governance, Wabash remains limited in publicly available demographic, housing, and economic data compared to incorporated towns along the corridor.

³³ Lilian L. Fitzpatrick Nebraska Place-Names (U of Nebraska Press, 1960).



Demographics

According to Census Business Builder, the total population in Wabash is 747, with a population density of 47 people per square mile.³⁴ This population is usually calculated by the ZIP Code, which also includes Murdock.

In terms of housing status, the median housing value in Wabash/Murdock area was \$178,600, which is below the median values for Cass County and Nebraska. The median income was \$66,719, with a median rent of \$950.³⁵

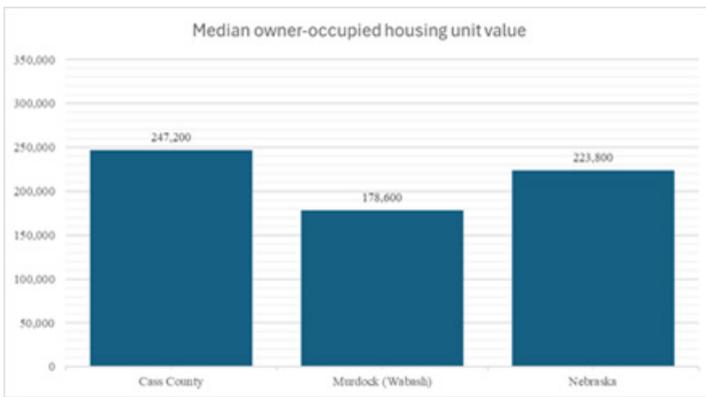


Figure 1.16. Median housing unit value for Wabash in comparison to Nebraska & Cass County.

Source: 2019-2023 ACS 5-Year Estimates, Table DP04

Housing

Elmwood's median home value is around \$193,487, with a gross rent of \$845. The conversion of the old Missouri Pacific rail corridor into the Mopac Trail brought renewed attention to Elmwood's properties. Of 310 estimated housing units in Elmwood, 299 are occupied.²⁹

³⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, Census Business Builder.

³⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, Selected Housing Characteristics.



Image: Hayden Outdoors Real Estate. "Aerial View of South Bend." Land.com, <https://www.land.com/property/42-hilltop-dr-loup-city-nebraska-68853/24877229/>. Accessed 19 November

SOUTH BEND

Community Profiles & Development History

History

South Bend, first settled in 1856 and platted the following year, developed around the prominent bend in the Platte River that gives the community its name.³⁶ Its early identity was shaped by this river-oriented geography, which influenced local settlement patterns and economic activity. Today, South Bend remains one of the smallest communities along the MoPac corridor. The following profile examines its demographic conditions, housing characteristics, and economic patterns to understand how this rural river community fits into broader regional trends and how future trail connectivity may support local needs.

³⁶ "HISTORY OF SOUTH BEND," accessed December 11, 2025, <https://www.southbendnebraska.com/history/history.htm>



Demographics

South Bend is one of the smallest villages among the seven trail towns, with a total population consistently decreasing from 110 in 2020 to 92 in 2022, except for the year 2023, which saw a slight increase to 99.³⁷

Notably, South Bend shows a significantly low percentage of population under age 18 (5.1%), which is about one-fifth of the rate in Nebraska (24.7%) and Cass County (23.6%).³⁸ However, the working-age population (18 to 64 years) accounts for the largest share (72.7%), about 25% higher than Nebraska's 59.0% and Cass County's 58.1%

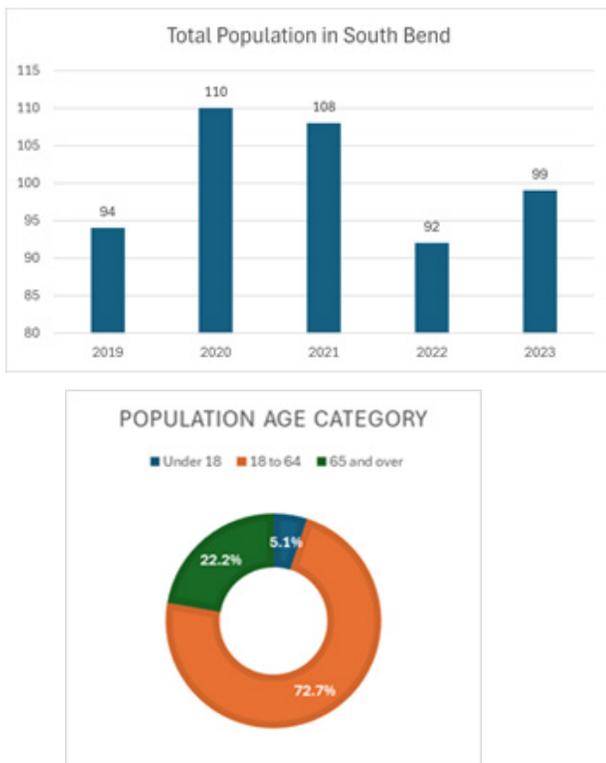


Figure 1.17. Population of South Bend, NE.
 Source: ACS 2023 5-year summary (The American Community Survey)

In terms of age category, the 55 to 59 years group accounts for approximately 27.3% of the total population, with 27 out of 99 people. The male population outnumbers females across several key age groups, including 15–19, 20–24, 25–29, and 30–34 years. On the other hand, some age groups over 65 years, such as 70–74 and 80–84, have larger female than male populations.³⁹

South Bend is among the least diverse of the seven villages in the MoPac corridor. Most residents identify as White, and the only other notable racial/ethnic group represented in the community is Hispanic. However, South Bend shows a relatively high share of Hispanic residents (10.1%) compared with the average across the seven villages (3.1%) and Cass County (3.94%), though it remains slightly below the statewide rate in Nebraska (12.3%).⁴⁰

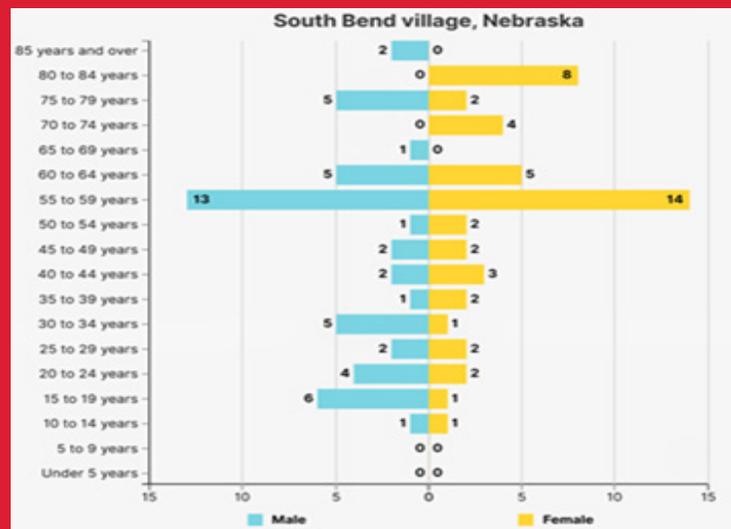


Figure 1.18. Population Pyramid for South Bend, NE
 Source: 2019-2023 ACS 5-Year Estimates Subject Tables.

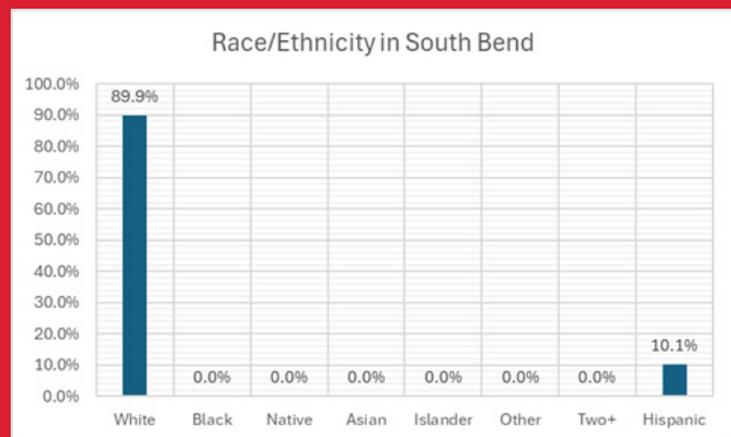


Figure 1.19. Population by Race/Ethnicity in South Bend, NE.
 Source: 2019-2023 ACS 5-Year Estimates, Table B03002

³⁷ U.S. Census Bureau, Selected Housing Characteristics.
³⁸ U.S. Census Bureau, Census Business Builder.
³⁹ U.S. Census Bureau, Age and Sex.
⁴⁰ U.S. Census Bureau, Census Business Builder.



SOUTH BEND



Business

South Bend is home to 62 employed citizens. Educational services are the most common occupations among South Bend residents, followed by retail trade, manufacturing, and health care.⁴¹

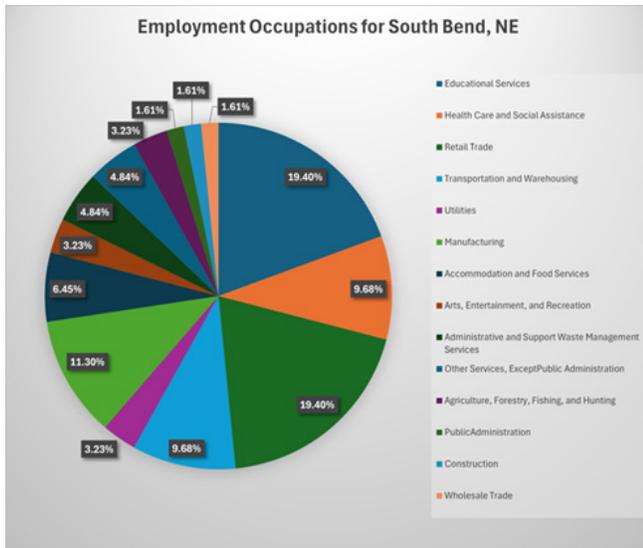


Figure 1.20. Employment Occupations for South Bend, NE.
Source: 2019-2023 ACS 5-Year Estimates

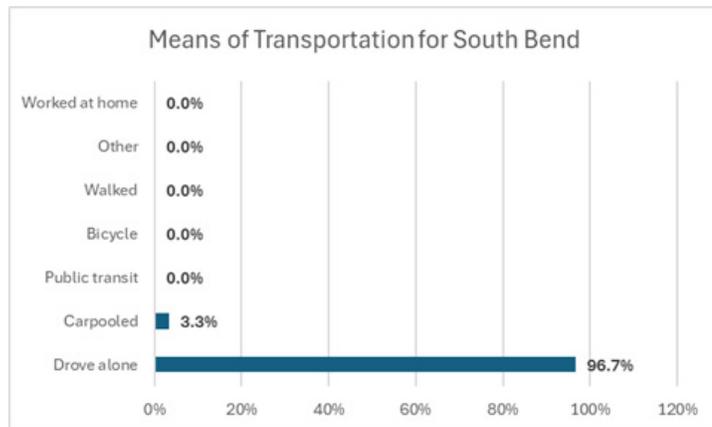


Figure 1.21. Means of Transportation to Work for South Bend, NE.
Source: 2019-2023 ACS 5-Year Estimates, Table B08006

Commuting modes in South Bend are relatively limited, consisting solely of driving alone and carpooling. The vast majority of the working population in South Bend is heavily dependent on personal vehicles, with the share of driving alone to workplaces reaching 96.7%.⁴² This figure is significantly above the levels in Cass County (78.6%) and Nebraska (77.3%), by about 25%. Carpooling accounts for an insignificant share (3.3%), especially when contrasted with Cass County (7.9%) and Nebraska (8.5%).⁴³

Housing

South Bend is a small community representing predominantly single-family housing with an estimated median housing price of \$114,700. The median household income is \$61,860, with a median gross rent of \$931. South Bend has a total of 49 housing units, with 41 of those units being occupied.⁴⁴

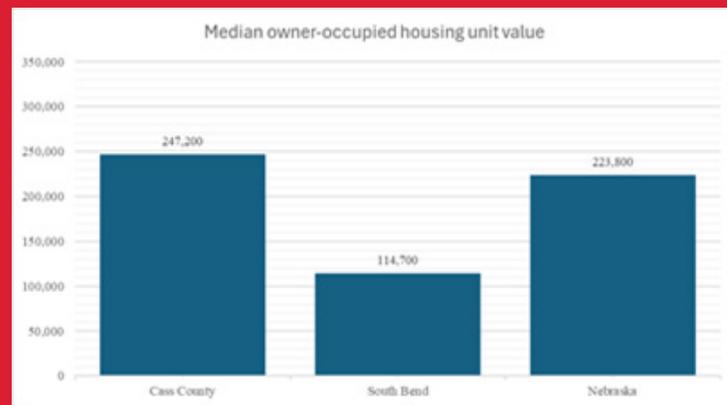


Figure 1.22. Median housing unit value in South Bend, NE.
Source: 2019-2023 ACS 5-year estimate, Table DP04

⁴¹ U.S. Census Bureau, Selected Economic Characteristics.
⁴² U.S. Census Bureau, Commuting Characteristics by Sex.
⁴³ U.S. Census Bureau, Census Business Builder.
⁴⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, Selected Housing Characteristics.



Image: American Legacy Land Co. "Aerial View of Louisville." American Legacy Land Co., <https://americanlegacylandco.com/listing/louisville-ne-68037-591740>. Accessed 19 November 2025.

LOUISVILLE

Community Profiles & Development History

History

Established in 1857, Louisville has long served as a recreational hub along the Platte River, shaped by early settlement patterns and its riverfront setting.⁴⁵ Today, Louisville remains a regional destination for outdoor activity, making its community profile particularly relevant to understanding how trail use, local economic vitality, and recreation-based development intersect. Its size, amenities, and location distinguish Louisville within the corridor's range of rural communities.

⁴⁵ About Louisville – City of Louisville Nebraska, n.d., accessed December 11, 2025, <https://louisvillene.gov/about-louisville/>.



Demographics

As the second largest village in the MoPac trail corridor, Louisville has had a gradual increase in population for the last five years, except for the year 2023, which showed a slight drop from 1,499 people in 2022.⁴⁶

Louisville’s population is relatively balanced between working-age and dependent (older and younger) groups, with its working-age share showing only minimal variation from Cass County (58.1%) and the state of Nebraska (59.0%).

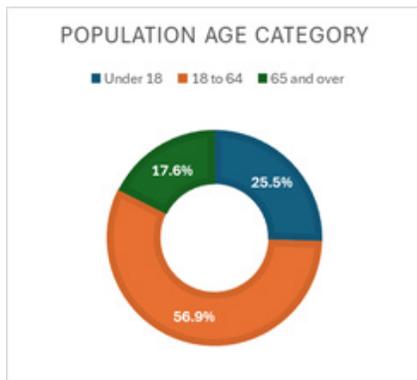
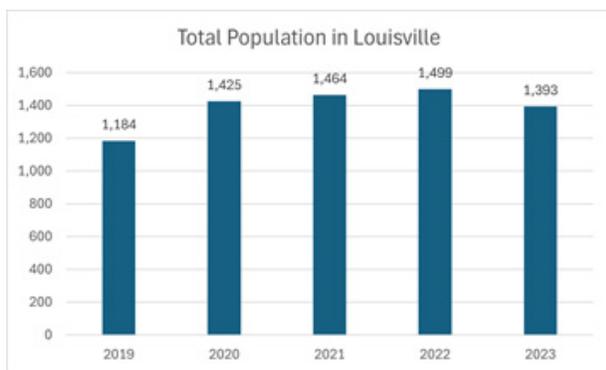


Figure 1.23. Population in Louisville, NE.
 Source: ACS 2023 5-year summary (The American Community Survey)

Notably, the population aged 40-49 in Louisville accounts for 19.2% of the total population, which is higher than the rate in Nebraska (11.8%).⁴⁷

Louisville is one of the more diverse communities along the MoPac, with a majority White population (87.5%) and smaller shares of residents identifying as Hispanic, Asian, American Indian or Alaska Native, or two or more races.⁴⁸

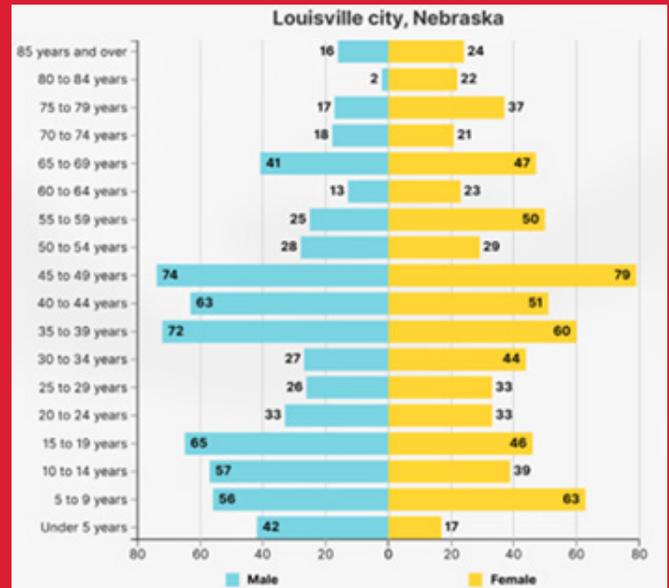


Figure 1.24. Population Pyramid for Louisville, NE.
 Source: 2019-2023 ACS 5-Year Estimates Subject Tables.

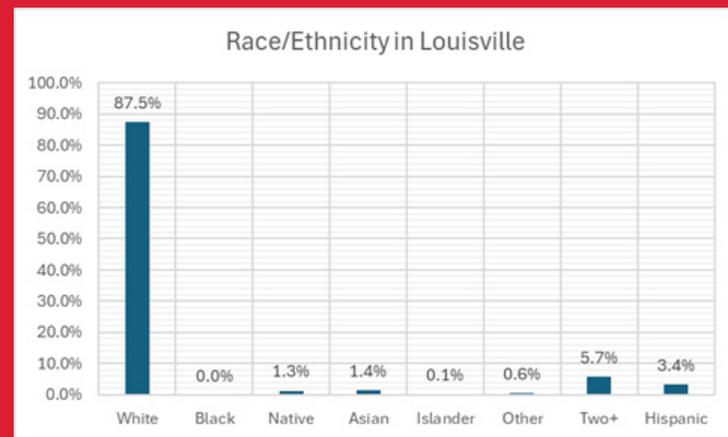


Figure 1.25. Population by Race/Ethnicity in Louisville, NE.
 Source: 2019-2023 ACS 5-Year Estimates, Table B03002

⁴⁶ “Louisville City, Nebraska - Census Bureau Profile,” accessed December 11, 2025, https://data.census.gov/profile/Louisville_city,_Nebraska?g=160XX00US3129260.

⁴⁷ U.S. Census Bureau, Age and Sex.

⁴⁸ U.S. Census Bureau, Race.



LOUISVILLE



Business

The business employment growth Rate in Louisville from 2019-2023 was -2.51%. Construction and extraction were the most common occupations in Louisville, Nebraska. Management was the second most common occupation, with Education being the third most common.⁴⁹

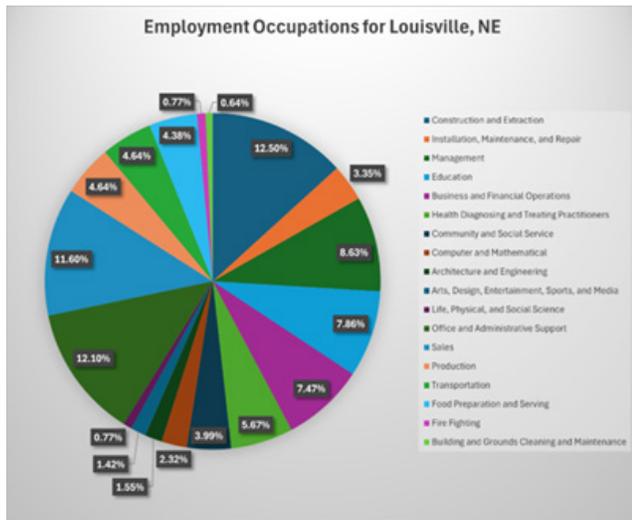


Figure 1.26. Employment Occupations for Louisville, NE. Source: 2019-2023 ACS 5-Year Estimates

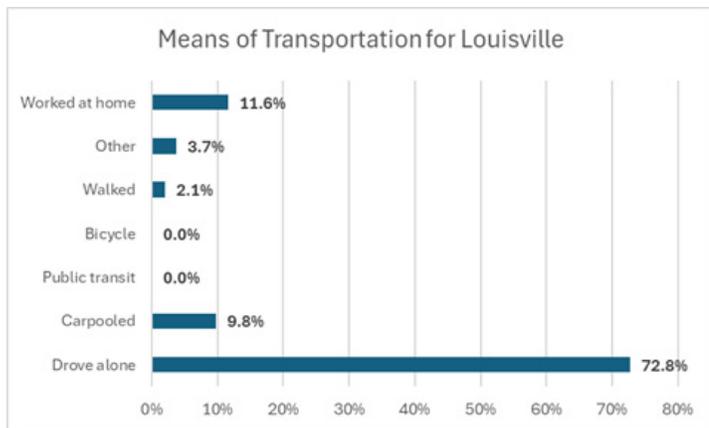


Figure 1.27. Means of Transportation to Work for Louisville, NE. Source: 2019-2023 ACS 5-Year Estimates, Table B08006

Similar to most other trail villages, most of the working population in Louisville depended on driving their personal vehicles (72.8%), while some people either carpooled (9.8%) or walked (2.1%) to work.⁵⁰

Housing

Louisville’s median home value is \$204,700, which is lower than both Nebraska and Cass County median housing values in 2023, with a gross rent of \$1,153.⁵¹ Overall, Louisville is a small community with a high share of family households and low median home values which is typical of predominately single-family housing stock in rural Nebraska towns.



Figure 1.28. Median unit Value for Louisville in comparison to Nebraska & Cass County. Source: 2019-2023 ACS 5-year estimate, Table DP04

⁴⁹ U.S. Census Bureau, Selected Economic Characteristics.
⁵⁰ U.S. Census Bureau, Commuting Characteristics by Sex.
⁵¹ U.S. Census Bureau, Selected Housing Characteristics.



Image: City of Springfield. "Aerial View of Springfield." Springfield Nebraska, <https://www.springfieldne.org/>. Accessed 19 November 2025.

SPRINGFIELD

Community Profiles & Development History

History

Established in 1881, Springfield quickly emerged as a growing settlement after early residents re-located buildings from nearby Sarpy Center to the new townsite.⁵² Within its first year, the community reached a population of 300, reflecting its early role as a local hub for commerce and daily life. Today, Springfield's development patterns, small-town character, and position along regional transportation corridors continue to influence its growth. This community profile outlines Springfield's demographic trends, housing characteristics, and economic conditions to better understand its place within the MoPac corridor.

⁴⁵ City of Springfield - History of Springfield," accessed December 11, 2025, <https://www.springfieldne.org/vnews/display-v/SEC/Community%7CHistory%20of%20Springfield>.



Demographics

Springfield is has the largest population among the seven villages in the trail corridor. Springfield’s total population increased overall from 1,466 in 2019 to 1,620 in 2023, despite small fluctuations in 2021 and 2022. The most notable increase occurred between 2019 and 2020.⁵³

The proportion of the working-age population, between the ages of 18 and 64 years, accounts for 55.7% of the population, which is a little bit less than the rate in Cass County (58.1%) and the state of Nebraska (59.0%). However, the older population (16.5%), aged over 65 years, outnumbered the share of the youth population aged under 18 (27.8%), about 10 percent higher than in Cass County (23.6%) and the state of Nebraska (24.7%).⁵⁴

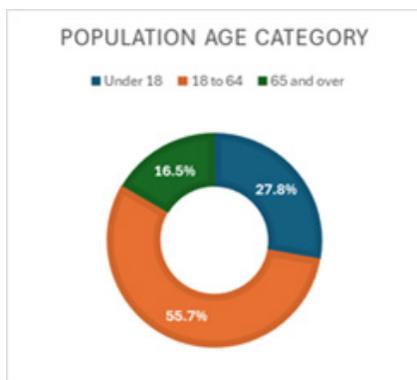
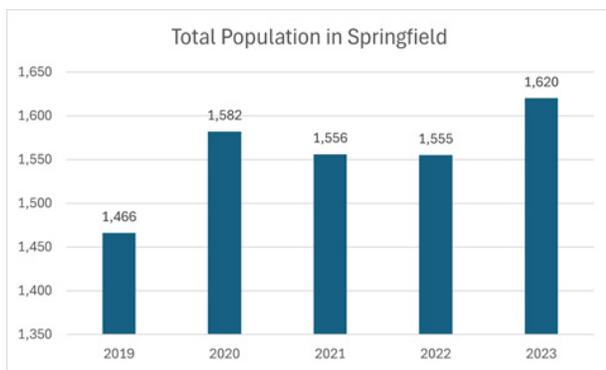


Figure 1.29. Population in Springfield, NE.
 Source: ACS 2023 5-year summary (The American Community Survey)

When examined in terms of the population age category, the 30 to 34 years and 34 to 39 years groups account for the most significant share of the population, together reaching roughly 20.5% of the total population. However, individuals in their 20s represent only a small share of the working-age population, accounting for just 5.5%.⁵⁵

Springfield’s population is predominantly White (94.3%), with all other racial or ethnic groups each making up only a small fraction of the population.⁵⁶ Black or African American and Hispanic residents each account for 1.4%, while Native (American Indian and Alaska Native) residents and individuals of two or more races each account for only 0.2%.

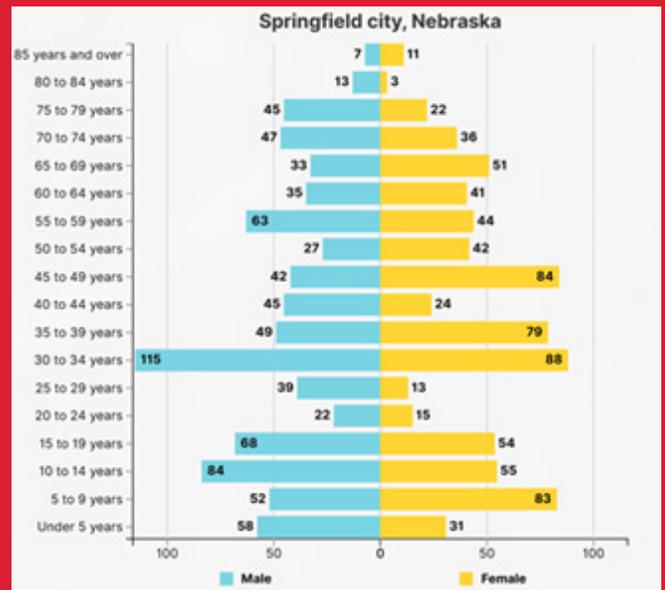


Figure 1.30. Population Pyramid for Springfield, NE
 Source: 2019-2023 ACS 5-Year Estimates Subject Tables.

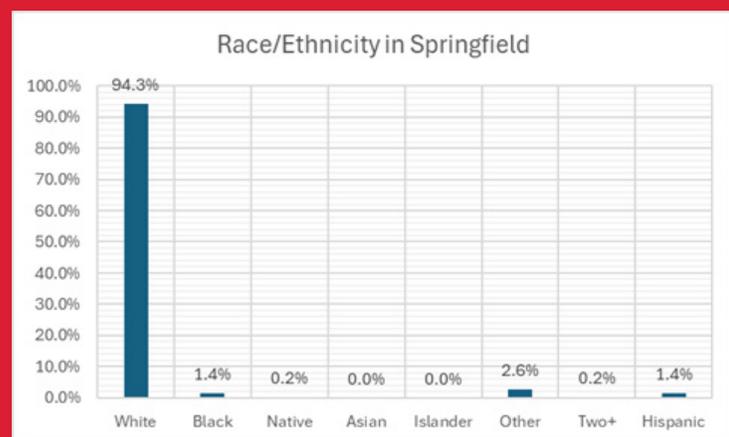


Figure 1.31. Population by Race/Ethnicity Springfield, NE.
 Source: 2019-2023 ACS 5-Year Estimates, Table B03002

⁵³ “Springfield City, Nebraska - Census Bureau Profile,” accessed December 11, 2025, https://data.census.gov/profile/Springfield_city,_Nebraska?g=160XX00US3146520.

⁵⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, Census Business Builder.

⁵⁵ “Springfield City, Nebraska - Census Bureau Profile.”

⁵⁶ U.S. Census Bureau, Race.





Business

Springfield has 869 employed citizens. There was a Growth Rate of +5.72% from 2019-2023 (from 822 to 869). Residents are primarily employed in health-care support occupations, followed by management positions and, third, by jobs in construction.⁵⁸

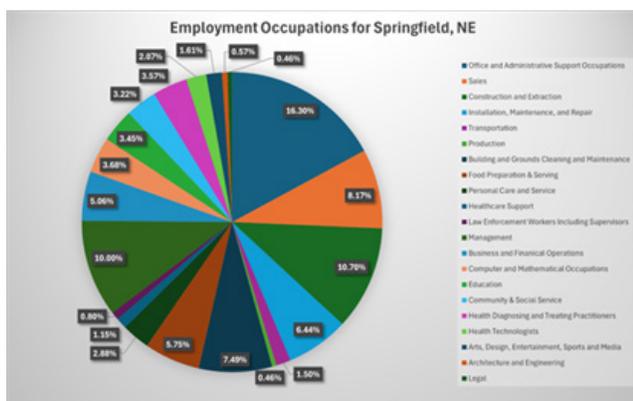


Figure 1.32. Employment Occupations for Springfield, NE. Source: 2019-2023 ACS 5-Year Estimates

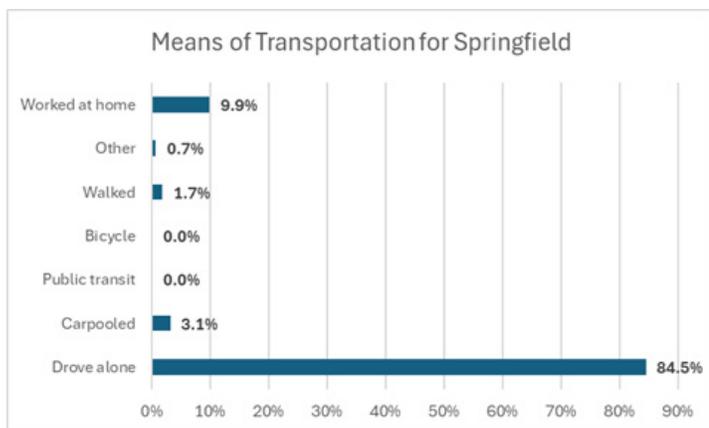


Figure 1.33. Means of Transportation for Springfield, NE. Source: 2019-2023 ACS 5-Year Estimates, Table B08006

Commuting options in Springfield are relatively limited, with residents predominantly depending on personal vehicles (84.5%), while a minimal share of the working population carpooled (3.1%) or walked (1.7%) to their workplaces.

⁵⁸ U.S. Census Bureau, Selected Economic Characteristics.



TRAIL ANALYSIS

Field surveys and observations were conducted to evaluate trail use and community perspectives, with 67 responses collected. Survey results revealed that most users accessed the trail biweekly, with the predominant age group for users being 59 years and older. Respondents reported engaging in a variety of recreational activities along the trail, including biking, walking, running, hiking, dog walking, nature observation, and photography. The most frequently used trail segments were Elmwood to Eagle, Eagle to Wabash, and Lincoln. Overall, users rated their trail experience highly, averaging 9-10, and emphasized the importance of connecting the trail to Omaha, Nebraska, assigning it an average rating of 9 on a 10-point scale measuring importance. Survey respondents highlighted several benefits of the proposed connection, such as enhanced regional connectivity, improved safety, and economic growth for small towns. Increased tourism expanded recreational opportunities and had positive environmental impacts. At the same time, respondents expressed concerns regarding funding, property rights, and ongoing maintenance and safety. Desired trail improvements included safe street crossings, rest areas, benches, water and charging stations, paved surfaces, trail markers, horseback riding access, and adequate parking facilities. Finally, many participants indicated a willingness to support public funding initiatives to advance the trail connection project.

The other part of the trail analysis addressed conditions of the trail.

The Mopac Trail has two sections that were analyzed, the first being the Mopac West Trail and the second being the Mopac East Trail. For Mopac West, this section of the trail spans from 84th Street in Lincoln, NE, to UNL City Campus and Antelope Valley Parkway. Mopac West is approximately five miles long, with points of interest along the trail being UNL City Campus, East Campus, Peter Pan Park, Bethany Park, and the Novartis Trailhead at 84th street. The trail conditions are considered good. There are currently traffic counters along the trail to track how many people walk or bike through the area. In 2017, the trail averaged 103 pedestrians and 114 cyclists per day, with the busiest days being Sundays.⁵⁹ In 2022, Mopac West averaged 3,500 pedestrians and 2,000 cyclists in 2 weeks.⁶⁰

The Mopac East Trail continues from 98th Street, near the edge of Lincoln, Nebraska, to Wabash, NE. This section of the trail spans 21.67 miles and was resurfaced in 2023 with crushed limestone. Points of interest along the trail include water fountains at Walton, Eagle, and Wabash. This section of the trail is also considered to be in good condition. Unlike the West section of the trail, this section does not currently have traffic counters along the trail path, so there is no data for the traffic statistics in this section. Based on field observations, on a good weather day there were about eight people per hour that were using the trail. On a bad weather day, there were about 3-4 people per hour using the trail.

⁵⁹ "Bicycle and Pedestrian Counts," accessed December 11, 2025, <https://www.lincoln.ne.gov/City/Departments/PDS/Planning/MPO/Bike-Lincoln/Bicycle-and-Pedestrian-Counts>.

⁶⁰ "Bicycle and Pedestrian Counts."

Implications, Recommendations, and Funding Opportunities

The findings from this chapter suggest the MoPac Trail functions as more than a recreational amenity. It is a regional connector of small towns with the Lincoln–Omaha metro area, shaping business activity, daily mobility, and long-term development prospects. Demographic analyses of the towns and villages along the MoPac corridor display both shared rural challenges and distinct local profiles. At the same time, most residents continue to rely on single-occupancy vehicles, and the unfinished Wabash–South Bend gap interrupts what could be a continuous low-stress route across Cass County. Trail user surveys and interviews confirm that people value the MoPac for health benefits, scenery, and community events, and that they see clear economic benefits for towns such as Eagle and Elmwood.

When it comes to housing along the corridor, a County-wide housing analysis emphasizes local patterns. Cass County’s recent housing study identifies a limited supply of housing, an aging housing stock, limited senior and transitional housing options, and infrastructure constraints that make it difficult for communities to absorb demand spilling over from the Omaha and Lincoln metropolitan areas.⁶¹ Trails are often marketed as amenities that attract new residents and sup-

port subdivision development; in Eagle and Louisville, new subdivisions and townhome projects are already reshaping the housing landscape.⁶² However, the Cass County study also notes that low-density acreage development can bypass town centers and make infrastructure expansion less efficient, suggesting that trail-oriented growth must be paired with careful land-use policy.

Additionally, comprehensive plans offer a community-specific lens for planning implications. Eagle’s comprehensive development plan anticipates ongoing residential growth driven by commuters to Lincoln and calls for improved local services and amenities to keep daily spending in town. Springfield’s plan articulates a vision of a “prosperous, family-oriented community” with a full range of housing, business, cultural, and recreational opportunities achieved through planned growth and partnerships.⁶³ While housing may be a shared goal among many towns and villages along the corridor, each community has a unique perspective, and resident voices should be at the forefront in MoPac Trail planning efforts. Local visions align with positioning MoPac as both a mobility corridor and a community asset, so long as trail investments reinforce individual community goals.

⁶¹ Amanda Heistand et al., COUNTY-WIDE HOUSING STUDY & AFFORDABLE HOUSING STRATEGIES-2029., n.d.

⁶² EAGLE, NEBRASKA COMPREHENSIVE DEVELOPMENT PLAN UPDATE 2018 TO 2028.

⁶³ “City of Springfield - Comprehensive Plan.”





Implications

The findings from community profiles, stakeholder interviews, and trail survey, along with existing studies and comprehensive plans, revealed the following planning implications:

1. Plan the MoPac as a regional origin–destination network.

Trail user surveys and community interviews highlight that many bicyclists and pedestrians travel between Lincoln, Eagle, Elmwood, and Wabash, with a strong interest in a future connection toward South Bend and Springfield. Planning should therefore emphasize origin–destination patterns: where people are starting, where they are going, and the gaps that prevent continuous, low-stress travel. Completing the Wabash–South Bend segment is central to unlocking that network, particularly for older adults and less experienced riders who are deterred by on-street traffic.

2. Align trail investments with community comprehensive plans and town centers.

As Eagle, Louisville, and Springfield plan for new subdivisions and modest population growth, the MoPac can help these communities realize their stated goals for walkable neighborhoods, local services, and family-oriented recreation.⁶⁴ Side paths, neighborhood connectors, and safe crossings should link new

housing to existing main streets and parks. In smaller communities like Elmwood and Wabash, where comprehensive planning capacity is more limited, integrating the trail into future land-use discussions can help protect access points and prioritize development near the corridor rather than scattered acreage housing.

3. Use the trail strategically within a constrained rural housing market.

Cass County’s housing study makes it clear that trails alone will not solve the region’s housing shortage. The county faces an aging housing stock, limited senior housing options, reluctance toward multi-family projects, and infrastructure constraints, including water capacity.⁶⁵ Within that context, the MoPac can still play a targeted role. In aging communities such as Walton and South Bend, trail-adjacent senior cottages, small duplexes, or accessory dwelling units could offer downsizing options while keeping residents close to services and recreation. In Elmwood, where there is a notable youth presence and evidence of trail-driven tourism, modest “missing middle” housing – or small-scale multi-family housing – near downtown and the trail-head could support young families and entrepreneurs without overwhelming local infrastructure.

⁶⁴ EAGLE, NEBRASKA COMPREHENSIVE DEVELOPMENT PLAN UPDATE 2018 TO 2028.

⁶⁵ “Connecting Trail Riders to Communities: The Elmwood Pie Ride’s Big Impact,” accessed December 16, 2025, <https://www.3newsnow.com/news/local-news/connecting-trail-riders-to-communities-the-elmwood-pie-rides-big-impact>.

Implications - Continued

4. Strengthen the town-trail relationship to capture economic benefits.

Findings from Eagle and Elmwood show that well-programmed events and clear wayfinding translate directly into business activity. For example, the Nebraska Passport program led to a significant increase in visitors to the Bess Streeter Aldrich House and Museum in Elmwood. The organization has also benefited from structured event like Thursday Pie Rides – an event that bring hundreds of cyclists to Elmwood every summer for pie, pizza, and a free concert. Kurt Schrader, the executive director of the Bess Street Aldrich Foundation, reported that just one of these Thursday rides generates \$1,000 for the nonprofit.

5. Treat the landscape as storytelling infrastructure.

The MoPac already carries a layered history—from railroad and agricultural development to the advocacy of local champions like Elaine Hammer. Interpreting that history through signage, public art, and small gathering spaces can help the landscape tell stories that matter to residents and trail users alike. This might include acknowledging Indigenous histories; explaining the role of railroads in settlement patterns; or showcasing local institutions, from Elmwood’s post-office origins to Wabash’s role as the cur-

rent trail terminus. Co-designing interpretive elements with residents, schools, and historical societies can help ensure that the narratives reflect community priorities as well as tourism goals.

6. Build on a culture of organized volunteerism and local stewardship.

The MoPac’s development history—sustained by long-term community involvement rather than a single transformative project—suggests that ongoing stewardship will remain crucial. Volunteer trail groups, “Friends of the Trail” organizations, and civic clubs already support events, fundraising, and maintenance. Introducing an “Adopt-a-Trail” program that appeals to local clubs like the Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, and biking groups to encourage on going stewardship.





Recommendations and Funding Opportunities

Based on these implications, several concrete recommendations emerge for Elmwood, Wabash, and other MoPac corridor communities:

1. Integrate trail access into local and county comprehensive plans, including future land-use maps, subdivision regulations, and capital improvement plans, so that new housing and commercial areas maintain clear, direct connections to the MoPac.
2. Promote small-scale, trail-adjacent housing options—such as duplexes, cottages, and accessory dwelling units (ADUs)—within existing corporate limits, consistent with Cass County’s emerging strategies to increase housing diversity while managing infrastructure costs.
3. Enhance key trailheads (Eagle, Elmwood, Wabash, Springfield) with wayfinding, bike parking, shade, benches, and water to reflect user feedback about desired amenities and to make it easier for visitors to find local businesses.
4. Develop a coordinated storytelling plan that links interpretive signs, public art, and community events, emphasizing each town’s history and current aspirations rather than a single, corridor-wide tourism narrative. For example, the Murals on FIRST AVE project in Council Bluffs, Iowa showcases nine murals along their First Avenue corridor and regional trail. These murals have beautified the corridor while fostering engagement and community ownership.⁶⁷
5. Expand origin–destination data collection using periodic trail counts, intercept surveys, or simple

QR-code trip logs to understand better where users live, what destinations matter most, and how improvements affect travel patterns over time.

To implement these actions, corridor communities can layer local initiatives with external funding, such as federal and state trail programs, including the Recreational Trails Program (administered in Nebraska by the Nebraska Game & Parks Commission (NGPC)), Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, and nonprofit grants that support gap-closing, trail-town economic development, and community engagement. Additionally, planning efforts could explore county and municipal financing tools, such as local option sales taxes dedicated to parks and trails, or in-kind matches using staff time and volunteer labor. Another funding mechanism could be utilizing public–private partnerships with businesses that already depend on trail traffic to sponsor amenities, wayfinding, and events.

Taken together, these implications and recommendations link the MoPac Trail’s development history with its future role in supporting rural mobility, housing, and economic resilience. Just as early advocates and volunteers sustained the corridor through decades of incremental work, the next phase will depend on coordinated planning, strategic investment, and community-driven storytelling. If pursued intentionally, closing the remaining gaps, strengthening town–trail connections, and aligning trail planning with housing and comprehensive plans can ensure that the MoPac continues to serve both residents and regional travelers.

⁶⁷ “Murals on FIRST AVE | Council Bluffs, IA - Official Website,” accessed December 16, 2025, <https://www.councilbluffs-ia.gov/2541/Murals-on-FIRST-AVE>.



Chapter 2: Destination-Driven Trail Networks

Overview

The Case for Trail Towns: How Towns Leveraged a Recreational Trail to Bolster Community Vitality, was prepared for the Lower Platte South Natural Resources District (NRD), Cass County, and the Village of Elmwood as part of the Elmwood Downtown Plan and MoPac East Trail planning process. The project asks how Elmwood can use its location along the MoPac Trail East to strengthen downtown, support local businesses, and participate in a broader network of “trail towns.”

Methods Group Two (Christina Hoyt, Sarah Murrel, Sreemeda Chintamadaka, Bhavana Sreekumar, and Marty Stumpf) focused on the trail-town research component. Our role was to identify peer communities, understand how they have leveraged nearby trails for community vitality, and translate those lessons into strategies that could inform Elmwood’s future.

We used a mixed-methods, comparative case-study approach. First, we identified selection criteria for towns similar to Elmwood, such as small population size, Midwestern context, and direct connection to a regional recreational trail. Using these criteria, we selected five case communities: Beatrice and Cortland, Nebraska (Homestead Trail); Springfield, Nebraska (MoPac Trail); Malvern, Iowa (Wabash Trace Nature Trail); and Brownville, Nebraska (Steamboat Trace Trail). For each town, we combined secondary data (Census and ACS profiles, plan-

ning documents, trail reports, and online sources) with primary data from semi-structured interviews, site visits, and trail-infrastructure observations to compare community and economic characteristics, document trail-to-downtown connections and amenities, and identify recurring strategies for using trails to support local businesses and downtown vitality.

Across the five case studies, several major themes emerged. Successful trail towns tend to operate as part of a corridor-wide network rather than as isolated destinations. Clear trail-to-downtown connections and basic amenities, such as signage, safe crossings, water, shade, and restrooms, are essential for making trail users feel welcome. Placemaking and storytelling, through public art, historic interpretation, and community events, help transform simple trail junctions into distinctive places that serve both residents and visitors. Long-term partnerships, volunteer leadership, and incremental “catalyst” projects support sustained investment and gradual economic benefits over time.

Drawing on these findings, the report concludes with high-level recommendations for Elmwood and the MoPac East corridor. These recommendations emphasize strengthening placemaking and community identity, improving physical connectivity and trail-oriented infrastructure, supporting local economic development and small businesses, and building durable partnerships and funding strategies with region-





al agencies and neighboring trail towns. Together, these strategies position the MoPac East not only as a recreational asset, but also as a catalyst for downtown vitality and long-term community development.

Introduction

Nebraska is home to 872 miles of recreational bike trails, and several of these trails connect multiple communities, providing extended trail opportunities.¹ Recreational bicycling and trail use are on the rise, and rural communities are seeking to capitalize on this opportunity.² In Nebraska, recreational bicycling generates an annual economic impact of \$228.7 million in output, \$31.2 million in tax revenue, and 2,331 jobs.³ Nebraska is also home to annual, monthly, and weekly bicycle events, with 46 events held across the state.⁴ Trail towns, communities that have developed economic infrastructure around trails, have realized both benefits and faced challenges from increased tourism. Trail users bring tourists to nearby attractions, stay at local lodging, and spend money at businesses that support trail users, such as gas stations and grocery stores.^{5,6} In addition, trails provide recreational opportunities and promote active living for residents who may otherwise have limited access to safe places to walk, run, or bike, free from conflict with vehicular or farm equipment.^{7,8}

Located near the urban areas of Lincoln and Omaha, the MoPac Trail is appreciated for its diverse recreational opportunities, attracting bicyclists, hikers, walkers, runners, cross-country skiers, and horseback riders.⁹ The MoPac Trail East is a 21-mile crushed limestone trail that connects Lincoln, NE, to Wabash, NE, passing through Walton, Eagle, and Elmwood.¹⁰ There is approximately a ten-mile gap in the trail, after which it resumes at South Bend, NE, and continues for 13 miles to Springfield, NE.¹¹ A 2024 feasibility study identified a 10-mile route along 334th Street as the preferred alternative for extending the trail.¹² Once finished, the MoPac Trail will become a 44-mile recreational trail. However, transitioning from the feasibility study to implementation poses a significant hurdle due to the \$15.5 million investment required.

A better understanding of how other Nebraska and regional cities have leveraged their trail resources can help the Lower Platte South NRD and Cass County make a stronger case for expanding the trail and assist Elmwood, NE (estimated population 765), in better leveraging current and future trail opportunities.¹³ This research will examine how towns like Elmwood, Nebraska, are utilizing trail connectivity, partnerships, and investment to foster economic development and downtown revitalization. Five case studies illustrate key elements of the successes and challenges of other trail towns, and the lessons learned are synthesized for Elmwood's use in planning and implementation efforts.

1 "Nebraska Trails | Nebraska Trail Maps | TrailLink," accessed December 12, 2025, <https://www.trailink.com/state/ne-trails/>.

2 "COVID-19 Impacts on Cycling, 2019–2020 | Request PDF," ResearchGate, n.d., accessed December 11, 2025, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/350945229_COVID-19_Impacts_on_Cycling_2019-2020.

3 Daniel P Piatkowski et al., INVESTING IN BICYCLE INFRASTRUCTURE TO SPUR STATEWIDE ECONOMIC GROWTH THROUGH BICYCLE TOURISM, n.d.

4 Piatkowski et al., INVESTING IN BICYCLE INFRASTRUCTURE TO SPUR STATEWIDE ECONOMIC GROWTH THROUGH BICYCLE TOURISM.

5 Suzanne Wilson et al., "Factors for Success in Rural Tourism Development," *Journal of Travel Research* 40, no. 2 (2001): 132–38, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004728750104000203>.

6 "(PDF) Economic Benefits from Biking Trails and Greenways," ResearchGate, ahead of print, August 6, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.5296/ber.v9i2.14727>.

7 "Rural communities_best_practices_and_promising_approaches_for_safe_routes.Pdf," n.d., accessed December 11, 2025, https://www.saferoutespartnership.org/sites/default/files/resource_files/rural_communities_best_practices_and_promising_approaches_for_safe_routes.pdf.

8 Michele G. Schasberger et al., "Promoting and Developing a Trail Network Across Suburban, Rural, and Urban Commu-

nities," *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 37, no. 6 (2009): S336–44, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amepre.2009.09.012>.

9 JEO Consulting Group, "MoPac Trail Connector Trail Feasibility Study," 2024, <https://indd.adobe.com/view/7bf53d2f-17e8-469c-a8b1-565bd4f2e932>.

10 JEO Consulting Group, "MoPac Trail Connector Trail Feasibility Study."

11 JEO Consulting Group, "MoPac Trail Connector Trail Feasibility Study."

12 JEO Consulting Group, "MoPac Trail Connector Trail Feasibility Study."

13 "Census Profile: Elmwood, NE," Census Reporter, accessed December 11, 2025, <http://censusreporter.org/profiles/16000US3115430-elmwood-ne/>.



Research Questions

What communities are comparable to Elmwood and the MoPac Trail corridor, and how have they successfully leveraged trail connectivity to support economic and downtown development?

Sub-questions:

- Which communities have trail systems similar in scale and regional connectivity to the MoPac East Trail?
- What criteria make a community a relevant comparison case?
- What strategies have comparable towns used to attract visitors and stimulate local business growth through trail connectivity?
- How have partnerships among local governments, nonprofits, and businesses supported these efforts?
- What measurable outcomes (e.g., visitor spending, business openings, downtown occupancy) demonstrate success?
- How do communities use the trail to create a sense of place?

What conditions and investments are needed to transform the MoPac East Trail corridor into a regional recreation and economic destination?

Sub-questions:

- What infrastructure improvements or amenities (e.g., signage, lodging, retail, events) would enhance destination appeal?
- How can local and regional stakeholders collaborate to market and manage the trail corridor effectively?
- What funding or policy mechanisms could support sustained economic benefits from increased trail use?
- How do trail infrastructure investments correlate with local business growth and employment rates?

Methods

This research employs a comparative case study design to examine how small Midwestern communities have leveraged trail connectivity to promote economic development and downtown revitalization, with the goal of identifying lessons that can inform planning efforts in Elmwood and along the MoPac East corridor. The methods were designed to address our research questions about comparable, peer communities, trail-based strategies, and the conditions and investments needed to transform the MoPac East into a regional recreation and economic destination.

Case Selection

We began by establishing criteria for selecting case study communities that are broadly comparable to Elmwood. These criteria included: small population size (generally under 10,000 residents), location in a Midwestern or Great Plains context, direct connection to a regional multi-use trail, and evidence of economic development, planning initiatives, or community projects explicitly tied to trail infrastructure. Based on these criteria, we selected five communities: Beatrice and Cortland, Nebraska (Homestead Trail), Springfield, Nebraska (MoPac Trail), Malvern, Iowa (Wabash Trace Nature Trail), and Brownville, Nebraska (Steamboat Trace Trail). These towns offer variation in size, trail maturity, and downtown conditions while remaining comparable to Elmwood in scale and setting.



Primary Data: Interviews & Site Visits

Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews and community/site visits in the selected trail towns and along the MoPac corridor. Interview participants included local planners and city administrators, trail planners and managers, business owners, nonprofit leaders, and active trail users who were directly involved in or affected by trail-related development. Participants were identified through purposive sampling—based on their roles in local government, trail organizations, or business associations—and snowball sampling, with interviewees recommending additional contacts who could speak to trail-related investments, partnerships, and community impacts.

To protect participants' privacy, all interviewees are kept anonymous in this report. We refer to them only by role (for example, "trail planner," "city administrator," "local business owner," or "volunteer") and by community, rather than by name or other identifying details. Interviews were conducted via video calls, phone calls, and in-person conversations during site visits, depending on participants' availability and location. Most interviews were transcribed and notes from these interviews were typed immediately following each conversation.

Site visits to Beatrice, Cortland,

Springfield, Malvern, and Brownville were used to document trailheads, trail-to-downtown connections, signage, public spaces, and nearby businesses through photographs, field notes, and informal conversations with residents and trail users. These visits allowed us to understand and compare how each town integrates its trail into the broader community and to ground interview comments in direct observation.

Secondary Data: Quantitative & Documentary Sources

Primary data were complemented by a range of secondary data sources, including:

- **Demographic and economic data from the U.S. Census and American Community Survey, supplemented by ESRI Business Analyst profiles where available, to characterize each community's population, employment, and business mix. In addition, local sources such as city websites were used to understand the community business mix.**
- **Planning reports, feasibility studies, and trail impact assessments related to the MoPac East, Homestead Trail, Wabash Trace, and Steamboat Trace corridors, used to understand prior investments, projected impacts, and regional planning goals.**



- Local economic development documents, tourism materials, and downtown plans that referenced trail-related strategies, events, or marketing efforts.
- Peer city reports and academic or practitioner literature on trail towns, bicycling economies, and trail-based rural development, which informed both our case selection criteria and our coding of interview themes

Overall, successful trail towns tend to embrace trail users through trail-friendly amenities, invest in placemaking and destination experiences, and position themselves as part of a broader network of communities along the trail. Based on these findings, interviewed a trail user to better understand how the public perceives and values trail towns.

Data Analysis & Coding

Data analysis integrated qualitative and quantitative methods. Interview notes and site-visit observations were first read closely to identify recurring concepts related to infrastructure improvements, business vitality, placemaking, partnerships, and governance. We then organized these observations into a coding matrix structured around our research questions and themes drawn from the trail-town and rural tourism literature, such as amenities, connectivity, branding, events, and regional networks.

Codes were applied manually to each interview and community, allowing us to compare how similar themes manifested across the five towns. For example, we compared the kinds of amenities provided at trailheads, the degree of physical and visual connectivity between the trail and downtown, the presence of recurring events, and the roles of volunteer groups or betterment associations. Where possible, we linked these qualitative themes to quantitative indicators, such as recent trail investments, new businesses near the trail, or documented visitor activity from local studies.

Finally, findings from each community were synthesized into a comparative framework that highlights both shared strategies and distinct local approaches. This framework serves as the basis for the cross-case themes and the chapter's concluding recommendations for Elmwood and the MOPAC East corridor.





Findings

Defining a Trail Town

Trail Town development is taking hold as an idea in Nebraska, particularly where abandoned railroad lines provide opportunities for outdoor recreation where land is predominantly privately owned.¹⁴ The National Park Service's Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance program is collaborating with communities throughout the region, helping them assess their trail resources.¹⁵ The Nebraska Trails Town Project, hosted by the Nebraska Trails Foundation, aims to help small communities capitalize on their trail resources. They offer funds for community training and startup expenses.¹⁶

What makes a trail town rather than a town along a trail? The Rails to Trails Conservancy, a non-profit dedicated to converting abandoned railroads to usable multi-use trails, defines a trail town as a "community through which [a trail] passes that supports [trail users] with services, promotes the Trail to its citizens, and embraces the Trail as a resource to be protected and celebrated. Trail Towns are built on a relationship between a town, the Trail, and its volunteers".¹⁷ To explore this idea, we looked at a combination of trail-based groups specializing in trail towns and conducted an interview with a national trail planner and landscape architect. Throughout the research, organizations and the interviewee presented themes including the importance of partnership, networks, placemaking, and amenities benefiting local residents and users alike.

According to the Rails to Trails Conservancy, there are three strategies for success: the first being regional thinking, which focuses on building a network of trail communities with a cohesive tourism strategy. The second strategy includes gathering data and tracking efforts to quantify success. The third strategy is "attract heads to the beds" because an overnight guest will spend more within the town.

The Trails Town Program® is a national program

14 Planner, Trail 2025

15 Planner, Trail. Interview.

16 "Nebraska Trails Foundation," accessed December 12, 2025, <https://www.nebraskatrailsfoundation.org/>.

17 "Trail Towns," Rails to Trails Conservancy, n.d., accessed December 11, 2025, <https://www.railstotrails.org/trail-building-toolbox/trail-towns/>.

that "revitalizes rural communities by growing outdoor tourism and small businesses. [The Program] power[s] Trail Towns across PA, WV, and MD, and help[s] trails nationwide follow our lead."¹⁸ This includes the well-known Great Allegheny Passage, one of the nation's original trail town projects, which connects small rural communities through a 150-mile multi-use trail.¹⁹ Together, these communities have worked to create user amenities and destination-based experiences.

According to the Trail Town Program, there are five key components to a successful trail town.²⁰ The first element is partnerships—within the community, along the trail, and more broadly. Having a team of diverse stakeholders, including business owners, community officials, trail groups, improvement groups, and county government, can create momentum and grow support. The second component is assessment and research that can help towns make the case for investment, such as community assessment, business surveys, or trail user data. The third key is connecting towns to the trail, ensuring riders have basic amenities, along with placemaking features such as public art. The fourth component is business and real estate development, including growing businesses and securing financing that supports tourism and trail users. The fifth key is marketing, which includes brand development and outreach.

An interview with a federal trail planner and landscape architect additionally brought forth themes such as:

- A network of trail towns is essential due to the long distances between stops. Partnering between towns to leverage resources, expertise, and marketing helps create a stronger outcome. The interviewee stated that within the Nebraska and Iowa region, the Wabash Trail was the

18 "TrailTownGuide.2.Pdf," n.d., accessed December 11, 2025, <https://www.trailtowns.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/TrailTownGuide.2.pdf>.

19 "Creating Opportunities Along the Nation's Trails Site Search," Trail Town Program, accessed December 12, 2025, <https://www.trailtowns.org/>.

20 Trail Town Program, "Creating Opportunities Along the Nation's Trails Site Search."



most developed trail town route due to the network of communities along the trail providing basic amenities and placemaking features.

- Placemaking is a critical component of creating destination-driven development.
- Progress takes time. Long-term commitment and planning are needed.
- Good planning and design involves expertise and feedback from trail users.

Overall, successful trail towns tend to embrace trail users through trail-friendly amenities, invest in placemaking and destination experiences, and position themselves as part of a broader network of communities along the trail. Based on these findings, interviewed a trail user to better understand how the public perceives and values trail towns.

Trail User

An active MoPac Trail user and planning scholar at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, offered a unique dual perspective that blended professional expertise with lived, day-to-day trail experience. Across the interview, several themes emerged—including the importance of user-centered design, safety and wayfinding needs, and opportunities for the MoPac to strengthen rural community identity. Their insights help contextualize Elmwood’s position within a broader regional trail network and illustrate how trail use patterns translate into practical planning considerations.

As a regular commuter and recreational rider, the trail user emphasized that the MoPac Trail serves different purposes for different user groups—ranging from casual family riders to long-distance cyclists who rely on the trail as an alternative transportation corridor. They noted that cyclists value efficiency, predictable surfaces, and transitions that feel intuitive, especially at road crossings where safety perceptions greatly influence ridership levels. Their comments align with findings from rural

trail studies showing that comfort and predictability remain key drivers of trail use across Nebraska com-



Figure 2.1. MoPac Trail Segment in Lincoln, Nebraska

Source: Google Maps Street View, accessed December 2025. Screenshot by Sarah Murrel.

munities.²¹ They pointed specifically to areas where surface quality changes abruptly or where signage is missing, explaining that these degrade the trail experience and deter newer or less confident riders.

In discussing trail amenities, the trail user highlighted a persistent need for basic infrastructure: water access, restrooms, benches, and shade. They explained that the MoPac Trail’s long uninterrupted stretches between towns can be both an asset and a barrier—offering quiet, scenic riding but also requiring thoughtful placement of user amenities. Their observations reflect broader trends documented in the Cowboy Trail impact report, which shows that amenities such as fix-it stations, water stops, and rest areas contribute to increased trip frequency and trail tourism across rural Nebraska²² (Matteson 2025). These features not only improve safety but also support long-distance riders who travel between trail towns.

The trail user also discussed the social role of trail-

21 Donald L. Greer, *Nebraska Rural Trails: Three Studies of Trail Impact*, n.d.

22 Cory Matteson, “A Nebraska Legacy: Examining the Cowboy Trail’s Impact Across Three Decades,” *Rails to Trails Conservancy*, October 7, 2025, <https://www.railstotrails.org/trailblog/a-nebraska-legacy-examining-the-cowboy-trails-impact-across-three-decades/>.



Figure 2.2. Destination Wayfinding Signage on the Wabash Trace Nature Trail, Iowa

Source: Jim’s Trail Resources, “Wabash Trace Nature Trail Signage,” accessed December 5, 2025.

based events in strengthening local economies and civic identity. They referenced popular regional rides—such as the Nacho Ride and Pie Ride—which draw hundreds of participants and serve as predictable economic boosts for small businesses along the corridor. These events mirror findings in national trail literature showing that recreational tourism is a reliable catalyst for local spending and repeat visitation, particularly when food, entertainment, or unique local destinations are incorporated into the experience.²³

Another major insight involved the potential for MoPac to serve as a “regional identity builder” for towns like Elmwood. The trail user explained that trails are more than transportation facilities—they reflect shared narratives about recreation, nature, and community values. In their view, towns that embrace this identity through placemaking—public art, signage, distinctive trailheads, or branded amenities—tend to capture more economic benefit from pass-through users. This perspective aligns

23 Rails-to-Trails-Conservancy CASE STUDY February 16 and 2024, “Prairie Corridor Case Study,” Rails to Trails Conservancy, n.d., accessed December 12, 2025, <https://www.railstotrails.org/resource-library/resources/prairie-corridor/>.

Table 2.3.1: Nacho Riders to Strava Users per Event Instance

Event Instance	Date	Nacho Riders	Strava Users
1	4/23/2019	69	30
2	4/30/2019	0	0
3	5/7/2019	0	0
4	5/14/2019	242	105
5	5/21/2019	0	0
6	5/28/2019	0	0
7	6/4/2019	162	70
8	6/11/2019	58	25
9	6/18/2019	0	0
10	6/25/2019	162	70
11	7/2/2019	323	140
12	7/9/2019	208	90
13	7/16/2019	231	100
14	7/23/2019	450	195
15	7/30/2019	369	160
16	8/6/2019	346	150
17	8/13/2019	254	110
18	8/20/2019	115	50
19	8/27/2019	173	75
20	9/3/2019	127	55
21	9/10/2019	104	45
22	9/17/2019	162	70
23	9/24/2019	104	45
24	10/1/2019	0	0
25	10/8/2019	35	15
26	10/15/2019	0	0
27	10/22/2019	0	0
28	10/29/2019	0	0
29	11/5/2019	0	0
30	11/12/2019	0	0
Total		3,692	1,600

Figure 2.3. Participation Trends for Lincoln’s “Nacho Ride,” 2019 Season.

Source: Piatkowski et al., 2020. INVESTING IN BICYCLE INFRASTRUCTURE TO SPUR STATEWIDE ECONOMIC GROWTH THROUGH BICYCLE TOURISM.

directly with case studies like Malvern, Iowa and Brownville, Nebraska, where trail-oriented placemaking has measurably shaped visitor perceptions and local business activity.

A final theme centered on the importance of planning partnerships. The interviewee emphasized that successful trail development depends not only on municipal investment but also coordination with NRDs, county officials, nonprofit organizations, and volunteer groups. She noted that maintenance, marketing, and programming often exceed what a single small town can support alone. This resonates with findings from the Prairie Corridor project, which stresses multi-agency collaboration as critical to sustaining trail quality and maximizing regional tourism benefits.²⁴

Overall, the trail user’s insights illustrate that Elmwood’s opportunities lie in enhancing user comfort, improving signage and access, strengthening partnerships, and shaping a trail-based identity that reflects local character. Their reflections rein-

24 Rails-to-Trails-Conservancy CASE STUDY and 2024, “Prairie Corridor Case Study,” Rails to Trails Conservancy, n.d., accessed December 11, 2025, <https://www.railstotrails.org/resource-library/resources/prairie-corridor/>.

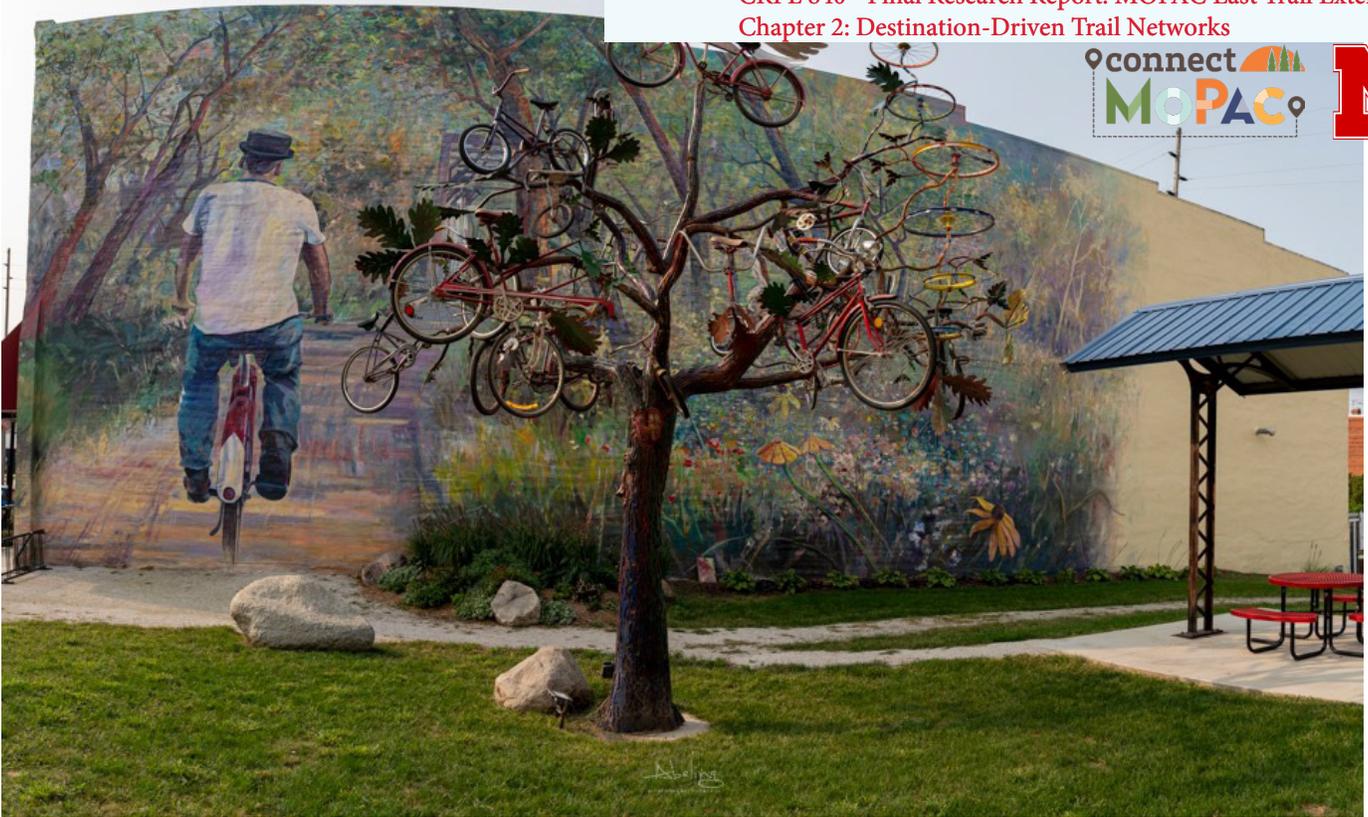


Figure 2.4. Malvern Bicycle Sculpture & Trail-Themed Mural. Source: Facebook

Photo by Iowa Road Trip (2020).

force that the MoPac Trail is not simply a recreational amenity but a strategic asset whose potential grows when communities connect infrastructure, culture, and economic development.

Malvern, IA, is a town of 1,046 people²⁵ located in southwestern Iowa, about 36 miles southeast of Council Bluffs, IA, and Omaha, NE. Mill County is considered part of the greater eight-county Omaha metro area.

²⁵ "P1: RACE - Census Bureau Table," accessed December 11, 2025, <https://data.census.gov/table/DECENNIALPL2020.P1?g=160XX00US1948720>.

Malvern, Iowa Community Profile



Square miles: 1.6

County name: Mills County

Population: 1,046

Trail: Wabash Trace Trail

The Wabash Trace Nature Trail connects Malvern northwest to Council Bluffs and south to Blanchard, IA, providing a 63-mile multi-use trail route for locals and tourists alike. The trail is twenty-eight years old; however, the majority of Malvern community redevelopment has occurred over the last thirteen

years, primarily driven by the Malvern Area Betterment Association. This case will examine Malvern's socio-economic profile, local business infrastructure, trail and tourist infrastructure, as well as planning and placemaking efforts within the community. Publicly available data, websites, newspaper articles, reports, site visits, and business interviews were used to inform the case.

Malvern, Iowa, had a population of 1,046 in 2020, according to the decennial census, and in 2010 population of 1,142 people according to the decennial census, resulting in a population loss of 96 individuals during the ten-year census cycle. The 2023 American Community Survey 5-year popu-



Demographics & Socioeconomics

lation estimate is 1,415 with a margin of error of 282 points. Even with the margin of error, the data suggests that Malvern’s population has grown modestly since 2020. The 2023 American Community Survey 5-year estimate also showed that 7.2% of the population moved into Malvern from another state in the last year, potentially indicating that the community is attracting new residents.²⁶ While the data doesn’t show why these individuals have moved to Malvern, some ideas include the proximity to Council Bluffs and Omaha, with a commute of less

²⁶ “S0701: Geographic Mobility by ... - Census Bureau Table,” accessed December 11, 2025, <https://data.census.gov/table/ACSST5Y2023.S0701?g=160XX00US1948720>.

Table 2.1: Malvern, IA Population 2010-2023

Year	Population	Margin of Error
2010	1,142	0
2015	1,063	± 165
2020	1,046	0
2023	1,415	± 282

Source: Population of Malvern, IA, utilizing 2020, 2010 decennial census data; 2015, 2023 American Community Survey 5-year estimate.

than 40 minutes, and Wabash Trace Trail access, attracting retirees.

The median household income in Malvern is \$82,027. The median population age is 42.6, with 20.2% of the population being 65 or older. There are 484 total households in Malvern. 18% of working individuals are employed in the Retail trade and Arts, Recreation, Entertainment, and Accommodation sectors, both sectors which support trail users and tourism.

Wabash Trace Nature Trail is a 63-mile multi-use trail that runs through the picturesque Loess hills of Southeast Iowa, connecting Council Bluffs, IA, south to Blanchard, IA. The trail features 70 bridges, including the iconic high trestle bridge, which is lit at night. The trail follows the abandoned Wa-

Table 2.2: Community Socioeconomic Profile of Malvern,

Demographics	Estimate	Margin of Error
Median Household Income:	\$82,027	± \$15,069
Median age	42.6	± 4.6
Population 65 Years and Older	20.2%	± 5.1%
Poverty	5.3%	± 3.4%
Unemployment Rate	N/A	
Total Housing Units	562	± 90
Total Households	484	± 86
Bachelors degree or higher	28.8%	± 7.6%
Residential Mobility-Moved from a different state in the last year	7.2%	± 6.5%
% of People employed in Arts, Entertainment, & Recreation, & Accommodation & Food Services” sector	6%	-
% of People employed in Retail Trade sector	12%	-

Source: S1901, S0101, B25002, DP02, S1501, 2023 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Wabash Trace Nature Trail



Figure 2.5: Wabash Trace Nature Trail, Council Bluffs, IA to Blanchard, IA. The colored markers are communities along the trail and Malvern is highlighted in purple.

Source: Created with Google Maps

bash Railroad, traveling through four counties and eight communities²⁷ and Blanchard. The corridor was purchased in 1989 and completed eight years later in 1997. Volunteers built the trail grant²⁸. Now, communities work together to provide basic services to trail users, creating a trail town network.

²⁷ Randiah Camille Green, “Iowa’s Wabash Trace Nature Trail: August 2025 Trail of the Month,” Rails to Trails Conservancy, 2025, <https://www.railstotrails.org/trailblog/iowas-wabash-trace-nature-trail-august-2025-trail-of-the-month/>.

²⁸ “Wabash Trace Nature Trail,” Wabash-Trace, accessed December 11, 2025, <https://www.wabashtrace.org>.



The Southwest Iowa Nature Trails Project, Inc (SWINT) and the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation provide the coordination and management of the trail. SWINT is a 501 (c)(3) organization funded completely by private donations and user fees. SWINT also has a small crew of part-time staff that assist with maintenance and management, and coordinate volunteers to provide the bulk of trail maintenance and management.²⁹ The Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation (INHF) provides technical expertise and coordination for trail development and was involved in the initial acquisition of the trail corridor.³⁰

A 2025 economic impact study, “Economic and Health Impacts of Bicycling and Trails in Iowa,” completed by Scioto Analysis and commissioned by the Iowa Bike Coalition, found that out of the 36,000 residents who live along the Wabash Trace Trail, 15,000 ride the trail twice a month recreationally. The study estimates that each year cyclists spend \$54 million in Wabash Trace Trail counties.³¹ Beyond direct economic impacts, the study estimates that the Wabash Trace Trail counties experience positive health outcomes, resulting in a reduction of 320 cases of obesity, 190 cases of poor mental health, and 72 cases of diabetes each year.³²

The Wabash Trace Trail cuts through the western edge of Malvern, Northwest to Southeast, with several crossings in town, only a block or two from Main Street. The trail infrastructure includes a trailhead called “the Wabash Depot,” which provides a clear entrance to the trail. The trailhead features parking, a restroom, a picnic table, a digital kiosk, a bike rack, and a bike repair kit, which includes tools and air. There is camping and water at a park a few blocks away. There is a wayfinding

29 Wabash-Trace, “Wabash Trace Nature Trail.”

30 “Multi-Use Trails,” accessed December 11, 2025, <https://www.inhf.org/what-we-do/trails>.

31 “2025 Economic Impact Study of Cycling and Trails | Iowa Bicycle Coalition,” accessed December 11, 2025, <https://iowabicyclecoalition.org/economic-impact-study-of-cycling-and-trails/>.

32 “2025 Economic Impact Study of Cycling and Trails | Iowa Bicycle Coalition,” accessed December 12, 2025, <https://iowabicyclecoalition.org/economic-impact-study-of-cycling-and-trails/>.

State, Regional and Community Planning

Comprehensive plans were unavailable for Mills County and Malvern, IA. Recently, a feasibility study for Malvern Living Roadways was completed. The study primarily focused on enhancing safe connectivity within the community, benefiting both Malvern students and the older population. If implemented, more sidewalks would be installed throughout the town, including additional connections to the Wabash Trace Trail.

Malvern Trail Town Components

Trail Connectivity & Infrastructure

sign on the trail that directs users to amenities and the business district. A trail user can get to the business district without crossing any major roads from the depot trailhead; however, no sidewalks are available for use. The street has minimal traffic and can be traveled without traffic conflicts, however, the lack of sidewalks may be limiting to users who require the safe, consistent surface a sidewalk provides.

The Trail Infrastructure Inventory completed for Malvern demonstrates that the town provides the elements necessary to be a trail town, offering trail user amenities, including those for multi-day excursions. Local businesses offer tourism destinations for trail users, along with vital services such as medical care and food. Even for non-trail users, the town’s business infrastructure provides for a nice day trip or overnight excursion

An in-depth interview was conducted with a small business owner and volunteer community leader. A second, short interview was conducted with a second business owner. Through the interviews, the themes that emerged were: Marketing the Trail Town; Creating destination through Art, Nature, and History; Partnerships, grants, and donations are vital for big projects; Change creates change; Volunteerism is critical to success. Further details



Table 2.3. Trail-Oriented Amenities Malvern

Bicycle and/or Pedestrian Trail Supportive Infrastructure Found	Malvern
Infrastructure	
Bicycle Lane from multi-use trail to services	
Secondary trails in community	
Defined Bike Route (by signage)	X
Crosswalk	
Sidewalks	X
Bridges that enable walking/biking	
Underpasses that enable walking/biking	
Parklet	X
Benches	X
Bike Rack	X
Repair Station/Air Pump	X
Shade in resting areas	X
Shade along trail	X
Signage	
State Law, Yield/Stop for Pedestrians at Crosswalk	X
Interpretative/Wayfinding Info	X
Entertainment/Downtown District	X
Services	
Food establishments	X
Public Restrooms (free)	X
Water (free)	X
Gas station	X
Camping	X
Lodging	X
Bike rentals	
Bike Shop	
Placemaking	
Sculptures	X
Murals	X
Historical markers	
Museum	X
Garden/arboretum	
Bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure observed while on-site.	X

Source: Site Visit Observations

Table 2.4: Malvern, IA Trail Supportive Business Inventory

Type of business	Number	Bike Friendly website/site visit
Café/Bar	4	Yes
Grocery	1	Yes
B & B lodging	5	Yes
Event Venue (concerts)	1	Yes
Convenience store/gas	1	N/A
Art Gallery/studios//retail	4	N/A
Recreation	2	N/A
Spa/Massage	3	N/A
Medical clinic	1	N/A
Pharmacy	1	N/A
Laundry service	1	N/A

Source: Created from businesses listed on Malvern, IA city website.

Placemaking Feature Inventory

Placemaking features in Malvern are extensive and feature a mixture of trail-forward amenities, signage, public art and history. Figure 2 shows a map with placemaking feature examples and are described as follows:

- The Trailhead, “Wabash Trace Trail Depot” provides trail user amenities.
- Wayfinding signage found at the Depot trail-head directs trail users to services.
- Main Street signage directs visitors to the Wabash Trace Trailhead and services. Main Street also features decorative brick sidewalks, lighting, flags, planters, and public art, all of which add to placemaking and wayfinding.
- A pocket park featuring public art installations and picnic areas.
- Salty Heifer Cafe, an example of how local businesses have embraced the trail by offering bike racks and a decor theme around biking.
- The iconic bike art installation at the south end of Main Street, where the Wabash Trace trail crosses. Cafes, bars, and grocery stores are only a block or two away.

Placemaking Features of Malvern, IA

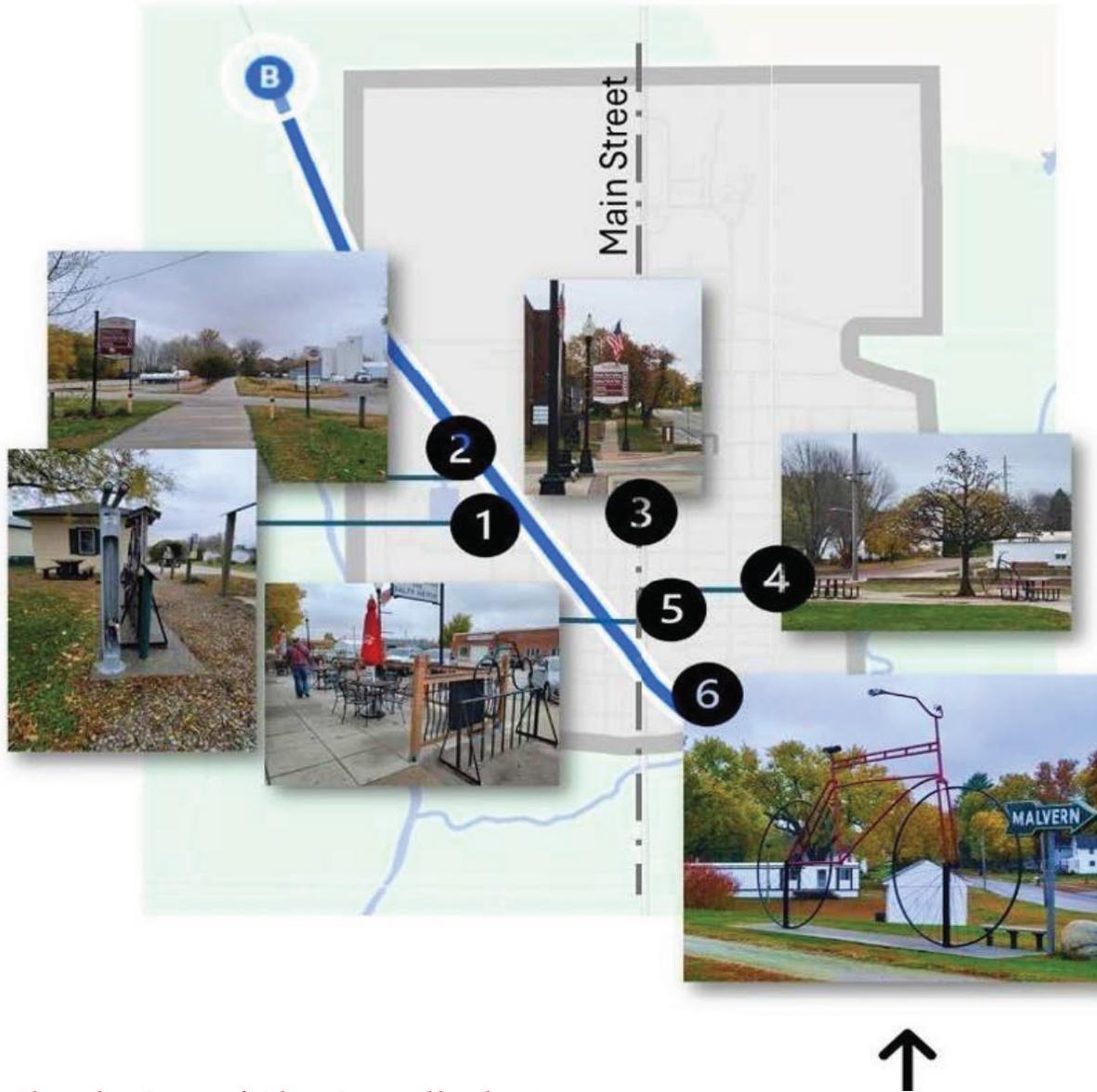


Figure 2.6: Placemaking Features of Malvern, IA created based on site visit

Interview themes

from the interviews are described in the Malvern Trail Town Lessons section.

The Malvern Area Betterment Association (MABA) is a dedicated group of volunteers focused on advancing various community projects and securing funding for development activities. Their first major effort was in 2012, supported by a Community Development Block Grant, which funded a downtown revitalization project focusing on derelict buildings and façades.

Malvern Trail Town Lessons:

Partnership and Volunteerism are critical to success

Since then, the town has added planters, the creation of a recreational park, and restored the Library Me-

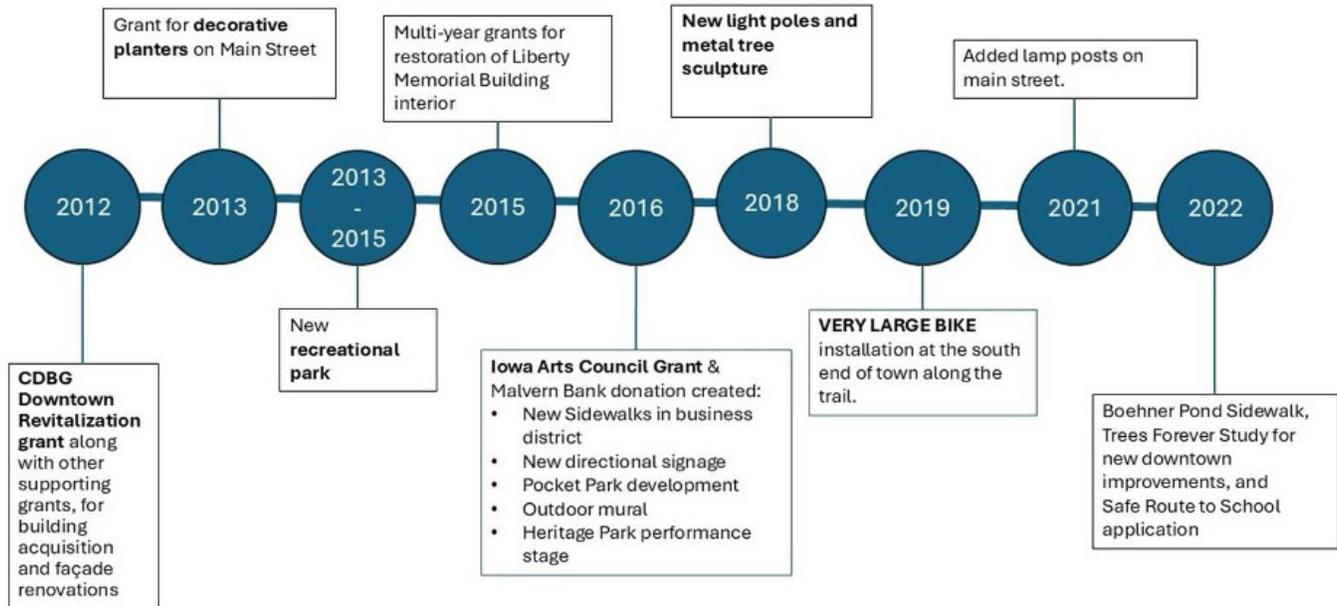


Figure 2.7: Malvern Area Betterment Association project timeline.

Source: Malvern, IA City Website

morial Building (now a community center). In 2016, MABA received a grant from the Iowa Arts Council, along with a donation from Malvern Bank, to install new downtown sidewalks, directional signage, and initiate placemaking features, including the mural and pocket park. Public art has become a defining feature of MABA projects, with several large sculptures by local artists now installed. Currently, MABA is working on community connectivity and recently applied for the Safe Routes to School grant to improve pedestrian infrastructure.

The interviewee emphasized that economic development and trail infrastructure are slow processes that require getting many people on board who may have different visions for their community. Much of the economic redevelopment and placemaking has focused on the downtown corridor, the trail through Malvern, and city parks. The interviewee discussed catalyst projects that led to other initiatives. “Once you start

Economic Redevelopment: Change creates change

seeing change, then it makes all these other things, like, you know, you get that second-hand endorsement to where it’s like, people start seeing... seeing’s believing.” For example, the Downtown Revitalization Grant led to the beautification of downtown areas and the development of parks. The pocket park and sculptures led to several other sculpture works in the area, including the bike tree and the VERY LARGE BIKE installation. Now, more local businesses are opening, and housing is being built. “We call it a renaissance...we’re being discovered, we’re... building houses.”

Malvern has created placemaking through physical features and events. Physical placemaking features include enhancing the downtown area’s appearance and incorporating art around Wabash Trace Trail themes, such as bicycles and nature. The interviewee shared that this art-based placemaking offers local artists a chance to showcase their work and engage with the community. In the case of sculptures such as “The



Placemaking is Vital

Bike Tree” and the “VERY BIG BIKE,” tourists of all kinds are entered into conversation with the trail and memory-making. Even local businesses embrace the bike theme; for example, The Salty Heifer, a local café and ice cream shop, incorporates the bike and trail theme into its décor, featuring art of all the trail towns along the Wabash and old bikes.

Malvern has also provided opportunities for tourists to learn about art through self-guided tours. A map featuring all the art in town is available to visitors via the city website.³³ Events are also an important placemaking component to the town, adding to the destination-based trail town vibe. Several businesses, such as the Art Church, offer live music regularly and during the summer there are several organized trail riding events.

Embrace the trail user

The interviewee shared that physical amenities that specifically support bike usage, such as repair stations and bike racks; business amenities such as lodging, cafes, and events are critical to welcome the trail user; Small projects such as adding bike racks or large projects such as restoring the Wabash Trail Depot and trailhead were essential components to making trail users feel welcome. According to the interviewee, volunteers continue to encourage business owners to add bike-friendly features.

The interviewee shared that physical amenities that specifically support bike usage, such as repair stations and bike racks; business amenities such as lodging, cafes, and events are critical to welcome the trail user; Small projects such as adding bike racks or large projects such as restoring the Wabash Trail Depot and trailhead were essential components to making trail users feel welcome. According to the interviewee, volunteers continue to encourage business owners to add bike-friendly features.

The interviewee shared that the Southwest Iowa

Nature Trail collaborated with community members to restore an old depot that had been vacant for 40 years. This project took place in 2016 and was funded through grants and volunteer labor. The depot building was fully restored, and a bike repair station was installed. In 2018, the depot was sold and is now operated as a bed and breakfast for trail users. The entire project was completed with a budget of approximately \$10,000. The interviewee emphasized that partnerships with the Southwest Iowa Nature Trail, like the depot project, have been crucial for the community to develop as a trail town.

Marketing the Trail Town is essential

Marketing the trail town is essential to building a sense of place, amplifying voices, and attracting tourists and supporters. One interviewee said, “The beauty of it is, you’re cross-promoting. It’s not just one person promoting their business.” For example, one interviewee shared the Salty Heifer, a local cafe, utilizes cross-advertising on the Wabash Trail Facebook page, which is crucial for their business. Other businesses have embraced the trail as part of their brand and marketing efforts. For example, Malvern Mezzos, a local bar that hosts live music, uses the trail throughout its brand and marketing. Language such as “Meet in the Middle” is a reference to Malvern being in the middle of the trail and “Welcome to the Middle. Great People,



Figure 2.8: Artwork from Mills County Chamber Tourism campaign.
Source: Mills County

³³ City of Malvern, n.d., accessed December 12, 2025, <https://malvernia.com/>.



Great Vibes, & Great Drinks in the Middle of the Wabash Trace” helps connect guests more directly to the trail and destination.³⁴ “BIKE FRIENDLY.” Located just around the corner from the Wabash Trace, we welcome all bicycle riders, whether you ride to compete, ride to relax, or ride to exercise. Come grab a cold one!” is a direct and welcoming invitation to trail users.

Mills County Chamber of Commerce provides additional promotion to towns along the Wabash Trace Trail with a campaign, “Closer than you think, More than you Expect!”³⁵ Each community features hand-drawn artwork that is carried as a theme throughout its promotional materials. The Chamber website features a webpage for each community that highlights attractions. Malvern’s page highlights local businesses, the Wabash Trace Trail, sculptures, and live music.

Challenges

The interviewee noted several challenges related to developing the trail. First, Malvern relies on a small group of people, mostly local business owners, who carry trail forward and economic development ideas into fruition. While the interviewee said, “In a small town, you can have a small group of people accomplish a lot,” they also emphasized that community change is because of a small group of people. Having a more regional network involved in the trail, along with support from outside organizations, helps spread the load. However, downtown revitalization has been a local endeavor.

According to the interviewee, one significant hurdle was the question of whether the community wished to “open our doors to outsiders.” MABA pushed ahead with a vision, despite not everyone being on board at first. Buy-in from the entire community has been slow over time but residents are encouraged by the positive changes.

The small but strategically situated community of Springfield, Nebraska, is nestled within the rapidly growing Omaha metropolitan region. With a 2020

Census population of 1,501 and a land area of 1.62 square miles, Springfield is similar in size and scale to Elmwood and makes for a robust case study community in learning about rural–urban interface dynamics. Its proximity to Omaha, Gretna, and Papillion puts it within an active development

Springfield, Nebraska Community Profile

Square miles: 1.62

County name: Sarpy County

Population: 1,501

Trail: MoPac Trail

corridor; however, Springfield has continuously preserved its small-town character, strong civic identity, and a close-knit sense of community.

With its location near the eastern terminus of the MoPac Trail corridor, Springfield has significant potential as a trail gateway community. Currently, the MoPac Trail runs 21 miles from Lincoln to Wabash, then picks up again near South Bend and runs approximately 13 miles into Springfield. The preferred alignment identified in the 2024 MoPac Gap Feasibility Study would route the trail along 334th Street, closing the 10-mile gap that currently exists in the trail and yielding a fully connected 44-mile regional trail. Springfield city leadership recognizes the value of tourism and outdoor recreation centered on trails, and considers the completion of the MoPac Trail an opportunity to increase visitor flow, improve local businesses, and support enhancements to the quality of life.

According to the 2020 decennial census, Springfield, Nebraska has a population of 1,501 residents, while the 2010 population was 1,529, which means there was a slight decline of 28 people in the ten-year census cycle. According to the 2023 American Community Survey 5-year estimate, it is expected that there are 1,603 people. Because of the small size of Springfield, the margin of error is ± 322 , so the true population could easily be moderate-

Demographics and Socioeconomic

ly higher or lower than the estimate. In general, the data indicates that Springfield’s population has remained relatively stable over time, with modest

34 “Mezzo: Bourbon & Cocktail Bar | Malvern, IA,” Mezzo Bar | Malvern, accessed December 12, 2025, <https://www.malvern-mezzo.com>.

35 Green, “Iowa’s Wabash Trace Nature Trail.”



growth since 2020.

The 2023 American Community Survey also indicates that an estimated 3.7% of the population moved into Springfield from a different county within the last year. Though the data do not indicate why individuals chose to move to Springfield, contributing factors may include proximity to Omaha, Papillion, and Gretna, all approximately 20–30 minute commutes; high-quality schools available within Sarpy County; and Springfield’s safe, small-town environment with convenient access to nearby employment centers. Springfield’s location as the eastern anchor of the MoPac Trail may also support interest from residents who value recreation and trail access.

The median household income in Springfield is \$92,153. The median population age is 37.1 years, with about 16% of the residents 65 years or older. There are 623 total households in Springfield. Employment patterns indicate that many working people in Springfield are employed in Retail Trade at 12% and in Arts, Entertainment, Recreation, Accommodation, and Food Services at 4.6%. The community’s poverty rate is 4.6%, though the

Table 2.5: Population of Springfield, NE 2010, 2015, 2020, 2023

Year	Population	Margin of Error
2010	1,529	0
2015	1,586	± 169
2020	1,501	0
2023	1,603	± 322

Source: Description: Population of Springfield, NE utilizing 2010, 2020 decennial census data; 2015, 2023 American Community Survey 5-year estimates.

margin of error is comparatively large due to the small population size of Springfield. Despite its modest size, socioeconomic indicators for Springfield have been particularly strong, with 22.6% of adults holding a bachelor’s degree or higher, and a stable housing base of 626 total housing units. Springfield’s proximity to Omaha, Papillion, and Gretna may also contribute to its economic stability by placing residents within commuting distance to regional employment centers while maintaining Springfield’s small-town character.

The MoPac Trail in Springfield is a 13.2-mile crushed stone rail-trail built along the former Missouri Pacific Railroad corridor. Beginning near W Schram Road on the northern edge of Springfield, the trail travels south, initially paralleling S 144th Street before diverging into the old rail right-of-way. It passes directly through downtown Springfield, providing trail users access to local shops, dining options, and the Sarpy County Fairgrounds.

Table 2.6: Community Socioeconomic Profile of Springfield, Nebraska

Median Household Income:	\$92,153	± \$6,000
Median Age	37.1	± 3.8
Population 65 Years and Older	16%	N/A
Poverty	4.6%	±4
Unemployment Rate	4.2%	N/A
Total Housing Units	626	N/A
Total Households	623	N/A
Bachelor’s Degree or Higher	22.6%	± 3.9%
Residential Mobility – Moved from a Different State Last Year	2.0%	N/A
% Employed in Arts, Entertainment, Recreation, Accommodation & Food Services	4.6%	-
% Employed in Retail Trade	12%	-

Source: S1901, S0101, DP05, 2023 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates.



MoPAC Trail Springfield

South of town, the trail continues through open agricultural landscapes with minimal development, ending just before the Platte River, where users may connect to the Platte River Connection trail. The Springfield segment is also part of the Great American Rail Trail, a 3,700-mile cross-country route. Parking is available near the southern trailhead at 20105 NE-31, offering convenient access for visitors.

The MoPac Trail runs directly through Springfield, forming one of the community's most significant recreational and connectivity assets. The 13.2-mile MoPac Trail that runs through the (Springfield) follows the former Missouri Pacific railroad corridor, beginning along West Schram Road north of town and continuing south toward the Platte River. As the trail enters Springfield, it passes the Sarpy County Fairgrounds and moves through the com-

Trail Connectivity & Infrastructure

community's central area, providing direct proximity to local dining, services, and small businesses.

Unlike many trail towns where the trail skirts the periphery, Springfield's alignment brings trail users into the heart of town, enabling easy access to

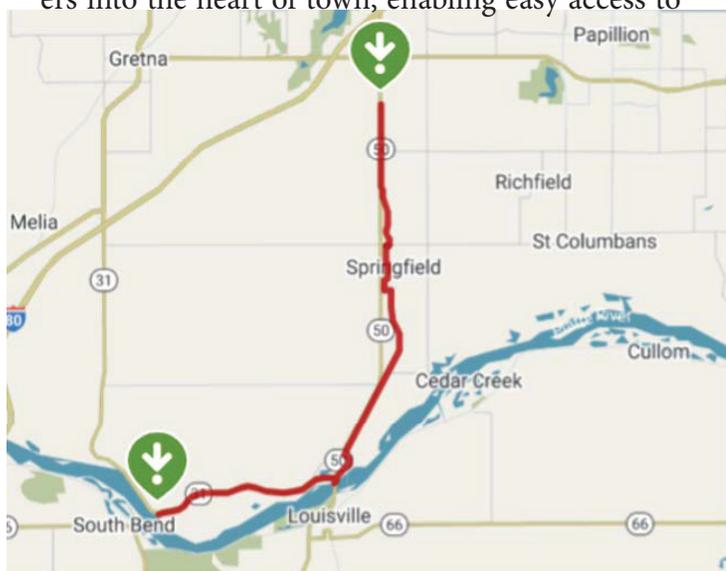


Figure 2.9: Map of MoPac Trail.

amenities. The trail is a crushed-limestone surface heavily used by walkers, runners, cyclists, and equestrians. At its southern endpoint, trail users can continue on the Platte River Connection trail, extending regional mobility and linking Springfield to a larger national network. The MoPac Trail that runs through (Springfield) is also part of the Great American Rail Trail, a 3,700-mile cross-country trail corridor.

According to interview insights, Springfield's trail proximity has strengthened local tourism and helped attract new residents, especially commuters working in Lincoln or the Omaha metro area. Wayfinding signage exists along the MoPac route near Springfield, though sidewalk connectivity varies across town. While some areas near the trail have direct walkable access to commercial destinations, others rely on local streets that do not have continuous sidewalks. Parking is available near the southern endpoint and at informal access points, though designated trailhead amenities such as bike repair stations, water, or restrooms are limited when compared with more built-out trail towns.

Overall, Springfield's trail infrastructure supports local recreation, enhances regional mobility, and serves as an anchor for community identity. Opportunities exist to improve in-town connectivity, add amenities supportive of the trail, and provide better wayfinding direction between the MoPac Trail and the Springfield business district.

Among the many placemaking features, Springfield provides ample opportunities to create a friendly and engaging space for both trail users and community members. The MoPac Trail is supported with a clear and identifiable trailhead, reinforcing a strong sense of arrival. While formal wayfinding between the trail and downtown is limited, trail users benefit from the close proximity, only about one block to essential services such as gas, food,



Table 2.7. Trail-Oriented Amenities in Springfield

Bicycle and/or Pedestrian Trail Supportive Infrastructure Found	Springfield
Infrastructure	
Bicycle Lane from multi-use trail to services	
Secondary trails in community	
Defined Bike Route (by signage)	
Crosswalk	X
Sidewalks	X
Bridges that enable walking/biking	
Underpasses that enable walking/biking	
Parklet	
Benches	X
Bike Rack	
Repair Station/Air Pump	
Shade in resting areas	
Shade along trail	X
Signage	
State Law, Yield/Stop for Pedestrians at Crosswalk	X
Interpretative/Wayfinding Info	
Entertainment/Downtown District	X
Services	
Food establishments	X
Public Restrooms (free)	
Water (free)	X
Gas station	X
Camping	
Lodging	
Bike rentals	
Bike Shop	
Placemaking	
Sculptures	X
Murals	
Historical markers	X
Museum	
Garden/arboretum	X
Bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure observed while on-site.	

Source: Site Visit Observations

Placemaking Features

and restrooms. For comfort-oriented amenities, the community provides shade areas, rest spaces, picnic areas, and water access through local businesses.

Visual interest comes through public art installations, pocket parks, and green spaces that add to the vibrant small-town character. The presence of bike racks adds to bicycle friendliness, even as the absence of lodging, camping facilities, and a bike repair station suggests opportunities for future improvement. Cultural and social assets like the Sarpy County Fairgrounds directly adjacent to the trail provide event-based placemaking that strengthens the identity of this community. In total, these features place Springfield as a trail-supportive community with a solid foundation on which to build further improvements related to visitation and local engagement.

The interview with Springfield’s City Administrator added much insight into the ways in which the MoPac Trail contributes to the community’s identity and economy, and where long-term planning priorities reside. The interviewee noted that the trail is an important asset for Springfield, bringing steady foot and bicycle traffic into town, at times during peak seasons. Many trail users stop in Springfield for food, water, or rest on their way

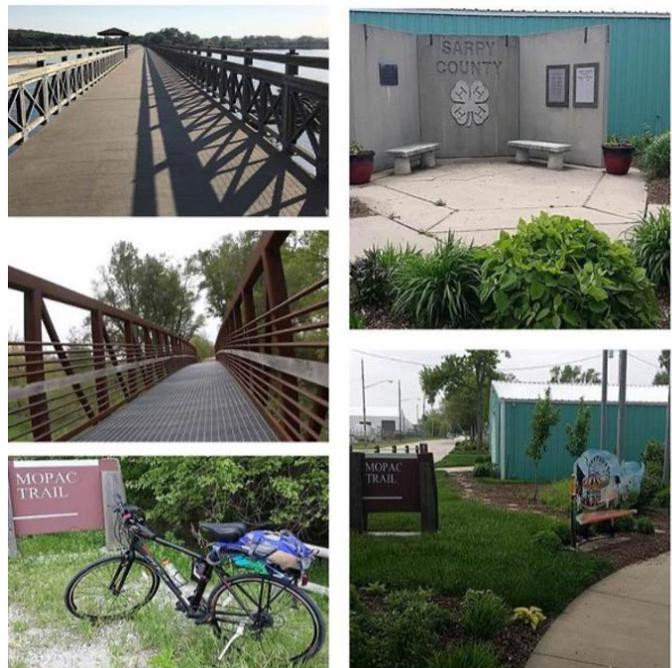


Figure 2.10: Placemaking Features of Springfield, NE Source:

Interview Highlights

further on, and this activity benefits the local businesses tremendously—particularly gas stations, small eateries, and shops that are close to the trailhead.

The interviewee also said that Springfield's position, midway between Omaha and the Platte River, puts the town in a natural stopping point along the trail for a quiet, rural break not too far from urban centers. Community involvement is further enhanced by having the Sarpy County Fairgrounds nearby, bringing people into the community who may interact with either the trail or other downtown amenities while in town. The interviewee also added that Springfield takes pride in maintaining a clean, safe, and friendly environment for both its residents and trail users.

At the same time, the interviewee pointed to several potential areas for future improvement. Signage from the trail into downtown is limited, and clearer wayfinding could further assist in directing visitors toward local services. While Springfield offers restrooms, water, and shaded rest areas, it lacks lodging, camping, and a bike repair station, features that could make the town more appealing to long-distance cyclists or multi-day trail users. The interviewee expressed interest in strengthening these amenities over time, in conjunction with local and regional planning efforts. In all, the interview reinforced the idea that Springfield is already a functioning trail-supportive com-

munity but has unrealized opportunities to improve connectivity, expand services, and capture more trail-based tourism.

Springfield has numerous assets that put it in a good position for trail-supported economic redevelopment. As the eastern anchor of the MoPac Trail corridor, it receives a continuous amount of foot and bicycle traffic, especially during the warmer months and major regional events. Trail users often stop in for fuel, snacks, and rest in Springfield, creating small yet significant action for businesses in the community. Being situated close to the Sarpy Coun-

Economic Redevelopment and Placemaking

ty Fairgrounds is a boost to this effect, drawing visitors into town for events that coincide with the use of the trail. All these dynamics suggest that Springfield is ripe to grow its trail-oriented economy through targeted investments in amenities, signage, and destination-building features.

Springfield's economic strengths include its walkable town core, historic main street character, and high-visibility location adjacent to Omaha's rapidly growing suburbs. Already contributing to the foundation of a trail-friendly commercial district are the city's retail and service businesses, including restaurants, a gas station, and shops along Main Street. Yet several gaps remain to fully make use of trail-based tourism for the city. Lodging options are scant,



bike repair stations are currently unavailable, and additional shade structures or rest areas could be installed to entice trail users to make longer stops and extend their stays in the community. Nature-based design and community-oriented gathering spaces are key elements of placemaking in Springfield. The leaf-shaped shelters, butterfly garden, arborum features, and interpretive nature signage provide a cohesive aesthetic identity that sets Springfield apart from other trail towns. Musical nature instruments to be installed near the trail and the storybook walk planned in coordination with the library continue to enhance Springfield's family-friendly and education-focused placemaking strategy. These features provide not only comfort and visual appeal but also a sense of place consistent with Springfield's values and an enhanced trail experience. The economic redevelopment opportunities for Springfield are focused on improving trail-to-town connectivity, increasing the number and variety of amenities, and developing destination-quality spaces near the MoPac corridor. Directions and signage, the creation of a formal trailhead plaza with seating and shade, and planning and coordination with regional partners could greatly position Springfield as a more significant stop along the larger MoPac Trail network. By capitalizing on its strong local identity and strategic location, Springfield can advance placemaking and economic vital-

ity, furthering its role as a friendly and engaging trail town.

A network of regional and local partnerships strongly supports Springfield's success as a trail-oriented community. The city works closely with the Papio-Missouri River Natural Resources District (NRD), which plays a central role in trail maintenance, environmental stewardship, and creek stabilization efforts along the MoPac Trail. Partners like the Community Foundation and local Business Association are critical collaborators in advancing community de-

Key Partnerships

velopment initiatives, promoting local events, and supporting small businesses that benefit from trail activity. Horizon Bank provides financial and organizational support for community projects and placemaking enhancements. Additionally, the Springfield Public Library is a key partner in family-focused trail programming, including an upcoming storybook walk and nature-themed play installations. Collectively, these partnerships build Springfield's capacity to pursue trail improvements, host events, and create a friendly atmosphere for residents and visitors.

The experience of Springfield underlines some key lessons for a trail-oriented community: proximity between the trail and downtown services is an important asset, and Springfield's one-block distance encourages users of the trail





to engage with local businesses. In part, though, that connection needs to be supported through clear wayfinding and a high-quality trailhead for economic benefits to be fully leveraged. Even small communities on limited budgets can greatly en-

Lessons Learned

hance trail appeal through low-cost placemaking initiatives, such as public art, shaded seating, and gardens. Partnerships-particularly with the library, the Fairgrounds, and local businesses-play a key role in creating vibrant community spaces and event-based activation. Lastly, Springfield shows that trail tourism is less about the infrastructure of trails themselves and more about developing a friendly environment through maintenance, safety, and hospitality. Such lessons can help Springfield and other communities build their position within regional trail networks.

The planning and implementation strategies of Springfield highlight the initiative of building a set of existing assets while positioning the area for future growth. Other current priorities include improving trail-to-town connections, signage, public amenities, and integrating community-driven placemaking projects. Accomplishing these initiatives requires coordination with regional partners, including Sarpy County, trail organizations, and

Planning & Implementation

the Omaha metro planning network. The projects the community is currently working on-the storybook walk with the library, nature-based installations near the trail, and other improvements to local parks-are testaments to ensuring accessible and family-friendly public space in Springfield. Ongoing investment in trail infrastructure, small business visibility, and event programming will continue to support the vision put forward by the town. Implementation strategies should shift focus toward smaller, incremental improvements as Springfield develops, allowing consistency with the

town's identity and continued economic resilience through quality-of-life improvements.

Cortland, NE is a village in Gage County, NE, located 21 miles south of Lincoln, NE and 18 miles north of Beatrice, NE. The village is bisected by US Highway 77, downtown on the west side, and the Homestead trail on the east side. Cortland has a population of 504 individuals, making it comparable to Elmwood, NE.³⁶

³⁶ "P1: RACE - Census Bureau Table," accessed December 12, 2025, <https://data.census.gov/table/DECENNIALPL2020.P1?q=Cortland+village,+Nebraska>.

Cortland, Nebraska Community Profile

Square miles: 0.26

County name: Gage County

Population: 504

Trail: Homestead Trail

The Homestead trail runs over 60 miles, from Lincoln, NE to Beatrice, NE, connecting many rural communities along its route and to the Blue River Trail that continues to Marysville, KS.³⁷ The trail is a rails-to-trails project; construction on the trail began in 2007, being completed in 2012.³⁸ While the trail has existed for over a decade, Cortland has not yet capitalized fully on the opportunity for economic development that the trail offers.

The 2020 decennial census showed Cortland's population to be 504 people and in 2010 it was 482 people, showing a population increase of 22 people. The 2023 American Community Survey 5-year estimates show a modest increase of 125 people, however the margin of error is 139 points which suggests the estimate is not valid.³⁹ Population growth in Cortland could be because of the close

³⁷ "Homestead Trail (Lincoln) | VisitNebraska.Com," accessed December 12, 2025, <https://visitnebraska.com/lincoln/homestead-trail>.

³⁸ "Homestead Trail (NE) | Nebraska Trails | TrailLink," accessed December 12, 2025, <https://www.trailink.com/trail/homestead-trail-%28ne%29/>.

³⁹ "Cortland Village, Nebraska - Census Bureau Profile," accessed December 12, 2025, <https://data.census.gov/table/ACSDP5Y2023.DP05?g=160XX00US3110635>.



Demographics and Socioeconomic Profile

Table 2.8: Population of Cortland, NE in 2010, 2015, 2020

Year	Population	Margin of Error
2010	482	
2015	527	±98
2020	504	
2023	629	±139

Source: Description: Population of Cortland, NE utilizing 2010, 2020 decennial census data; 2015, 2023 American Community Survey 5-year estimates.

proximity to both Lincoln and Beatrice making it a viable bedroom community.

The median household income in Cortland is \$84,492. The median population age is 35.5 years, with about 17% of the residents 65 years or older. There are 229 total households in Cortland. The community's poverty rate is 4.9%.⁴⁰

Cortland has very limited amenities available to trail users. The main offering to trail users is a small rest area. This rest area features a concrete pad along with three wooden benches. Each bench is engraved and painted with a different inscription; one bench is inscribed with "est. 1883," another with "elev 1445," and the final bench is engraved with "Cortland, Nebraska."

Within city limits, there are no shaded sections of trail, with the entire section of trail being exposed.

⁴⁰ "Cortland Village, Nebraska - Census Bureau Profile."

Table 2: Socio-Economic Profile of Cortland, NE

Median Household Income:	\$84,492
Median age	35.5
Population 65 Years and Older	17.3
Poverty	4.9
Unemployment Rate	1.0%
Total Housing Units	229
Total Households	229
Bachelors degree or higher	56
Residential Mobility-Moved from a different state in the last year	2
% of People employed in Arts, Entertainment, & Recreation, & Accommodation & Food Services* sector	13 people
% of People employed in Retail Trade sector	24 people

Homestead Trail

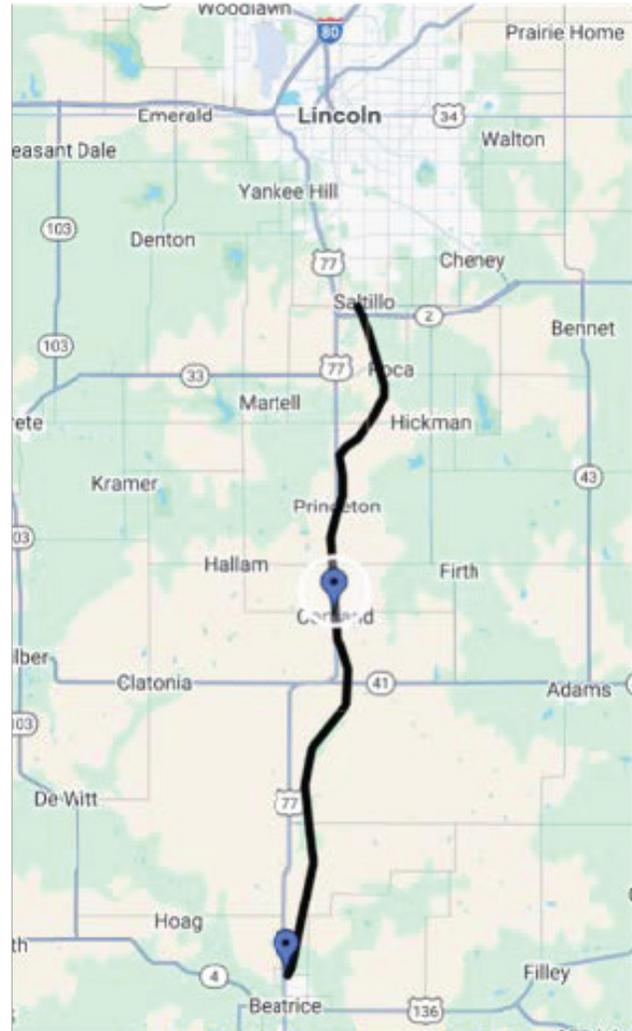


Figure 2.11: Homestead Trail Map, Nebraska portion

The Homestead trail was developed through a partnership between City of Beatrice, Lower Platte South Natural Resources District and the Nebraska Trails Foundation. The trail follows the abandoned Union Pacific Rail line through farmland until it reaches Pickrell, NE where the trail becomes more shaded. Limited services are available at Cortland and Pickrell and full services are available in Lincoln and Beatrice.



Figure 2.12: Cortland Trail Inventory showing signage, benches and homestead trail.

Source: Site-Visit photos

Amenities For Trail Users

The village uses the trail corridor, as well as the highway corridor as an opportunity to advertise local businesses with many billboards advertising places such as a shed seller, a gun store, and the local Legion Post 253.

To access food, water, and restrooms, a trail user must cross Highway 77. The businesses in the community that are open regularly are two gas stations along the highway. These gas stations are the most readily accessible sources of food, water, or restrooms. In addition, there is a bakery that is open for limited hours and a pizza place. There are no opportunities for any of these amenities on the east side of town, where the trail passes through. No lodging or camping is available within Cortland.

Cortland has a unique history reflected on both the city website and in the town museum. The museum is located in a 1883 building that used to be Oddfellows Hall and Modern Woodman of American Hall and offers free admission to visitors.⁴¹ However, beyond the museum, placemaking elements such as history, art and gardens have not been used as a community development tool.

⁴¹ "City of Cortland," accessed December 11, 2025, <https://villageofcortland.com/museum/>.



Table 2.9: Trail Supportive Infrastructure Inventory

Bicycle and/or Pedestrian Trail Supportive Infrastructure Found	Cortland
Infrastructure	
Bicycle Lane from multi-use trail to services	
Secondary trails in community	
Defined Bike Route (by signage)	x
Crosswalk	x
Sidewalks	x
Bridges that enable walking/biking	x
Underpasses that enable walking/biking	
Parklet	
Benches	x
Bike Rack	
Repair Station/Air Pump	
Shade in resting areas	
Shade along trail	
Signage	
State Law, Yield/Stop for Pedestrians at Crosswalk	x
Interpretative/Wayfinding Info	
Entertainment/Downtown District	x
Services	
Food establishments	x
Public Restrooms (free)	x
Water (free)	
Gas station	x
Camping	
Lodging	
Bike rentals	
Bike Shop	
Placemaking	
Sculptures	
Murals	
Historical markers	
Museum	
Garden/arboretum	
Bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure observed while on-site.	

Source: Site-Visit in November 2025

Table 2.10: Businesses of Cortland, NE

Type of business	Number	Bike Friendly website/site visit
Café/Bar/Restaurant	2	N/A
Event Venue (concerts)	1	N/A
Convenience store/gas	2	N/A
Museum	1	N/A

Source: List of businesses created from Cortland City Website.

Placemaking and Aesthetic Features

Conclusions

Cortland does not effectively leverage the opportunity that the trail offers for economic and community development partially because the village is bisected by US highway 77, which hinders the ability of the town to embrace the trail. The majority of businesses are located across the highway from the Homestead trail, making access to these businesses potentially dangerous. The village has a deep history from which to draw in creating a unique placemaking or storytelling experience. While the difficulties of geography and established infrastructure may forever limit the success of the trail in Cortland, there are opportunities for the community to improve its trail success.

This case helps show the need for trail accessibility to a community’s downtown core. If access is not readily available, it will be very difficult for the benefits of a trail to be realized. The geographic layout of the trail must be carefully chosen to allow a community the opportunity to embrace the trail.

The city of Beatrice, NE is the principal city of Gage County, NE. Beatrice had a population of 12,261 according to the 2020 decennial census.⁴² The city is located 41 miles south of Lincoln, NE. Beatrice is connected to Lincoln via US Highway 77 and the Homestead Trail. Beatrice’s value lies in its well-developed trail network and infrastructure, diverse sightseeing opportunities, and large

⁴² “Beatrice City, Nebraska - Census Bureau Tables,” accessed December 12, 2025, <https://data.census.gov/table?q=Beatrice+city,+Nebraska>.



Beatrice, Nebraska Community Profile



Figure 2.13. Aerial View of Downtown Beatrice, Nebraska

Source: Homes.com, “Beatrice, NE Local Guide.”

Square miles: 9.56
County name: Gage County
Population: 12,290
Trail: Homestead Trail

regional population. The city has taken steps to embrace the Homestead Trail since its opening in 2012, from storytelling efforts to a unique brewery experience.

Beatrice is a relatively well-connected city for trail users. While there are breaks in the Homestead Trail going through downtown Beatrice, resulting in a disjointed experience, the city offers its own connecting trail taking users between the two premier parks in the city—Riverside and Chataqua Parks. The city trail follows the path of the Big Blue River, offering trail users a shaded and picturesque experience. The Homestead Trail follows the route of an old Union Pacific Railroad line through agri-

Demographics and Socioeconomic Profile

Table 2.11: Businesses of Cortland, NE

Demographics	Beatrice, Nebraska
Median Household Income:	\$68,040
Median age	43.1
Population 65 Years and Older	22.1%
Poverty	19.9%
Unemployment Rate	2.0%
Total Housing Units	6105
Total Households	5510
Bachelors degree or higher	1744
Residential Mobility-Moved from a different state in the last year	93 people*
% of People employed in Arts, Entertainment, & Recreation, & Accommodation & Food Services* sector	473 people*
% of People employed in Retail Trade sector	707 people*

Sources: S1901, S0101, B25002, DP02, S1501, 2023 5 yr ACS



Amenities for Trail Users

Table 2.12: Trail Supportive Infrastructure Inventory

Bicycle and/or Pedestrian Trail Supportive Infrastructure Found	Beatrice
Infrastructure	
Bicycle Lane from multi-use trail to services	
Secondary trails in community	x
Defined Bike Route (by signage)	x
Crosswalk	x
Sidewalks	x
Bridges that enable walking/biking	x
Underpasses that enable walking/biking	
Parklet	x
Benches	x
Bike Rack	x
Repair Station/Air Pump	
Shade in resting areas	x
Shade along trail	x
Signage	
State Law, Yield/Stop for Pedestrians at Crosswalk	x
Interpretative/Wayfinding Info	
Entertainment/Downtown District	x
Services	
Food establishments	x
Public Restrooms (free)	x
Water (free)	x
Gas station	x
Camping	x
Lodging	x
Bike rentals	x
Bike Shop	x
Placemaking	
Sculptures	x
Murals	
Historical markers	x
Museum	x
Garden/arboretum	
Bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure observed while on-site.	x

Source: Site-Visit in November 2025

Trail Connectivity Summary

cultural land so the city trail offers users a shadier and more enjoyable experience.

A key business supporting bike recreation in Beatrice is the Big Blue Bike Company located at 719 Market St on the east side of Downtown. The bike shop opened in 2023 to support cyclists of all ages.⁴³ Aside from this amenity serving cyclists, being a large town, Beatrice has many businesses well suited to support cyclists passing through. Cyclists have ready access to fast food restaurants

43 “About Us - Big Blue Bike Co. | Beatrice, NE,” accessed December 12, 2025, <https://www.bigbluebikene.com/articles/about-us-pg216.htm>.

Businesses

Table 2.13: Businesses of Cortland, NE

Type of business	Number	Bike Friendly website/site visit
Café/Bar/Restaurant	20+	N/A
Event Venue (concerts)	5+	N/A
Convenience store/gas	10+	N/A
Museum	1	N/A
Grocery	4	N/A
Bike Shop	1	Yes

Source: Cite Visit; Interview

along the northern section of the trail in town, with restaurants including Subway, Taco Johns, and Runza, among several other options.

The Homestead Trail trailhead is located at Court Street and 2nd Avenue with ready access to the city’s downtown district. Popular locations near the trailhead are the Stone Hollow Brewing Company and Sunrise Bakery, though other amenities at this location are the Gage County Museum, and other downtown businesses.

The interviewee described the Homestead Trail and Chief Standing Bear Trail as shared recreational assets that connect Beatrice internally and to nearby communities such as Cortland, Pickerel, and Barnston. Trail use was framed primarily around leisure and social recreation rather than commuting, with residents using the trails to ride, run, and visit neighboring towns. The interviewee also emphasized the importance of internal trail connections that allow residents to easily access the regional corridors, reinforcing the trails’ role

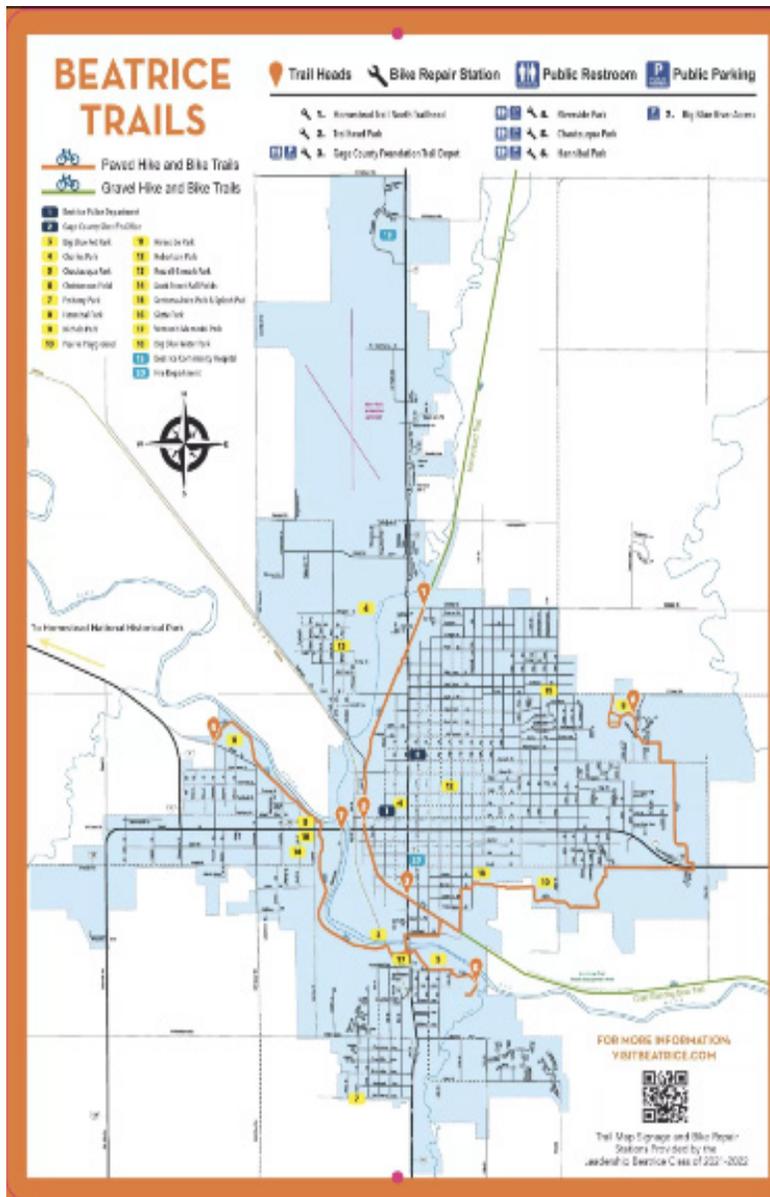


Figure 2.14: Beatrice Hike and Bike Trail System and Community Amenities
 Source: City of Beatrice, Public Properties Department, “Hike & Bike Trail.”

Interview Themes

Trails as Community Connectors and Shared Recreational Space

in strengthening community cohesion. These observations align with Nebraska rural trail studies, which find that trails in small towns function most strongly as social and recreational spaces that enhance quality of life and community identity rather than daily transportation.⁴⁴

A prominent interview theme was the trail system’s role in supporting incremental economic activity through downtown-focused investments and recurring events. The interviewee highlighted a brewery located near the Homestead Trail terminus and described events such as the Hoppy Half marathon, the Golden Ride, and gravel cycling races that intentionally start and end near downtown. These events were described as drawing both local participants and visitors, creating concentrated periods of economic and social activity

44 Matteson, “A Nebraska Legacy.”



Trail-Linked Economic Activity Centered on Downtown and Events

near trail-adjacent businesses and public spaces. This pattern reflects trail research showing that events are often among the most immediate and visible economic benefits for rural communities.⁴⁵

The interviewee emphasized investments in trailheads and adjacent public spaces—including green space conversions, restrooms, and picnic shelters—as strategies to encourage trail users to spend time in Beatrice rather than pass through. Partnerships were also identified as essential, with the Nebraska Trails Foundation, local running and cycling clubs, the YMCA, and individual leaders playing key roles in trail development and activation. Finally, the interviewee noted that the city owns and maintains sig-

Trailheads, Partnerships, and Municipal Commitment

nificant portions of the trail system, with maintenance funded through the municipal operating budget. Trail studies similarly emphasize that partnerships, clear ownership, and consistent maintenance funding are critical to sustaining trail quality and long-term community support.⁴⁶

Beatrice offers several transferable lessons for Elmwood as it considers how to leverage its position along the MoPac East Trail. First, Beatrice demonstrates the value of treating trails as everyday community infrastructure, not solely as tourism assets. Interview findings show that recreational and social use by residents forms the foundation of long-term trail success, reinforcing local identity and community cohesion.⁴⁷ For Elmwood, prioritizing resident access, comfort, and routine use may be

45 Matteson, “A Nebraska Legacy.”

46 Matteson, “A Nebraska Legacy.”

47 Greer, Nebraska Rural Trails: Three Studies of Trail Impact, n.d.

Table 2.14: Trail-Related Events and Downtown Linkages in Beatrice

Event	Trail Connection	Downtown Relationship	Type of Activity
Hoppy Half Marathon	Homestead Trail	Starts/ends near brewery	Running
Golden Ride	Homestead Trail	Downtown endpoint	Cycling
Gravel Cycling Events	Standing Bear Trail	Post-ride gathering downtown	Cycling

Source: Interview with Beatrice city official (2025); Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (2025), Trail Linked Economic Activity in Rural Communities.



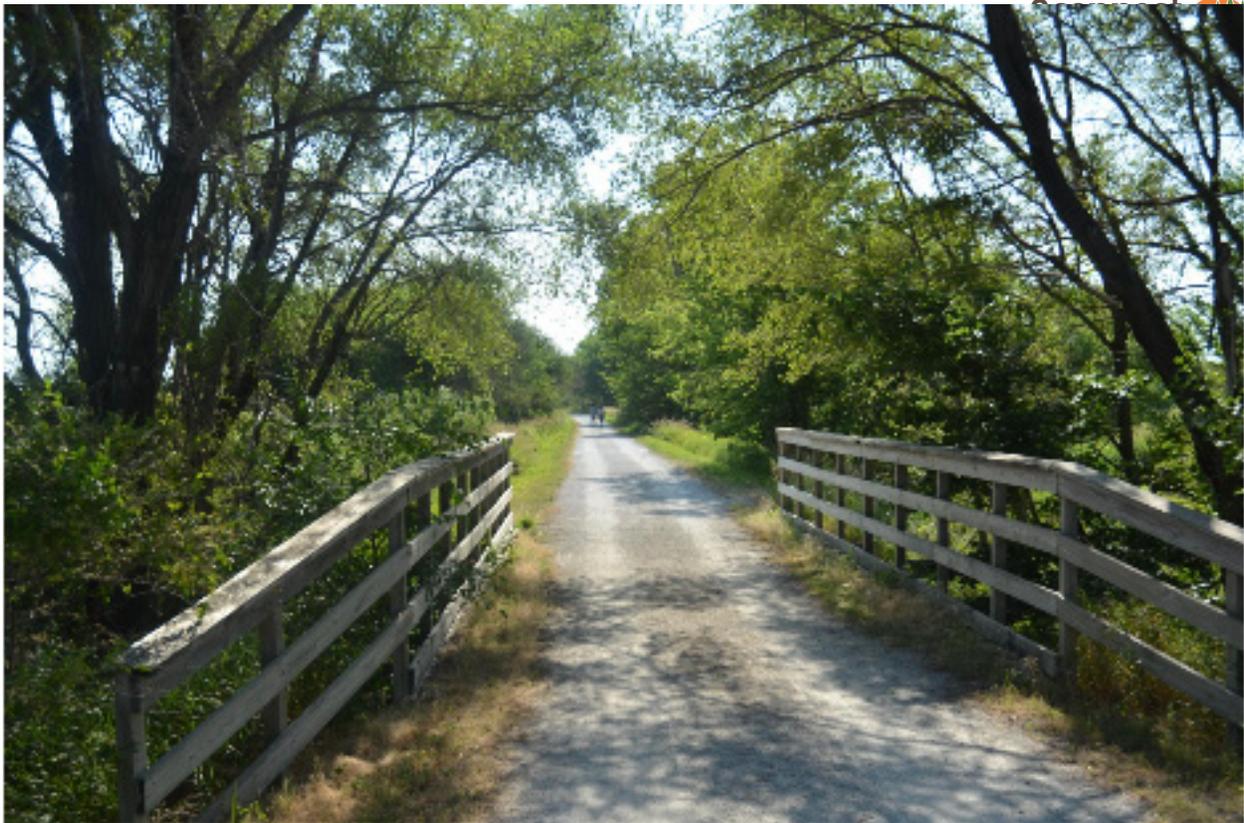


Figure 2.15. MoPac East Trail Segment in Nebraska
Source: Visit Nebraska, MoPac East Trail.

Lessons for Elmwood

as important as attracting outside visitors.

Second, Beatrice illustrates how downtown-oriented trail connections and events can concentrate activity without requiring large-scale commercial development. Events such as races and organized rides that start and end near downtown have helped channel trail users toward local businesses and public spaces. Trail research similarly finds that event-based programming often provides the most immediate and visible economic benefits for small communities.^{48,49} Elmwood could pursue modest, recurring events that align with local capacity rather than one-time destination marketing.

Third, Beatrice highlights the importance of basic trailhead amenities and partnerships. Investments in restrooms, green space, and picnic areas, combined with collaboration among nonprofits, local clubs, and municipal government, support trail activation and long-term stewardship.⁵⁰ For Elmwood, incremental amenity improvements and strong partnerships may offer a realistic pathway toward sustained trail-based vitality.

In Beatrice, the Homestead Trail and Chief Standing Bear Trail function as more than recreational infrastructure; they are embedded in the city's everyday social and civic life. As described in the interview, residents use the trails for leisure, social riding, and travel between neighborhoods and nearby communities, reinforcing the trails as familiar public spaces rather than destination amenities alone. This lived, routine use reflects patterns identified in Nebraska rural trail research, which finds that trails in small towns most often support recreation, social interaction, and community identity rather than commuter transporta-

48 Greer, Nebraska Rural Trails: Three Studies of Trail Impact, n.d.

49 Matteson, "A Nebraska Legacy."

50 Matteson, "A Nebraska Legacy."



Trail-Based Storytelling and Community Identity in Beatrice

tion.⁵¹

The spatial relationship between the trails and downtown further shapes Beatrice’s trail narrative. Trail corridors converge near the city’s core, where recent public investments and private activity intersect. The interview highlighted a brewery located near the Homestead Trail terminus that has become a social gathering point and a destination for trail users and event participants. Trail-based events such as the Hoppy Half marathon and regional cycling rides transform the trail into a temporary civic stage, concentrating activity downtown and reinforcing its role as a place of arrival and celebration. Similar event-driven patterns are documented in rural trail studies, which show that organized rides and races often represent the most visible early economic benefits of trail development.⁵²

Public space improvements along the trail further contribute to this evolving story. The interview described the conversion of former industrial or underutilized sites into green space, restrooms, picnic shelters, and trailhead amenities designed to encourage trail users to stop and linger. Research on rural trail corridors consistently identifies these basic amenities as critical to user satisfaction and dwell time, shaping whether trail users engage with nearby communities or simply pass through.^{53,54}

Underlying these visible changes is a network of partnerships and municipal commitment. The Nebraska Trails Foundation, local running and cycling clubs, the YMCA, and individual community leaders were all identified as central to trail development and activation, while the city’s ownership and maintenance of trail segments reflect a long-term civic investment. Trail-town literature similarly emphasizes that sustained partnerships and clear governance structures are essential to main-

taining trail quality and reinforcing trails as enduring elements of community identity.⁵⁵

Challenges Facing Trail Development and Use in Beatrice

Beatrice faces several interconnected challenges in maximizing the economic and recreational benefits of its trail system. A primary constraint is the city’s distance from major population centers such as Lincoln and Omaha. Although the Homestead Trail provides a direct connection to Lincoln, the length of the ride largely limits use to experienced cyclists, reducing casual visitation and spontaneous, short-duration trips that typically generate consistent trail-related spending in rural communities.⁵⁶ In addition, Beatrice has a limited supply of trail-oriented commercial services, particularly food and retail options near the downtown trail corridor. As noted in the interview, the local brewery functions as a primary trail destination, while other establishments have struggled to recover following COVID-19, constraining the city’s ability to capture spending from trail users despite existing trail traffic.⁵⁷ The city also bears full responsibility for main-

55 Matteson, “A Nebraska Legacy.”

56 Greer, Nebraska Rural Trails: Three Studies of Trail Impact, n.d.

57 Matteson, “A Nebraska Legacy.”

51 Greer, Nebraska Rural Trails: Three Studies of Trail Impact, n.d.

52 Greer, Nebraska Rural Trails: Three Studies of Trail Impact, n.d.

53 Greer, Nebraska Rural Trails: Three Studies of Trail Impact, n.d.

54 Matteson, “A Nebraska Legacy.”



Figure 2.16: Park entrance and landscaped stairway in a City of Beatrice public park.

Source: City of Beatrice, City Parks Guide



taining substantial trail segments, including surface upkeep, tree trimming, and bridge repairs, which places ongoing demands on municipal budgets and staff as trail use increases.⁵⁸ Economic activity associated with the trails is further concentrated around organized events, creating uneven usage patterns and limiting year-round benefits unless paired with broader place-making strategies.⁵⁹ Finally, opportunities to strengthen long-distance connectivity depend on coordination with regional and state partners, reducing Beatrice's ability to independently enhance its trail network.

Brownville, Nebraska is a small historic river town on the Missouri River with the Steamboat Trace Trail running immediately adjacent to the community. As a potential "destination-driven" node in a regional trail network, Brownville's value lies in the tight overlap between trail access, riverfront scenery, and a concentrated set of heritage and arts assets. Nebraska trail research suggests that small towns located directly on rural rail-trails tend to see higher resident support for trails, stronger perceptions of community pride, and optimism about long-term economic benefits—even when short-term business impacts are modest.⁶⁰ Brownville fits this profile: it is compact, walkable, and

58 Greer, Nebraska Rural Trails: Three Studies of Trail Impact, n.d.

59 Matteson, "A Nebraska Legacy."

60 Greer, Nebraska Rural Trails: Three Studies of Trail Impact, n.d.

Brownville, Nebraska Community Profile

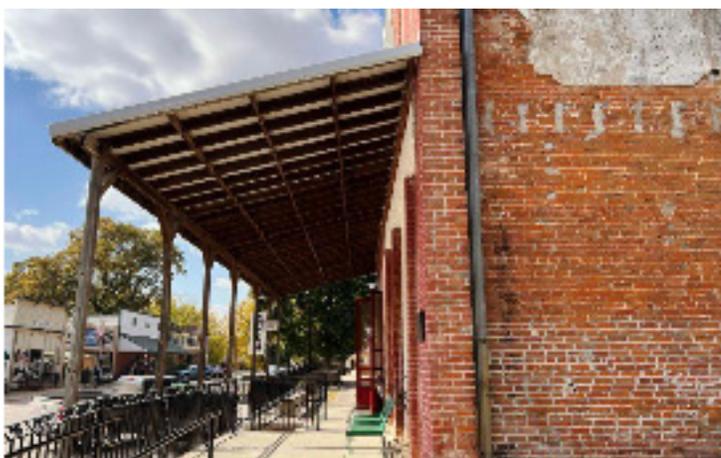


Figure 2.17. Historic Commercial Streetscape in Brownville, Nebraska. Source: Oh My! Omaha, "Things To Do In Brownville, Nebraska," accessed December 6, 2025.

Square miles: 0.65

County name: Nemaha County

Population: 139

Trail: Steamboat Trace Trail

already marketed around tourism, making it well positioned to leverage Steamboat Trace users as visitors to downtown and riverfront attractions.

Trail Connectivity Summary

From a connectivity standpoint, Brownville's primary strengths are proximity and legibility. The Steamboat Trace corridor runs along the river's edge, and Brownville's built-up area is immediately upslope, so most homes, galleries, and inns are within a short walk or bike ride of the trail. This pattern is consistent with other rural trail towns in Nebraska and Iowa, where small-town residents typically live within a few blocks of the trail and report high levels of use and satisfaction.⁶¹ For Brownville, a clear system of wayfinding signs at the trailhead and along local streets can reinforce the idea that downtown and the trail are part of the same place, not separate destinations.

The trail access analysis should document: (1) the exact location of the main Steamboat Trace trailhead relative to downtown blocks; (2) the condition and width of connecting streets and sidewalks; and (3) any existing on-street bike markings or shoulders that can function as low-stress bike connections. Similar to Cortland's concerns about highway crossings, Brownville's safety profile should evaluate riverfront road crossings, posted speeds, sightlines at trail intersections, lighting, and crosswalk visibility. Nebraska trail studies note that residents rarely report major increases in crime along rural trails but do highlight privacy and nuisance concerns when crossings are poorly designed, or users feel "out of place" near homes.⁶² Applying those lessons in Brownville means prioritizing good lighting, clear markings, and context-sensitive railings, bollards, and signage where the trail meets local streets.

61 Greer, Nebraska Rural Trails: Three Studies of Trail Impact, n.d.

62 Greer, Nebraska Rural Trails: Three Studies of Trail Impact, n.d.



Figure 2.18. Brownville Trail Access Points and Destination Wayfinding Map

Source: Adapted from Lewis & Clark National Historic Trail—Travel Guide, “Governor Furnas Arboretum and Whiskey Run Creek Nature Center,” accessed December 6, 2025.

Parking and access will also shape Brownville’s ability to host trail-based tourism. In other Nebraska trail communities, small businesses and trail managers highlight the value of reliable parking for cars and shuttles, and in some cases horse trailers and RVs.⁶³ In Brownville, documenting the number and location of public parking stalls near the trailhead, as well as any informal roadside parking areas, will help assess capacity for peak-season events. The assessment should also note ADA access surface conditions, slopes, and the presence of curb ramps or handrails to determine whether Brownville’s trail-to-downtown connection is truly usable for older adults, families with strollers, and visitors with mobility devices.

Amenity provision is a critical factor in whether rural trails are perceived as inviting “destinations” or simply pass-through corridors. Nebraska’s Prairie Corridor project and Cowboy Trail experience both emphasize restrooms, water, shade, and interpretive opportunities as essential to building trail loyalty and return visitation.⁶⁵ Brownville’s existing amenities such as public restrooms, park shelters, and riverfront seating can be inventoried and mapped relative to the trail.

In particular, the Brownville assessment should identify where trail users can access: (1) restrooms during regular hours; (2) potable wa-

63 Greer, Nebraska Rural Trails: Three Studies of Trail Impact, n.d.

64 Matteson, “A Nebraska Legacy.”

65 Rails-to-Trails-Conservancy CASE STUDY February 16 and 2024, “Prairie Corridor Case Study,” Rails to Trails Conservancy, n.d., accessed December 12, 2025, <https://www.railstotrails.org/resource-library/resources/prairie-corridor/>.



Amenities For Trail Users

ter or bottle-filling stations; (3) shaded seating or picnic shelters; and (4) any bike repair stands or informal repair resources (e.g., nearby hardware or auto-parts stores).

Table 2.15: Trail-Oriented Amenities in Brownville

Bicycle and/or Pedestrian Trail Supportive Infrastructure Found	Brownville
Infrastructure	
Bicycle Lane from multi-use trail to services	X
Secondary trails in community	X
Defined Bike Route (by signage)	X
Crosswalk	X
Sidewalks	X
Bridges that enable walking/biking	
Underpasses that enable walking/biking	
Parklet	X
Benches	X
Bike Rack	X
Repair Station/Air Pump	
Shade in resting areas	X
Shade along trail	X
Signage	
State Law, Yield/Stop for Pedestrians at Crosswalk	X
Interpretative/Wayfinding Info	X
Entertainment/Downtown District	X
Services	
Food establishments	X
Public Restrooms (free)	X
Water (free)	X
Gas station	X
Camping	X
Lodging	X
Bike rentals	
Bike Shop	
Placemaking	
Sculptures	X
Murals	X
Historical markers	X
Museum	X
Garden/arboretum	X
Bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure observed while on-site.	

Source: Analysis based on Brownville trail access mapping and local amenity information, accessed December 6, 2025.

On Nebraska’s Cowboy Trail, the lack of bike shops along a long rural corridor has led advocates to invest in fix-it stations and creative partnerships to help users stay on the trail.⁶⁶ Brownville’s smaller scale suggests that even one strategically placed fix-it station and a water fill point near the trailhead and downtown could measurably improve user experience.

Economic and Tourism Assets

Trail impact studies in rural Nebraska indicate that while many individual businesses initially report limited direct revenue gains from trail users, they nonetheless expect trails to contribute to overall business activity and community image over time.⁶⁷ Brownville already functions as a regional tourism destination, with wineries, riverfront lodging, museums, galleries, and a seasonal event calendar. Positioning these assets clearly for trail users can help convert “passing through” into “staying in town,” mirroring the way communities along the Cowboy Trail and Prairie Corridor have marketed their trail-adjacent amenities as part of a larger experience.^{68,69} A Brownville visitor-serving business inventory should include: (1) lodging options (inns, B&Bs, Airbnbs, campgrounds); (2) food and beverage (cafés, restaurants, bars, wineries); (3) retail oriented toward visitors and trail users (convenience stores, souvenir shops, bike-friendly businesses); and (4) arts, heritage, and entertainment venues (museums, historic sites, performance spaces). The Malvern and Springfield case studies illustrate how small-scale lodging and hospitality investments—such as converting historic buildings to Airbnbs or adding new cafes and family-friendly events—can significantly amplify the economic benefits of trail traffic by encouraging overnight stays and repeat visits.^{70,71} Integrating similar strategies into Brownville’s tourism planning could deepen the impact of Steamboat Trace visitors on local businesses.

66 Matteson, “A Nebraska Legacy.”
 67 Greer, Nebraska Rural Trails: Three Studies of Trail Impact, n.d.
 68 Rails-to-Trails-Conservancy CASE STUDY and 2024, “Prairie Corridor Case Study.”
 69 Matteson, “A Nebraska Legacy.”
 70 Malvern Interview, 2025
 71 Springfield Interview 2025, 2025



Table 2.16: Visitor-Serving Establishments and Lodging Options in Brownville

Business Name	Type / Category	Rooms / Units (if applicable)	Approximate Distance from Trailhead
River Inn Resort	Lodging / Inns	18 rooms	0.5 mi
Spirit of Brownville	Riverboat / Tourism Attraction	N/A	0.5 mi
Whiskey Run Creek Winery & Distillery	Winery / Distillery / Event Venue	N/A	0.7 mi
Lyceum	Restaurant / Dining	N/A	0.3 mi
Gospel Coffee & Ice Cream	Coffee Shop / Dessert	N/A	0.2 mi
Lone Tree Saloon	Bar / Restaurant	N/A	0.2 mi
Brownville Market	General Market / Retail	N/A	0.3 mi
The Bird's Nest Trading Post	Trading Post / Gifts	N/A	0.3 mi
John Lokke Art	Art Studio / Gallery	N/A	0.2 mi
Palmerton Gallery	Art Gallery	N/A	0.2 mi
The Crucible	Art Studio / Gallery	N/A	0.5 mi
New Earth Clay	Pottery Studio	N/A	0.4 mi
Wright Books	Local Bookstore	N/A	0.3 mi
Flatwater Folk Art Museum	Folk Art Museum	N/A	0.5 mi
Glass Art @ 601	Glass Art Studio / Gallery	N/A	0.5 mi
Pierce Cottage	Historic Guest Cottage / Lodging	1 room	0.8 mi
Environs Art	Art Gallery	N/A	0.2 mi
Buckaroo Books	Bookstore / Gifts	N/A	0.2 mi
Euphoric Soul Salon	Wellness / Service	N/A	0.2 mi

Source: Data compiled and adapted from Brownville-NE.co Business Directory, accessed December 6, 2025.

Economic indicators such as median household income, employment levels, and business trends from Census and Census Business Builder data will help frame whether Brownville’s economy is stable, growing, or vulnerable. In the Prairie Corridor case, projected trail visitation and ecotourism are explicitly linked to job creation and long-term competitiveness in recruiting workers.⁷² Brownville’s assessment can similarly consider whether trail-driven tourism might help stabilize seasonal revenues, support local entrepreneurship, and diversify an economy that may otherwise rely heavily on a narrow set of sectors. For instance, the snapshot shows that arts and cultural enterprises make up nearly 37% of local visitor-servicing businesses—far outweighing lodging (10.5%) or basic services (5%), suggesting both a strong cultural identity and a vulnerability to fluctuations in discretionary tourism spending. With just over one-fifth of businesses in food and beverage and fewer accommodations available, the town may capture day-trippers more easily than overnight visitors, indicating capacity gaps where additional lodging, dining, or trail-support amenities could convert trail traffic into longer stays and higher spending. The recent openings of new retail, food, and museum ventures further imply that Brownville is already responding to visitor demand, but the uneven distribution of business types signals opportunities for targeted development as well as risks if cultural tourism declines.

Placemaking and Aesthetic Features

Finally, Brownville’s identity as a historic river town gives it a strong foundation for trail-oriented placemaking. Trail users across Nebraska consistently rate exposure to nature, scenery, and quiet outdoor experi-

72 Rails-to-Trails-Conservancy CASE STUDY and 2024, “Prairie Corridor Case Study.”



Brownville Economic Snapshot

Median Income: \$78,750

Visitor Servicing Businesses: 18

Recent Openings within the Last Five Years

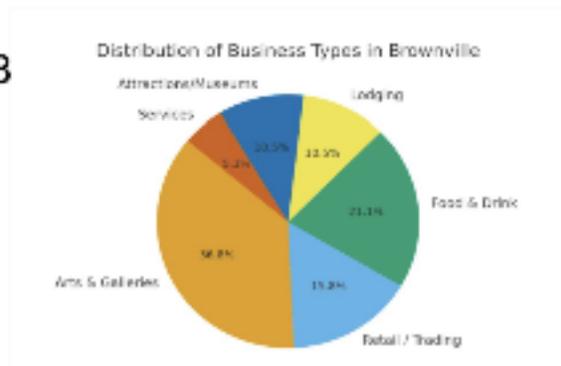


Figure 2.19. Economic Snapshot of Brownville Showing Median Income, Visitor-Servicing Businesses, and Recent Commercial Openings
 Source: Sarah Murrel compilation using ACS Census estimates and local business inventory (2025).

ences as their most important reasons for using rural trails.⁷³ Case studies from Malvern and Springfield show how communities have layered public art, interpretive signage, and playful design elements onto this base—murals, bike-themed sculptures, leaf-shaped shelters, Storybook Trails, and nature-themed play features—to create memorable stops that encourage people to linger.^{74,75} Brownville can do something similar by centering its river and steamboat heritage.

A Brownville placemaking assessment should document existing public art, historic markers, riverfront viewpoints, and interpretive installations, as well as any gaps in wayfinding between the trail, riverfront, and historic commercial streets. High-quality wayfinding such as maps, directional signs, and interpretive panels is identified in Nebraska trail plans as critical to connecting local residents and visitors to the “network of discovery” that trails represent.⁷⁶ For Brownville, this could mean coordinated signage that highlights walking loops from the trailhead to museums, galleries, river overlooks, and dining options, using a consistent visual language.

uding Malvern, Springfield, Brownville, and insights from Dr. Cochran’s long-term MoPac use suggest that trail connectivity can meaningfully shift local spending patterns, strengthen placemaking, and position small rural towns as appealing destinations for both residents and regional visitors.^{77,78} Because Elmwood sits at a midpoint between Lincoln and Omaha, the town is particularly well-positioned to capture economic activity from cyclists, walkers, families, and recreation-oriented travelers already familiar with the Nacho Ride, the MoPac commuter segments, and the broader regional trail network.

One key implication is the role of trail proximity and access design in shaping downtown foot traffic. Case studies demonstrate that physical connectivity, not just geographic proximity, is decisive. In Malvern, the

73 Greer, Nebraska Rural Trails: Three Studies of Trail Impact, n.d.
 74 Malvern Interview, 2025
 75 Springfield Interview, 2025
 76 Greer, Nebraska Rural Trails: Three Studies of Trail Impact, n.d.
 77 Trail User Interview, 2025
 78 Malvern Interview, 2025



Wabash Trace runs near town, but only after targeted placemaking and art installations did trail users begin routing themselves into downtown businesses.⁷⁹

79 Malvern Interview, 2025



Figure 2.20. Visitor Orientation Map and Wayfinding Sign in Brownville, Nebraska.

Source: MapQuest listing for Whiskey Run Creek Winery & Distillery, accessed December 6, 2025.

Overall, assessing Brownville through the lenses of trail connectivity, user amenities, tourism assets, and placemaking aligns with the broader Nebraska trail literature, which emphasizes multiple benefits including recreation, health, economic development, environmental education, and community identity are essential outcomes of a successful trail system.

Implications, Recommendations, and Funding Opportunities

Implications for Elmwood

Trail-oriented development along the MoPac East corridor has significant implications for Elmwood's downtown vitality, visitor economy, and long-term community identity. Evidence from peer communities incl

Springfield's experience reinforces this: an attractive, well-signed entry point combined with amenities like shelters, educational signage, and gardens created a powerful "gateway experience" that encouraged users to linger.⁸⁰ Elmwood currently lacks a strong visual or experiential cue guiding trail users toward Main Street, which means latent economic activity may be passing by unnoticed.

Interviews also highlighted that safety, maintenance, and user comfort matter greatly for trail users' willingness to stop in nearby communities. The interviewed trail user noted the limited availability of shade, water, and restrooms along the MoPac corridor and emphasized that gaps in safety signage can deter both commuters and recreational riders.⁸¹ Similar observations in Springfield where erosion control and clear trail-to-park connections became priorities, indicate that small infrastructure details influence overall user satisfaction and trail reputation. For Elmwood, improving crossing safety, enhancing wayfinding, and providing basic amenities will likely shape both trail usage and local perceptions of the trail as a community asset.

Brownville's experience along the Steamboat Trace Trail offers another implication: small towns with strong cultural or historical identities can leverage the trail as an interpretive and tourism platform. Brownville's wineries, museums, architectural heritage, and riverfront have created a leisure-tourism ecosystem that draws visitors beyond simply the trail itself. Although Elmwood's scale and assets differ, the model shows that cultural clustering—such as local art, heritage signage, or public-facing programming—can significantly strengthen the town's appeal for trail users seeking meaningful destinations.

Evidence from national and Nebraska trail-impact studies further underscores the magnitude of potential benefits. The Rails-to-Trails Conservancy reports that projects like Lincoln's Prairie Corridor are projected to attract 400,000+ visitors annually while stimulating ecotourism, job creation, and tal-

⁸⁰ Springfield Interview, 2025

⁸¹ Trail User Interview, 2025



Figure 2.21. Concept Rendering of Proposed Trail Kiosk Placement at Elmwood Trailhead

Source: Sarah Murrel created image using Google Street View as base imagery (2025).

ent retention.⁸² Similarly, the Cowboy Trail produces measurable economic ripple effects through lodging, dining, and outfitting services in towns as small as 300–1,000 residents.^{83,84} For Elmwood, even modest increases in trail visitation could support local small businesses, encourage new entrepreneurial ventures, and reinforce the town’s long-term resilience.

Taken together, these implications indicate that Elmwood has a strong strategic opportunity to position itself as a destination-driven trail town, but doing so will require deliberate investments in connectivity, placemaking, and cross-sector partnerships.

Recommendations for Elmwood

Based on cross-case findings, interviews, and trail literature, several recommendations emerge to enhance Elmwood’s ability to leverage the MoPac Trail for economic development and community vitality.

First, Elmwood should prioritize a clear, attractive trail-to-downtown connection. Communities with successful trail-oriented economies universally highlight the importance of intuitive, well-signed routes that draw users into town centers. In Malvern, artistic wayfinding and public art serve as both functional navigation tools and placemaking anchors.⁸⁵ Springfield similarly invested in shelters, nature-themed signage, and educational displays that signaled a welcoming environment.⁸⁶ Elmwood could adopt a hybrid approach—art-forward and nature-forward—to reflect its own character and landscape. Improvements could include a paved or crushed-limestone spur, consistent directional signage, and interpretive elements highlighting Elmwood’s history and natural context.

Second, Elmwood should develop a signature placemaking identity aligned with regional trail culture. Interviews confirm that unique, memorable experiences encourage trail users to stop, spend money, and return. For example, Malvern’s Art Church and music series created a recognizable cultural niche, while Springfield’s Storybook Trail fosters family-oriented programming. Elmwood could explore themes such as local artistic heritage, small-town craftsmanship, nature-focused interpretation, or seasonal programming tied to the community’s existing strengths. Creating a cohesive visual and experiential brand—through murals, sculpture, interpretive storytelling, or micro-events—would enhance Elmwood’s presence within

82 Rails-to-Trails-Conservancy CASE STUDY and 2024, “Prairie Corridor Case Study.”

83 Rails-to-Trails-Conservancy CASE STUDY and 2024, “Prairie Corridor Case Study.”

84 Matteson, “A Nebraska Legacy.”

85 Malvern Interview, 2025

86 Springfield Interview, 2025



Figure 2.22. Elmwood Trailhead Amenity Configuration Supporting Trail Users and Access Points

Source: Sarah Murrel generated map overlay using Google aerial imagery and field observation (2025).

the broader MoPac corridor.

Third, Elmwood should expand amenities that improve user experience, especially water access, shade, restrooms, and bike repair infrastructure. These were consistently mentioned as unmet needs in interviews. The Cowboy Trail case study highlights the major role of fix-it stations, trailhead improvements, and rest areas in enhancing visitor satisfaction and supporting rural economies.⁸⁷ Installing such amenities near Elmwood's trail access point and downtown could substantially increase user comfort and encourage longer stays.

Fourth, Elmwood should pursue strategic partnerships to support development, maintenance, and marketing. Springfield's success was heavily tied to collaboration with its Community Foundation, Business Association, and the NRD, while Brownville leveraged nonprofit and heritage groups to coordinate events and cultural programming. Elmwood could build partnerships with the Lower Platte South NRD, Cass County Tourism, local artists, nearby breweries or wineries, and cycling organizations. Such partnerships would support coordinated marketing of Elmwood as a MoPac destination and could strengthen regional identity along the trail.

Finally, Elmwood should develop a long-term economic development strategy aligned with trail visitation patterns. Trail studies show that lodging, food service, small retail, and cultural programming yield the highest returns in rural trail towns.^{88,89} Elmwood could encourage trail-oriented entrepreneurship through business-friendly zoning, façade improvement programs, pop-ups, and tourism marketing initiatives. Over

87 Matteson, "A Nebraska Legacy."

88 Rails-to-Trails-Conservancy CASE STUDY and 2024, "Prairie Corridor Case Study."

89 Matteson, "A Nebraska Legacy."a



time, Elmwood could position itself as a stopover hub for regional events such as overnight rides, weekend cycling tours, or family recreational outings.

Funding Opportunities for Trail-Oriented Improvements

Trail development and placemaking improvements in Elmwood can be supported through a combination of federal, state, regional, and philanthropic funding sources.

Federally, programs such as the Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP), Recreational Trails Program (RTP), and Community Development Block Grants (CDBG) provide substantial funding for trail connectivity, signage, accessibility improvements, and public infrastructure. Malvern's successful use of CDBG funds to support downtown improvements illustrates how such funding can catalyze arts-based and public-space projects that complement trail development.⁹⁰

State-level opportunities include grants through Nebraska Game and Parks, which frequently supports trail enhancements, safety improvements, and recreational amenities—evidenced by their investments in fix-it stations, trailheads, and programming along the Cowboy Trail.⁹¹ Elmwood may also qualify for Nebraska's Rural Development Commission grants, tourism marketing grants, and Outdoor Recreation Legacy funding for projects that improve accessibility and community health. Regional partners such as the Lower Platte South NRD are well positioned to support design, maintenance, and erosion mitigation. Springfield's col-

laborative model demonstrates the effectiveness of NRD partnerships in achieving multi-benefit outcomes, particularly when environmental education and nature-based amenities are involved.⁹² Elmwood could similarly seek NRD support for drainage improvements, bank stabilization, ecological signage, and habitat-based placemaking.

Philanthropic and private funding sources also present viable opportunities. The Prairie Corridor case study shows how philanthropic contributions from conservation nonprofits, local businesses, and community foundations can support trail-oriented ecological education, interpretive design, and placemaking.⁹³ Elmwood could pursue partnerships with local banks, arts organizations, historical societies, and corporate sponsors interested in community wellness and rural revitalization.

92 Springfield Interview, 2025

93 Rails-to-Trails-Conservancy CASE STUDY and 2024, "Prairie Corridor Case Study."

90 Malvern Interview, 2025

91 Matteson, aA Nebraska Legacy."



Table 2.17: Funding Sources for Trail-Oriented Improvements in Elmwood

Funding Source / Program	Administering Entity	Eligible Uses	Project Fit for Elmwood
Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP)	Federal Highway Administration / NDOT	Sidewalks, trail construction, crossings, wayfinding, ADA access	Supports wayfinding signage, accessibility improvements, trail-to-downtown connection
Recreational Trails Program (RTP)	Federal Highway Administration / Nebraska Game & Parks	Trail construction, maintenance, amenities, equipment	Supports kiosks, repair stations, interpretive elements, trail surfacing
Community Development Block Grant (CDBG)	U.S. Dept. of Housing & Urban Development (via Nebraska DED)	Public facilities, downtown revitalization, tourism improvements	Supports downtown enhancements tied to trail visitation (example: Malvern case)
Nebraska Game & Parks Grants	Nebraska Game & Parks Commission	Recreation facilities, safety improvements, trailheads, programming	Supports trail kiosks, fix-it stations, shelters, ecological signage (Cowboy Trail precedent)
Nebraska Rural Development Commission Grants	Nebraska Rural Development Commission	Rural revitalization, community facilities, marketing	Supports trail-driven economic development and small-town vitality
Nebraska Tourism Marketing Grants	Nebraska Tourism Commission	Destination promotion, signage, visitor infrastructure	Supports branding, trail-to-downtown signage, seasonal programming
Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership (ORLP)	National Park Service	Urban/rural recreation facilities, accessibility, inclusion	Supports inclusive trail access, wellness-focused improvements
Lower Platte South Natural Resources District	Regional NRD	Habitat restoration, erosion control, signage, nature-based amenities	Supports bank stabilization, ecological interpretation, drainage improvements
Philanthropic Foundations & Corporate Sponsors	Local and regional nonprofits, businesses, community foundations	Education, placemaking, conservation, health initiatives	Supports interpretive design, art, wellness features (Prairie Corridor precedent)
Local Economic Development Tools (e.g., LB 840)	Municipality	Job creation, capital projects, community investment	Supports trail amenities, branding, event-based improvements
Business Improvement Districts & Sponsorships	Local government & private sector	Downtown improvements, marketing, maintenance	Supports co-funded wayfinding, benches, façade upgrades
Event Revenues & Tourism Fees	Village / tourism partners	Reinvestment of hospitality/tourism proceeds	Supports incremental infrastructure upgrades tied to visitation

Source: Sarah Murrel compilation based on agency guidance and case examples (2025).

Finally, funding could also be supported through local mechanisms, such as LB 840 economic development funds (if adopted), business improvement districts, event revenues, or cost-sharing partnerships with businesses that directly benefit from increased trail traffic. Over time, as visitation increases, Elmwood could reinvest hospitality tax revenues or special event proceeds into trail infrastructure, marketing, and downtown improvements.



Chapter 3

Economic and Transportation Implications

Overview, Abstract and Introduction

Overview

This Chapter analyzes the potential economic implication of a trail connector for commercial operations along the trail and related organizations to trail usage across the local and state level. Additionally, this chapter discusses transportation implications for the connector and short-distance recreational users, long-distance enthusiasts and the potential for increased commuter usage.

Abstract

The MoPac Trail connection project represents a major recreational and economic investment to Cass County, Nebraska and surrounding municipalities by linking two popular sections of the mixed-use converted rail trail. By completing the 8-mile connection, there will be over 200 miles of continuous trail accessible to residents in Southeast Nebraska, linking the major cities of Lincoln and Omaha. In a news interview with the President of the Nebraska Trails Foundation, they mentioned the connection is projected to generate approximately \$2.5 million in annual economic impact¹⁰⁰ through increased tourism, consumer spending, and long-term economic development. Beyond the economic impacts, the trail connection will enhance community well-being and transportation equity by expanding non-motorized mobility options between Lincoln and Omaha, improving safety for area cyclists, and fostering healthier, more connected communities throughout the region. To determine the economic impacts from the trail connection, we looked at socioeconomic data for the region, analyzed changes in local tourism and general trends in regional recreation, and studied the opportunities for increased area mobility from the proposed trail connection. We collected quan-

titative and qualitative data from sources such as the Census Bureau, Parks and Rec ridership data, news articles, stakeholder interviews, and more. After analyzing this data, we determined that the trail connection has significant potential for increasing local economic activity because trail-based events generate millions of dollars in annual revenue along the MoPac trail. The data shows that the trail is predominately used by recreational users as it does provide direct access to most major employers or educational institutions. We recommend that the Cass County Economic Development Council and other local stakeholders collect more data on local ridership to better document the benefits of the MoPac trail connection. Additionally, we recommend that trail events continue to be promoted and expanded with the trail connection to better engage with the highest source of revenue for the trail. Finally, trail towns should work to build and expand local businesses that cater to trail users—primarily cyclists—in order to capture economic benefit from the trail.

Introduction

The MoPac Trail Connection project is both a recreational investment and a strategic economic development initiative. Currently, there is an 8-mile gap in the MoPac between Wabash and South Bend in Cass County. According to the feasibility study conducted by JEO Consulting Group,¹⁰¹ the estimated cost of completing the connection is approximately \$15.49 million. This figure reflects expenses associated with engineering and design, right-of-way acquisition, grading and drainage improvements, bridge or underpass construction (where necessary), and the installation of trail surfaces and amenities. Due to the substantial financial commitment, we are assessing the potential economic and transportation impacts



100 Messel, Eddie. "Cass County MoPac Trail Connector Plans Delayed." KETV, March 26, 2025. <https://www.ketv.com/article/cass-county-mopac-trail-connector-plans-delayed/64301854>
101 JEO Consulting, MoPac East Trail Connector Study (October 2024), <https://indd.adobe.com/view/7b53d2f-17e8-469c-a8b1-565bd4f2e932>

that this connection would generate to better understand the nuances of the connection's undertaking.



Figure 1: Proposed MoPac Trail Connection

Source: JEO MoPac Trail Connection

Various studies of rail to trail conversions throughout the world have found a positive cost-benefit relationship between initial infrastructure and continuous maintenance costs and their economic benefits from visitor spending, improved mental and physical health outcomes, value of infrastructure for recreation, and overall environmental improvements.^{102,103,104} While making this case for the MoPac trail connection it's important to consider the trail's entire lifespan, since economic benefits "accrue due to the infrastructure over the years of its useful life."¹⁰⁵

The trail connection's completion

is expected to provide an estimated \$2.5 million in positive economic impact¹⁰⁶ just through increased regional spending; that does not include other potential revenue sources such as trail events. This impact reflects increased spending by trail users, enhanced tourism activity, and the broader economic effects associated with outdoor recreation infrastructure. Trails such as the MoPac often serve as economic drivers because they draw users from both local communities and neighboring regions. Visitors frequently spend money on food, lodging, equipment rentals or purchases, and participation in organized events, all of which contribute to the local economy. The MoPac Trail in particular has a history of supporting trail-based events that attract large groups of cyclists and outdoor enthusiasts, generating sustained tourism activity over time.

Visitor spending is vital for the recuperation of the trail's costs because it brings revenue to all communities along the MoPac corridor. "For example, when tourists buy food or meals at a local grocery store or restaurant [along the trail], the grocery store or restaurant increases purchases of inputs needed to provide their products (i.e., labour, farm produce, business services). These sectors, in turn, need to increase input purchases (i.e., farmers increase expenditures on labour, fuel and fertilizer) to provide more of their products. The 'ripple effect' expenditures made by all business sectors in order to meet tourist demands for goods and services are the indirect effects of tourist spending."¹⁰⁷ Connecting the separated sections of the MoPac is of particular importance to the trail's success because scholars argue that longer trails, due to their longer recreational opportunities, enhance the most lucrative type of tourism - overnight visitors.¹⁰⁸

102 Verghese, Jacob, Austin Barrett, Heather M. Devlin, David R. Brown, David P. Hopkins, Sajal K. Chattopadhyay, and Jeffery A. Reynolds. "Parks, Trails, and Greenways for Physical Activity: A Community Guide Systematic Economic Review - Sciencedirect." HHS Public Access, June 2024. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0749379724000400>.

103 "Physical Activity: Park, Trail, and Greenway Infrastructure Interventions When Implemented Alone." The Community Guide, May 1, 2025. <https://www.thecommunityguide.org/findings/physical-activity-park-trail-greenway-infrastructure-interventions-implemented-alone.html>.

104 Bowker, J.M., John C. Bergstrom, and Joshua Gill. "Estimating the Economic Value and Impacts of Recreational Trails: A Case Study of the Virginia Creeper Rail Trail." *Tourism Economics* 13, no. 2 (2007): 241-60. <https://doi.org/10.5367/000000007780823203>.

105 Verghese, Jacob, Austin Barrett, Heather M. Devlin, David R. Brown, David P. Hopkins, Sajal K. Chattopadhyay, and Jeffery A. Reynolds. "Parks, Trails, and Greenways for Physical Activity: A Community Guide Systematic Economic Review - Sciencedirect." HHS Public Access, June 2024. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0749379724000400>.

106 Messel, Eddie. "Cass County MoPac Trail Connector Plans Delayed." KETV, March 26, 2025. <https://www.ketv.com/article/cass-county-mopac-trail-connector-plans-delayed/64301854>.

107 Ibid.

108 Reis, Arianne Carvalho, and Carla Jellum. "Rail Trail Development: A Conceptual Model for Sustainable Tourism." *Tourism Planning & Development* 9, no. 2 (February 20, 2012): 133-47. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21568316.2011.630748>.

The connection also strengthens Lincoln's position in the growing outdoor recreation industry, a sector that has become increasingly important at both the state and national level. Outdoor recreation contributes billions of dollars annually to state economies and is recognized for its ability to support small businesses, stimulate rural development, and enhance regional competitiveness.¹⁰⁹ By completing the MoPac Trail connection, Lincoln stands to expand its share of this market. A fully linked trail system encourages longer-distance cycling and increases visitation because users prefer continuous, uninterrupted routes. This improved trail connectivity is likely to amplify tourism-based revenues and result in higher year-round user activity.

The MoPac Trail's economic value extends into long-term community development and land-use considerations. The land surrounding the proposed connection is primarily zoned for agricultural, recreational, and industrial uses, which offers significant flexibility for future economic opportunities¹¹⁰. Trails can act as catalysts for reinvestment in adjacent areas, encouraging complementary amenities such as trailheads, small outdoor-related businesses, recreational facilities, and wayfinding improvements. Industrial and agricultural zones may also experience indirect benefits, including enhanced access and aesthetic improvements that support broader development goals.

Once connected, the MoPac Trail will expand as a multifaceted economic asset. Its benefits include direct tourism revenue, long-term community development potential, strengthened regional identity, and the economic benefits that result from improved regional mobility and public health. Although the initial investment exceeds \$15

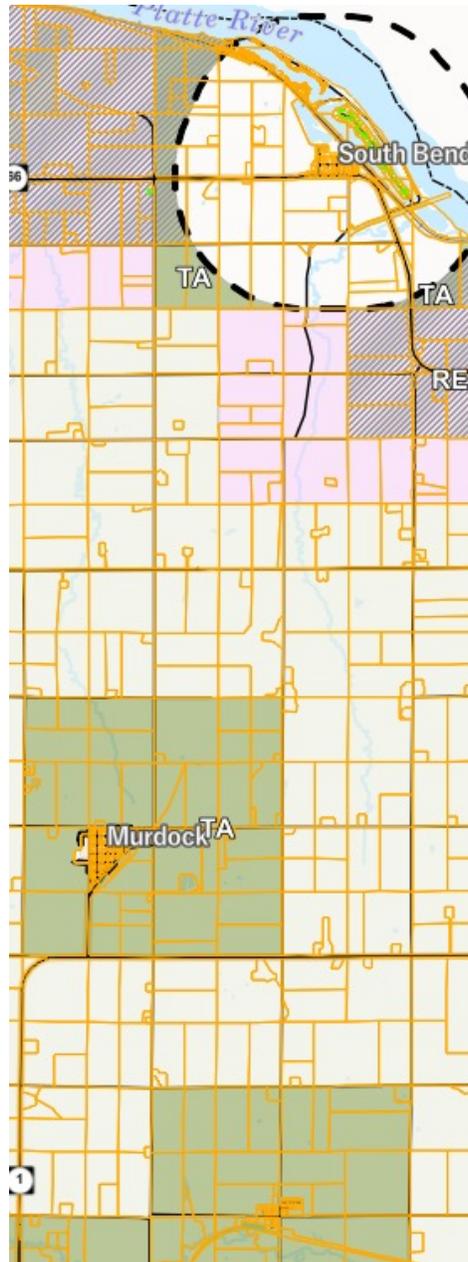


Figure 2: Regional Zoning Along the Proposed MoPac Trail Connection

Source: Cass County GIS Zoning and Jurisdiction Finder¹¹¹



Legend:

-  AGRICULTURAL
-  COMMERCIAL
-  INDUSTRIAL
-  INDUSTRIAL / AGRICULTURE
-  R / MIXED UNIT DEVELOPMENT
-  RECREATIONAL / AGRICULTURE
-  RESIDENTIAL
-  TRANSITIONAL AGRICULTURAL
-  Parcel
-  IOLL
-  ETJ



¹⁰⁹ Outdoor Recreation Roundtable, "New Data Shows Outdoor Recreation is a \$1.2 Trillion Economic Engine, Supporting 5 Million American Jobs," Outdoor Recreation Roundtable, November 20, 2024, <https://recreationroundtable.org/news/new-data-shows-outdoor-recreation-is-a-1-2-trillion-economic-engine-supporting-5-million-american-jobs>

¹¹⁰ Cass County GIS, "Zoning and Jurisdiction Finder." 2025. <https://gis-cass.hub.arcgis.com/>

¹¹¹ Cass County GIS, "Zoning and Jurisdiction Finder." 2025. <https://gis-cass.hub.arcgis.com/>

Research Questions and Methods

million, the projected economic returns—combined with the trail’s capacity to support millions in sustained recreational and tourism activity, and improve local health—position the project as a meaningful contributor to Cass County’s economic growth.

Research Questions

For this chapter, we used the following questions to guide our analysis of the economic and mobility impacts of the MoPac trail connection:

1. What are the socioeconomic considerations of completing the trail connection?

A. How have adjacent land uses changed since the trail’s creation?

B. What are the external benefits of the trail that may not be captured by economic statistics? What about cons or controversies?

2. What increase in tourism have communities on the trail seen?

A. What is the change in local and out-of-state tourism rates?

B. What economic impact have special events and recreational activities created?

C. What are current recreational bike ridership levels in the region/state? Is this a growing trend?

3. What impact would the trail have on local, regional, and state-wide economic development?

A. What is the local population that would be reachable by constructing the trail?

B. What is the anticipated change in mobility?

C. What is the expected growth in commercial activity along the corridor?

D. What is the baseline economic data for Cass County/Elmwood? What economic growth has occurred in completed sections of the trail?

Methods

In order to answer the research questions proposed in this chapter, we limited the scope of economic research to Cass County, where the proposed trail connection is to be constructed. The MoPac Trail in its entirety extends beyond Cass County both to the East and West, so the findings and recommendations for the MoPac Trail connection will apply to a larger geographic area. Additionally, this research assumes that the MoPac Trail connection will be constructed according to “Alignment D” as proposed in the JEO feasibility study¹¹². To collect quantitative data in support of our research questions, we utilized primary and secondary data sources to gather information on the demographics, consumer habits, business activity, and commuting patterns in order to observe greater trends on the economic and transportation dynamics of Cass County surrounding the proposed trail connection. To collect qualitative data, we conducted interviews with multiple trail stakeholders and collected secondary data from relevant reports, case studies, and news articles. A table of data sources and the type of data we collected from them is below.



Table 3: Data Sources Utilized for Re-searching Economic Development

Data Source	Data Type
US Census Bureau American Community Survey and Economic Survey Data	Quantitative Data on Demographics, Economic Activity, Etc.,
Rail-to-Trails Economic Impact Studies	Quantitative and Qualitative Data on Economic Impact from Rail to Trail Projects
Interviews with Trail Stakeholders	Qualitative Data on Trail Usage, Economic Benefits, Etc.
Trail Event Registration Websites	Quantitative Data on Trail Event Attendee Numbers and Registration Fees
Strava Global Heatmap	Quantitative Data on Cumulative Trail Ridership by Segment
Local News	Quantitative and Qualitative Data on Trail User Experience, Economic Impact to Surrounding Towns
JEO Consulting MoPac Feasibility Study	Quantitative and Qualitative Data on Trail Connection Cost, Route, Etc.



To address our research question on the potential mobility benefits of the MoPac Trail connection, we first wanted to collect descriptive statistics of current and potential trail users, as well as their primary or secondary motivations for using the trail. We were interested in determining if there were uses for the trail beyond recreation, such as for commuting to work or school. By understanding the current trail user base, ridership levels, local demographics, and potential attractions or destinations along the new route, we can infer potential future impacts for mobility in Cass County from the trail connection. We collected data on trail ridership from current bicyclist counts from the City of Lincoln and City of Omaha, as well as from the Strava global heatmap. Additionally, we collected location data on the top local employers, educational institutions, and recreational facilities from the Cass County Economic Development Council.

In order to visualize this data and determine potential changes to mobility, we mapped the location of these destinations to determine their proximity to the existing trail

and proposed trail connection. It is assumed that the trail connection will be constructed in the same manner as the existing route, with a mix of gravel trail and various road crossings with no gradient. This is important to note because the trail composition and ease of ridership will impact accessibility for users with mobility-based disabilities and users who prefer less physical exertion to traverse the route.

To calculate the potential economic impact to Cass County, we utilized census data and local business directories to quantify existing businesses in trail towns and current consumer spending activity. Additionally, to understand how tourism and trail events spur economic development, we profiled routine events that occur on the trail and the calculated impact in dollars for each event. For events where an economic impact estimate was not available, we calculated economic impact by multiplying the number of riders by the event entrance fee, as well as the estimated daily economic benefit rate of \$18 for day users and \$124 a day for overnight users as determined by the Trail Town Program in 2014¹³. Adjusted



113 Trail Towns. "Economic Impact of Regional Trails." Updated June 1 2015. The Progress Fund. <https://www.trailtowns.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Econom->

Findings

for inflation in September 2025, this is \$25 for daily users and \$172 for overnight users¹¹⁴. For events where the organization provided a direct figure, that number was quoted instead (i.e. the Market to Market Relay and Nacho Ride).

To understand broader economic and transportation implications, our group conducted three interviews with local stakeholders and residents involved in the trail connection effort. These interviews were mainly conducted via Zoom, lasting approximately 30 minutes, and had general guiding questions for each interviewee. The conversations focused on understanding the unique obstacles the MoPac and, more broadly, recreational trails, face when trying to justify their expansion under the argument of economic benefit, whether directly measurable or externalities that still benefit the greater area.

Findings

Our research determined that the existing MoPac Trail generates tens of thousands of users and millions of dollars in economic impact annually. The completion of the MoPac Trail connection is expected to increase both of these figures greatly, due to an increase in regional mobility, safety, and connection between the major metropolitan areas of Lincoln and Omaha. In order to produce economic development, the trail connection must be designed to attract a high volume of trail users and also encourage them to patronize local businesses in nearby trail towns. In Cass County, where the trail connection will be built, 22% of adults report participating in no physical activity outside of work¹¹⁵. Of those who do exercise, 59% of people already live close to a park or recreation facility¹¹⁶. Assuming a current

County population of 26,598, and 5.7% of the population living with an ambulatory disability, there are less than 20,000 potential trail users located within Cass County¹¹⁷. There is a much higher population located in nearby Lincoln (291,932 residents) and Omaha (488,197 residents within city limits), the Western and Eastern trail termini, respectively¹¹⁸. It is important that the trail connection is expected to draw users from these areas where trail user numbers are also much higher.

We can estimate potential ridership level by looking at current trail use along the existing MoPac East Trail. The trail is mixed use, but further away from metropolitan areas the primary use of the trail is predominantly cycling. The most popular section of the trail is between Lincoln and Eagle, Nebraska, following the route of the Nacho Ride. Strava, a fitness activity tracking app, has recorded over 15,000 cycling attempts on this route by 2,781 users¹¹⁹. In comparison, the Eastern section of the route between Springfield and the Platte River has recorded 4,019 cycling attempts by 1,295 people¹²⁰. Additionally, 199 riders have recorded 396 rides between the two MoPac trail termini, but as discussed above this route is not popular because it requires riding on gravel roads without protection from vehicles or road hazards¹²¹.



ic-Impact-of-Regional-Trails-1.pdf

114 US Bureau of Labor Statistics. "CPI Inflation Calculator." Accessed December 11 2025. https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm

115 County Health Rankings & Roadmaps. "Cass County Population Health and Well-Being Snapshot." 2025. <https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/health-data/nebraska/cass/year=2025#population-health>

116 Ibid.

117 US Census Bureau. "ACS 5-Year Community Survey." 2023. <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/news/updates/2023.html>

118 Ibid.

119 Strava. "Global Heatmap." Accessed October 2025. strava.com/maps/global-heatmap

120 Ibid.

121 Ibid.

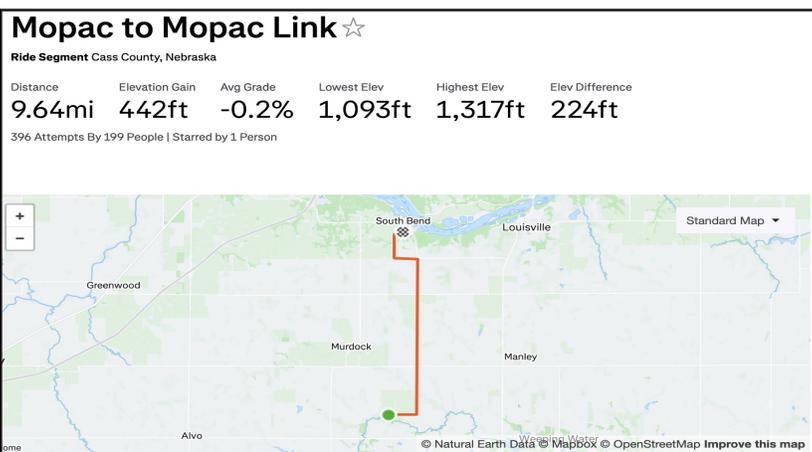
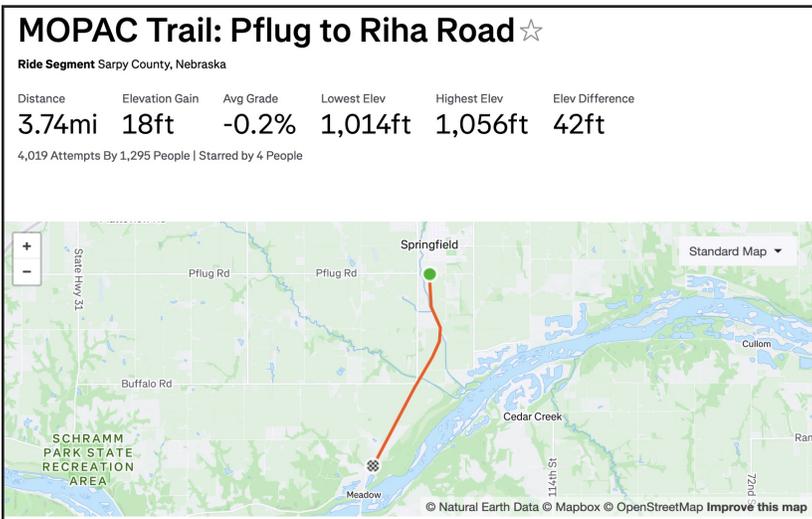
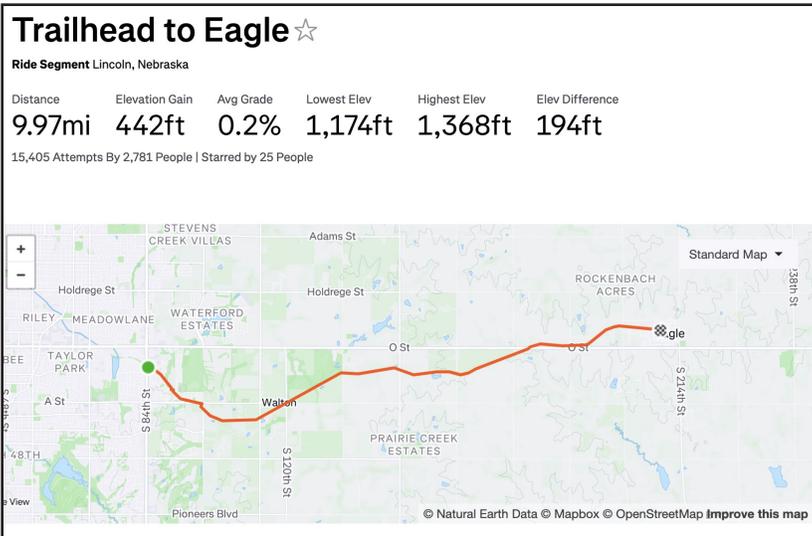


Figure 4-6: Strava Global Heat map Data on Trail Usage Along Proposed MoPac Trail Connection and Adjacent Routes¹²²



We can estimate the ridership base in Lincoln from the pedestrian and bicycling count at the MoPac Trail's intersection at 70th Street. The image below shows that there are upwards of 9,000 cyclists during peak activity months.

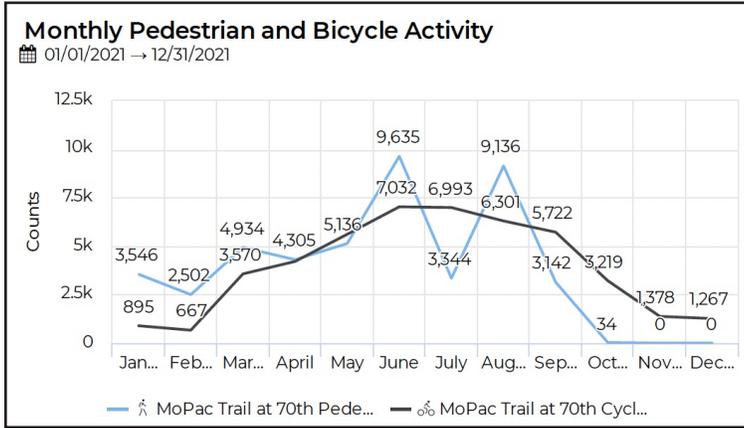


Figure 7: 2021 Monthly Pedestrian and Bicycle Count at the MoPac Trail on 70th Street in Lincoln.¹²³

There is not a current trail user count at the MoPac near Omaha, but we can estimate trail numbers based off of the closest trail counter at the West Papio Trail at I-80 which also records thousands of trail users during peak months, predominately bicyclists.

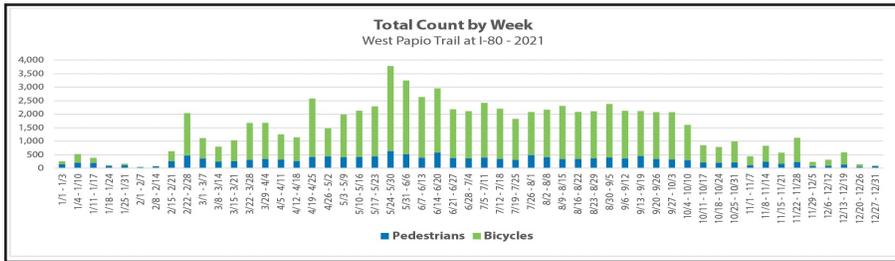


Figure 8: 2021 Weekly Pedestrian and Bicycle Count at the West Papio Trail at I-80 in Omaha.¹²⁴

We can also look at city-wide pedestrian and bicycle counts to determine active residents who may be converted to MoPac Trail users.

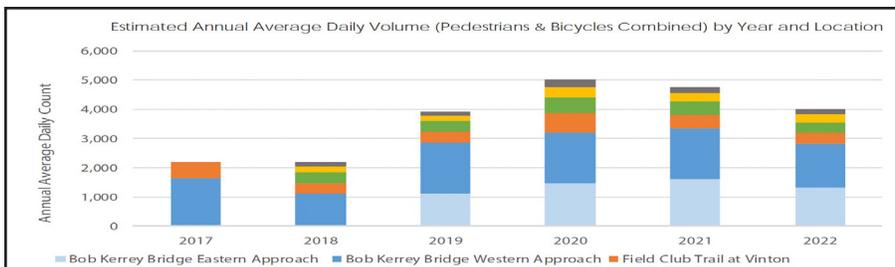


Figure 9: Annual Average Daily Volume of Pedestrian and Cyclists At Six Trail Counters in the City of Omaha between 2017-2022¹²⁵



¹²³ "Bike-Pedestrian Counts." City of Lincoln. Accessed October 23, 2025. <https://www.lincoln.ne.gov/City/Departments/PDS/Planning/MPO/Bike-Lincoln/Bicycle-and-Pedestrian-Counts#section-4>
¹²⁴ "Biking in Omaha - City of Omaha Planning Department - Urban Planning." Omaha City Planning. 3. Accessed October 23, 2025. <https://urbanplanning.cityofomaha.org/biking-in-omaha>.
¹²⁵ Ibid.

There is not comparable cumulative data available for Lincoln’s trails, but looking at year-by-year trends for Lincoln’s popular Rock Island Trail we can draw similar conclusions for overall patterns in local ridership levels.

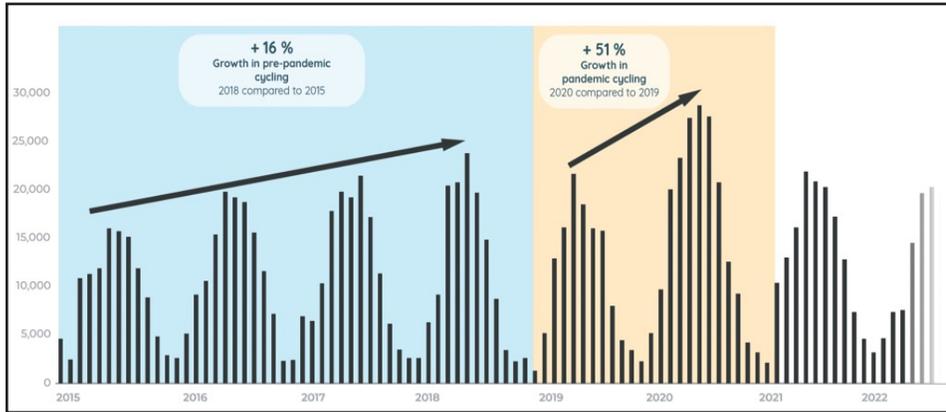


Figure 10: Annual Monthly Ridership Data at Rock Island Trail in Lincoln Nebraska between 2015-2022. ¹²⁶

We can see in this image that trail ridership year-over-year has increased dramatically since the pandemic, and although rates have declined since 2020 there are still higher rates of ridership compared to pre-pandemic years. This holding trend provides an optimistic forecast for trail usage rates along the proposed trail connection.

In addition to high rates of trail use, there needs to be enough local commerce to generate revenue and promote economic development in Cass County. At this time, the three towns located along or near the proposed trail connection—Murdock, Wabash, and South Bend—lack local businesses. Other towns along the existing MoPac Trail, such as Elmwood and Eagle, do have consumer establishments but still stand to benefit from increased trail use.

Table 11: Number of Consumer Establishments in Towns Adjacent to the Proposed MoPac Trail Connection

Town Name	Number of Shops and Restaurants	Town Population
Elmwood	4	765
Murdock	4	235
Wabash	0	<100
South Bend	0	99

Source: Visit Cass County Business Directory¹²⁷, DP05 ACS 5-Year Estimates 2023¹²⁸

To analyze the trail connection’s potential impact on regional mobility, we mapped the location of the top ten employers in Cass County in relation to the existing trail and proposed trail connection. These employers overlap with the majority of schools and recreational facilities in Cass County, such as Louisville and Plattsmouth Public Schools, Platte River State Park, and Louisville State Recreational Area—all potential destinations for local commuters. It is important to note that according to the 2023 ACS 5-Year Estimates, of workers 16 years of age and older in Cass County, Nebraska, only 34.1% of the population works in the County¹²⁹. Out of all 7,014 working individuals in Cass County, 4,702 (67.0%) drove alone and 466 (6.6%) carpooled¹³⁰. Additionally, 1,523 individuals worked from home (21.7%)¹³¹. No one reported



¹²⁶ "Bike-Pedestrian Counts." City of Lincoln. Accessed October 23, 2025. <https://www.lincoln.ne.gov/files/sharedassets/public/v1/planning/bike-lincoln/trail-counter-page/bike-ped-counts-report-2022-2023.pdf>
¹²⁷ Visit Cass County. "Directory Listings." Accessed November 13 2025. <https://visitcasscounty.com/directory-directory/>
¹²⁸ US Census Bureau. "ACS 5-Year Community Survey." 2023. <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/news/updates/2023.html>
¹²⁹ Ibid.
¹³⁰ Ibid.
¹³¹ Ibid.



using public transportation¹³². In the image below, we can see that most major employers are not in proximity to the MoPac Trail or proposed connection. For those located within reasonable bike commuting distance, most require either a river or major highway crossing and are not actually feasible commuting pat



Figure 12: Top 10 Employers in Cass County and Proximity to The MoPac Trail

Source: Cass County Economic Development Council ¹³³

The MoPac Trail connection is therefore not likely to significantly increase regional mobility for commuters. It will however increase regional mobility for towns on and near the trail connection in Cass County, and connect thousands of Nebraska residents to recreational and commercial opportunities in towns such as Wabash, Elmwood, Murdock, and South Bend.

Business Industries in Cass County

Businesses in the retail, industrial, agricultural, and service sectors all contribute to Cass County’s economy. The county is home to a range of small and mid-sized businesses that serve both locals and tourists, according to the Cass County Economic Development Council and the business directory.

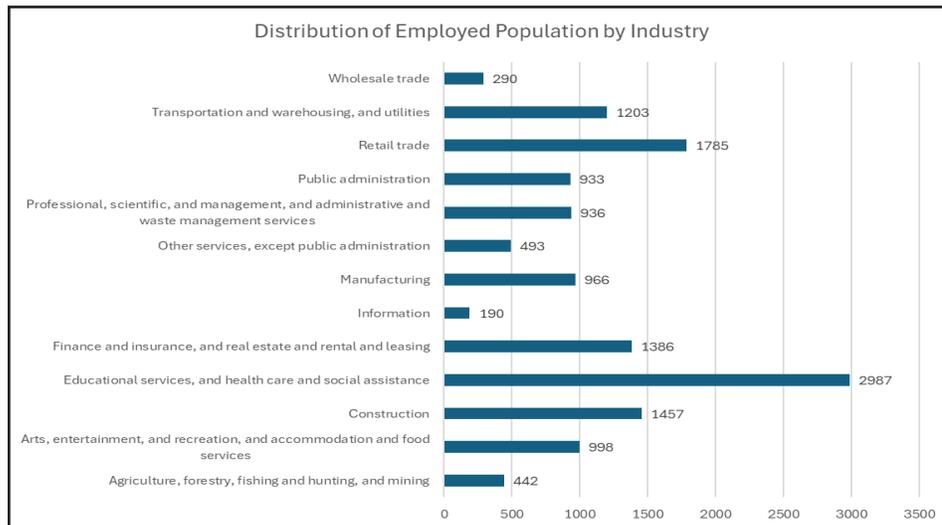


Figure 13: Distribution of Employed Population by Industry (Source: Census Business Builder)

¹³² Ibid.
¹³³ "Cass County Economic Development Council." 2025. Greater Omaha Chamber. <https://www.omahachamber.org/we-dont-coast-cass-county/>



Key industries include:

1. Agriculture - In Cass County, agriculture continues to be one of the most important industries. Many people in the MoPac corridor have ties to farming, agribusiness, and associated support services, and a sizable area of the surrounding land is zoned agricultural.

2. Retail and Consumer Services - Retail businesses, including supermarkets, hardware stores, specialty shops, and gas stations, are dispersed across the municipalities of Cass County and function as the main hubs for consumers. Both locals and trail visitors should take note of these.

3. Hospitality, Tourism, and Recreation - Trails systems, state parks, and outdoor amenities all contribute significantly to the local economy. Businesses such as:

- Restaurants
- Lodging providers
- Recreational rental shops
- Convenience stores near parks and trailheads

play a role in supporting visitors using the MoPac Trail and nearby attractions.

4. Industrial and Manufacturing - Manufacturing plants, construction firms, and distribution hubs can be found in some of Cass County's industrial zones. These sectors are some of the county's biggest employers.

5. Health, Education, and Public Service - Schools, medical facilities, municipal services, and jobs at the county level are all part of the county. These establishments support long-term population needs and comprise a steady element of the labor force.

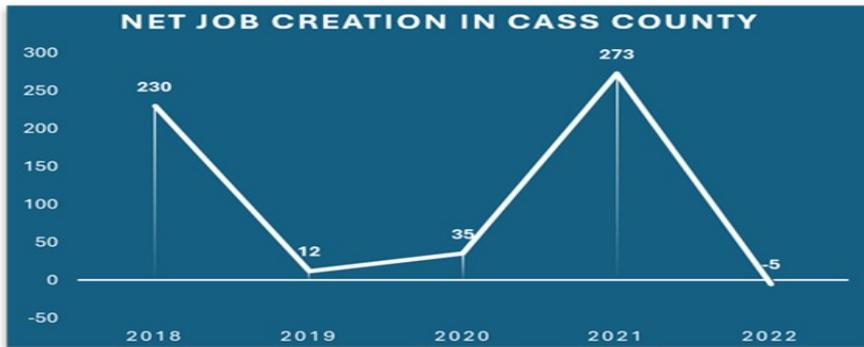


Figure 14 Net Job Creation in Cass County, 2018-2022

Source: Census Business Builder Data

In Figure 14 it shows that between 2018 and 2022, Cass County's net job creation fluctuated significantly. Strong job growth in 2018 and another peak in 2021 are signs of economic prosperity. Economic slowdowns and post-recovery stabilization are reflected in the steep decline in 2019 and the minor loss of jobs in 2022. All things considered, the trend shows a fluctuating yet robust local economy. The small sample size of the population, as well as measuring errors, may contribute to the fluctuation seen above.



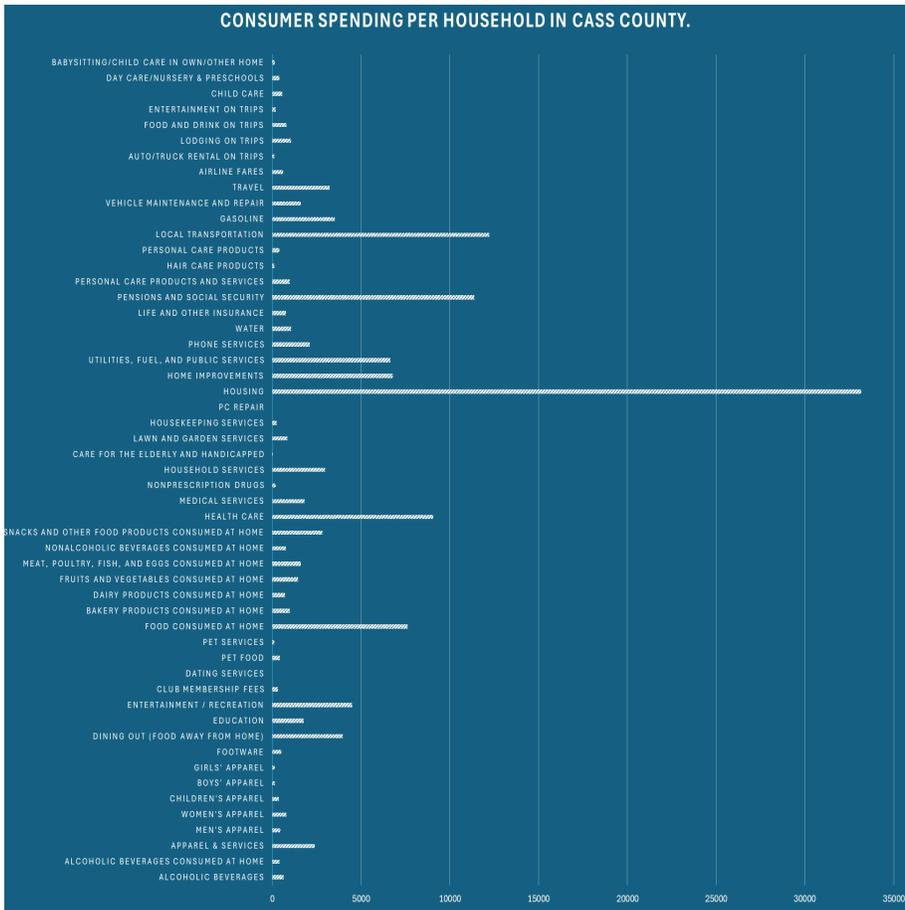


Figure 15: 2024 Consumer Spending per Household in Cass County. Source: Census Business Builder Data

Major Spending Categories

Cass County families normally distribute funds among the following sectors based on standard household spending categories:

- 1. Housing and Utilities** - This category, which includes maintenance, utilities, property taxes, and mortgage/rent payments, is typically the biggest. The mix of suburban and rural areas in Cass County makes housing a stable and substantial expense.
- 2. Transportation** - Another significant expense—typically the second-largest—is transportation. Fuel, maintenance, car purchases, and transportation expenses are all included in spending. Transportation expenditures are higher than in more metropolitan counties since many inhabitants commute to Lincoln, Omaha, or other towns for work.
- 3. Food and Dining** - Groceries, dining out, and convenience food purchases are expenditures for households. This consistent customer base helps local eateries, coffee shops, and retail establishments, and it grows as tourism does.
- 4. Healthcare** - Due to aging populations and the demand for neighborhood pharmacies, clinics, and medical services, healthcare spending is still high. In rural and semi-urban counties like Cass, this is a significant consumption category.
- 5. Entertainment, Recreation, and Retail Goods** - Spending on recreational activities, apparel, personal hygiene, and general commerce helps local companies and small retailers. Spending on leisure is anticipated to rise if the MoPac Trail connection is constructed since more trail users and visitors will come to Cass County.

6. Miscellaneous Goods and Services - These consist of household goods, daycare services, insurance premiums, and educational expenses. Discretionary spending in this category usually rises as incomes do.

The Cass County business structure and expenditure trends indicate that the trail expansion may create new business prospects:

- Increased retail and food service sales from trail users
- More tourism-related expenditure on lodging, recreation, and local attractions
- The expansion of small businesses along the route corridor, such as cafés, gear stores, and bike repair stations
- Positive spillover effects on property values and community services

One of the main ways the MoPac trail has an economic impact on the local area is through tourism. A 2015 study synthesized a framework to identify factors contributing to rail trails as successful and sustainable tourism attractions. The definition of successful tourism is defined by “how many non-local people visit; how positive their experience is, and how supportive local stakeholders are of the trail.”¹³⁴ The framework’s factors for success are divided into three spatial categories: 1. Generating region 2. Transit region 3. Destination region, as shown in the following figure outlined in blue, orange, and red respectively. The first category, Generating region, encompasses a visitor’s permanent residence because it is the place from which visits are generated.¹³⁵ The factors that contribute to success in this category are “visitor’s awareness and motivation to visit [the] trail” and the “trail’s proximity to large population centers.”¹³⁶ In the MoPac trail’s case, supporting these factors means marketing, improving trail user’s experiences

to encourage repeat users and recommendations by word-of-mouth, and completing the trail’s gap leading to Omaha. The second category, Transit region, involves the route visitors take when travelling from their residence to the tourism destination. In the MoPac’s case, this involves improving access to the trail for example, providing adequate parking nearby. The third category, Destination region, involves the location that attracts tourists and the features that contribute to that attraction. This category encompasses the factors of the trail specifically. These factors include:

- Highlighting unique trail features - such as “railway heritage, rural landscapes, historic towns, easy gradients and long distances.”¹³⁷
- Sophisticated marketing - for example, providing a single website that offers all of the information regarding the trail.
- Gateway towns - towns along the trail which work as enter and exit points as well as “bike hire, accommodation, rest stops, information centres, tour operations and [restaurants].”¹³⁸
- Secondary attractions - venues or events which influence a visitor’s decision to visit the trail, such as wineries, museums, or organized races/rides
- Interpretation - this includes providing opportunities for visitors to learn about and appreciate the places they visit along the trail, by including informational signage about “relics of the railway”
- Cooperation of managements - since the trail runs through many jurisdictions, cooperation between stakeholders and managing organizations is of crucial importance for the trail’s development
- ‘Friends of the trail’ groups - these non-profit groups work as advocates and information promoters for the trail and communities along the trail



134 Taylor, Paul. “What Factors Make Rail Trails Successful as Tourism Attractions? Developing a Conceptual Framework from Relevant Literature.” *Journal of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism* 12 (November 19, 2015): 89–98. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jort.2015.11.005>.
135 Leiper, Neil. “The Framework of Tourism: Towards a Definition of Tourism, Tourist and the Tourist Industry.” *Journal of Travel Research* 19, no. 1 (July 1980): 38–38. <https://doi.org/10.1177/004728758001900184>.
136 Taylor, Paul. “What Factors Make Rail Trails Successful as Tourism Attractions? Developing a Conceptual Framework from Relevant Literature.” *Journal of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism* 12 (November 19, 2015): 89–98. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jort.2015.11.005>.
137 Ibid.
138 Ibid.



- Technical factors - “the condition of the trail and related facilities such as sign-posting, toilets, rest stops and the availability of water.”¹³⁹
- Sustainable funding - obtaining consistent and reliable funding for maintenance of the trail

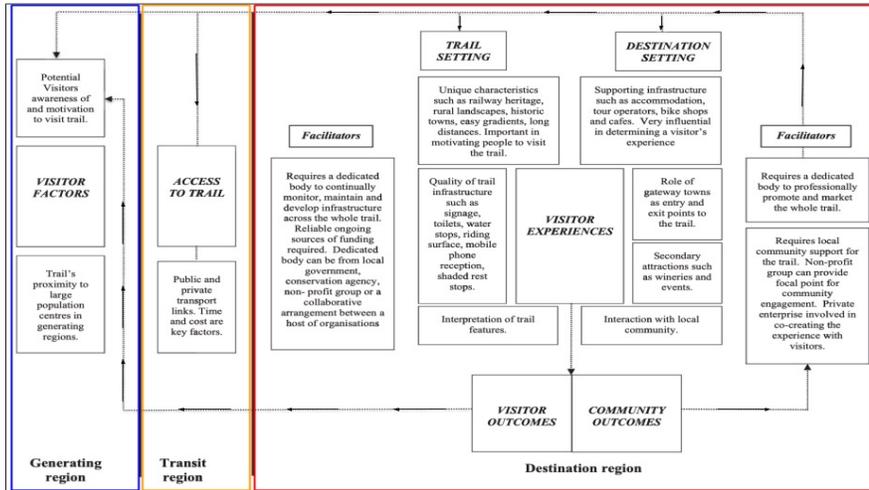


Figure 16. “What factors contribute to the success of Rail Trails as tourism attractions? A conceptual framework.”¹⁴⁰

The MoPac trail already has a variety of attractions for visiting users. It's clear that optimizing the economic impact of the trail means supporting the existing attractions. For example, near the section of the MoPac in South Bend there are parks and campsites nearby including: Platte River and Mahoney State Parks, Louisville State Recreation Area, YMCA Camp Kitaki, and Omaha Campsite. Extending the trail, specifically because of the connection's proximity to this area, would allow for easier access to nearby businesses for visitors and campers, potentially increasing spending at those businesses.



Figure 17. Map of Parks and Campsites Near the MoPac Trail in South Bend
Created using Google My Maps

A draw for out-of-state tourists visiting the MoPac trail is the Great American Rail-Trail (GRT). The trail is set to span from Washington D.C. to Washington state, for a total of a 3,700-mile route. Fifty million people will live within 50 miles of the trail, giving it the potential to be a high-profile attraction.¹⁴¹ Furthermore, the longest segment of the trail is set to be located in Nebraska, with a total of 584 miles of trail once completed.¹⁴² As of 2022, the GRT was approximately 53% complete with 88 gaps still to be connected nationwide,¹⁴³ and 52% completed with 12 gaps in Nebraska¹⁴⁴, as shown in the figure showing the GRT proposed trail. In 2022, headwaters economics published data

139 Ibid.
140 Ibid.
141 "Great American Rail-Trail Route Assessment 2024." Rails to Trails Conservancy, May 7, 2024. <https://www.railstotrails.org/resource-library/resources/great-american-rail-trail-route-assessment-2024/>.
142 "Great American Rail-Trail In Nebraska." Rails to Trails Conservancy. Accessed November 19, 2025. <https://www.railstotrails.org/site/greatamerican-railtrail/content/nebraska/>.
143 "Economic Potential of the Great American Rail-Trail May 2022." Rails to Trails Conservancy, May 2022. <https://www.railstotrails.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Economic-Potential-of-the-Great-American-Rail-Trail-2022-by-RTC.pdf>.
144 "Great American Rail-Trail In Nebraska." Rails to Trails Conservancy. Accessed November 19, 2025. <https://www.railstotrails.org/site/greatamerican-railtrail/content/nebraska/>.



regarding the economic potential of the completed nationwide trail. This data assumes: 1. Businesses along the trail will be intentionally supported. In the MoPac’s case this could mean encouraging the opening of retail shops, restaurants, and places for lodging. Also, providing trail signage directing people to those businesses, and marketing communities along the trail as stops for its users. 2. The increase of physical activity during the pandemic continues. 3. The trails will be well-maintained. Considering these assumptions, Nebraska is calculated to have users of the trail spending between seven million and 22.1 million dollars annually,¹⁴⁵ as shown in the GRT Economic Impact table.

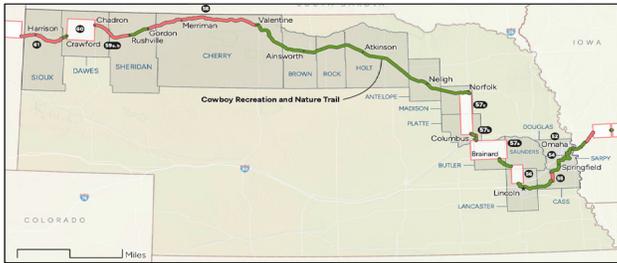


Figure 18. Great American Rail-Trail (GRT) Proposed Trail Across Nebraska¹⁴⁶

Nebraska	Low estimate	Middle estimate	High estimate
Users	488,000	1,011,000	1,534,000
Trips	841,000	1,743,000	2,645,000
Visitor Spending	\$7,000,000	\$14,500,000	\$22,100,000
Jobs	83	172	261
Labor Income	\$2,920,000	\$6,052,000	\$9,184,000
GDP Contribution	\$4,800,000	\$9,900,000	\$15,000,000
Tax Revenue	\$619,000	\$1,283,000	\$1,947,000

Table 19. Great American Rail-Trail (GRT) Economic Impact Potential in Nebraska¹⁴⁷

Trail events have the largest economic impact of any other current trail use. These events generate an economic impact through the following main categories of spending: 1. Registration fees and merchandise sales 2. Lodging 3. Eating and drinking 4. Fuel and groceries.¹⁴⁸ There are many trail events hosted on the MoPac. Some examples of the variety and economic impact of these trail events are shown in the Pie Ride, Nacho Ride, Goldenride 2.0, and Market to Market Relay. The Pie Ride is an event occurring on seven Thursdays in the summer. Participants ride from anywhere along the MoPac East Trail to the park in Elmwood. One of five local organizations sell pie and dessert while a free concert is held, and food and drinks are served at The Quonset bar. Approximately 100 cyclists participate on an average night, and on an average night the “pie host” makes \$1,200 in revenue per event. In correspondence with the event’s coordinator, Marie Gregoire, the event grows larger every year. As an example of the event’s success, in its 2025 season, the Methodist Church in Elmwood made a record \$1,600 in one night and anticipates reaching a new record next year. Many organizations collaborate to support the event including marketing expenses paid by the Nebraska Trails Foundation and Cass County Tourism. Musician fees and operating expenses not covered by grants are sponsored by the Nebraska Arts Council, and many other local businesses.

¹⁴⁵ Lawson, Megan. “Economic Potential of the Great American Rail-Trail Methods and Data Sources.” Rails to Trails Conservancy, May 2022. <https://www.railstotrails.org/site/greatamericanrailtrail/content/impact/>.

¹⁴⁶ “Great American Rail-Trail Route Assessment 2024.” Rails to Trails Conservancy, May 7, 2024. <https://www.railstotrails.org/resource-library/resources/great-american-rail-trail-route-assessment-2024/>.

¹⁴⁷ Lawson, Megan. “Economic Potential of the Great American Rail-Trail Methods and Data Sources.” Rails to Trails Conservancy, May 2022. <https://www.railstotrails.org/site/greatamericanrailtrail/content/impact/>.

¹⁴⁸ Arroyo, Pedro Agüero, Daniel P. Piatkowski, and F. Alsalem. “Investing in Bicycle Infrastructure to Spur Statewide Economic Growth through Bicycle Tourism.” DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska-Lincoln, December 2020. <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1296&context=ndor>.





The Nacho Ride is a non-competitive weekly bike ride that starts from April and ends around November. Riders begin from 84th St. in Lincoln and end at Bailey’s Local, a bar in Eagle. In its 2019 season the Nacho Ride had a peak ridership of 450 riders in a single day. The event has an estimated 3,692 total riders annually, contributing an estimated economic impact of \$82,000. The bar, Bailey’s local’s revenue is impacted greatly by this event. The event’s success has led to the bar investing in improvements for designated bicycle storage, and opening up its basement as a second dining room for customers.¹⁴⁹ Additionally, the event has grown so large that every participant no longer fits within a single venue, presenting an opportunity for riders to be customers at other establishments in Eagle.

A particularly event-filled gathering is the Goldenride 2.0. It’s a three day event where cyclists camp for two nights at the Louisville Recreation Area and ride along the MoPac trail with live music and a food truck provided. As part of the event, riders are encouraged to be customers to nearby businesses. For example, suggesting participants pay to float down the Platte River.¹⁵⁰ Registration is \$175 a person, and this year (2025) the event had 116 participants, contributing an estimated economic impact of approximately \$40,000. Notably, the event coordinators are expecting 300-500 participants this coming year (2026) and they have a total capacity for 700.¹⁵¹

One of the longest and by far the largest events hosted on the MoPac is the Market to Market Relay, where teams of runners race 76 miles from Omaha to Lincoln, ending in a party at Lincoln’s pinnacle bank arena. Due to the popularity of the event participants have to enter into a drawing and be selected in order to participate, with a base registration fee of \$735 per team. In 2019, over 5,000 runners from 35 states participated, which contributed the largest economic impact of any event at an estimated 1.5 million dollars.¹⁵²

Table 20. Annual Economic Impact of Trail Events ¹⁵³¹⁵⁴¹⁵⁵¹⁵⁶

Event	Location (From - to)	Year	Participants per Year	Frequency	Estimated Economic Impact
Pie Ride	Lincoln, Walton, Eagle, or Wabash to Elmwood	2025	~700	Summer - seven Thursdays	\$17,262*
Nacho Ride	Lincoln to Eagle	2019	3692	Summer - weekly	\$82,163
Goldenride	Louisville Recreation Area to Eagle & Springfield	2025	116	Annual - three days	\$40,006*
Market to Market Relay	Omaha to Lincoln	2019	5000	Annual - single day	\$1,500,000

*Note: Indicates a number calculated using (Trailtowns, 2015) and adjusted for inflation

149 Ibid.
 150 "Goldenride Bikefest." Goldenride. Accessed November 20, 2025. <https://www.bikegoldenride.com/>.
 151 Ibid.
 152 "Market to Market® Relay Nebraska: Team Running Relay from Omaha to Lincoln." Market to Market® Relay. Accessed November 20, 2025. <https://www.markettomarketrelay.com/locations/nebraska/>.
 153 Arroyo, Pedro Agüero, Daniel P. Piatkowski, and F. Alsaleem. "Investing in Bicycle Infrastructure to Spur Statewide Economic Growth through Bicycle Tourism." DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska-Lincoln, December 2020. <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1296&context=ndor>.
 154 "Goldenride Bikefest." Goldenride. Accessed November 20, 2025. <https://www.bikegoldenride.com/>.
 155 Trail Towns. "Economic Impact of Regional Trails." Updated June 1 2015. The Progress Fund. <https://www.trailtowns.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Economic-Impact-of-Regional-Trails-1.pdf>
 156 "Record-breaking Year for Market to Market Relay Nebraska." 1011 NOW, October 10, 2019. <https://www.1011now.com/content/news/Record-Breaking-Year-for-Market-to-Market-Relay-Nebraska--562756201.html>.

Interviews

Interviews

Sheri Weiss, executive director of a non-profit with a mission to increase access to cycling within the greater community of Lincoln by providing free and reduced-cost services, such as providing new bicycles to individuals in need and general maintenance and repair. Weiss spoke about the potential impact a trail connector between the north and south portions of the existing MOPAC trail may have on their organization's mission.

When speaking on the potential economic viability of smaller bike shops in villages along the trail, Weiss said, "We at the bike shop were the recipients of 1000s of dollars of inventory from a bike shop that closed in Omaha, it's bitter-sweet that we were able to receive that inventory. It's just sickening to see what's happening." However, Weiss did have hope for creative solutions that can still serve trail users and positively impact the local economy along the trail, "I'm not sure that a large-scale bike shop in rural Nebraska is going to succeed, but there needs to be somewhere people can go and get supplies for maintenance and repair." A potential solution may be to approach local business owners such as auto repair, restaurants, gas stations or visitors centers that have established and maintained good relationships with the cycling population along the trail and would be willing to stock essential repair items like inner tubes, patch kits, spare tires and tools in locations that have a reasonable population of cyclists in and around the area.

This approach could be utilized, if successful, to help ease opposition and hesitation from local residents when a trail is proposed within their jurisdiction. There are multiple factors that contribute to the opposition of trail expansion, Weiss said, "When the Oak Creek Trail was going there was opposition to that. Until those communities saw

there wasn't vandalism, these are cool people just riding the trails. They're not getting in my cornfield. Those fears end up dissipating." A small, but meaningful opportunity to increase revenues by directly offering supplies in addition to the primary business function could show local business owners the potential increase in customer base they may see and not just people riding through their village.

Speaking to potential political barriers to getting trails expanded and connected in a timely manner, Weiss said, "Trails have long proven in other communities and states that cycling and bike tourism is for real, and our state's really missing out. It's not for a lack of trying." A lot of the turmoil caused over the project is difficult to narrowly define and can often seem to drastically fluctuate, Weiss said, "We thought we were on the right path, then all of a sudden, whatever it was, there wasn't enough information to move forward on the project." The future path for the expansion of trails and the MOPAC connector appears to be continued education and persistent engagement throughout the public engagement process.

Isaac Remboldt, Trail user and Lincoln resident, planned and traversed the MOPAC trail from Lincoln to Omaha, including the current gap in the trail this report is studying. Remboldt spoke about the different aspects of planning this trip like budget, route, timing, recreation and overall recommendation that may improve the trail experience.

It was apparent how longer trips were negatively impacted by a lack of specific services Remboldt said, "To prepare we stopped by Cycle Works to get some supplies, spare tires and stuff. We also packed a half lunch, Cliff bars and energy bars. But we planned to stop at Eagle or Murdoch for lunch." The lack of proper amenities along the trail makes trail users more inclined to get more



specific supplies in Lincoln or Omaha before continuing, which can easily lead to making additional purchases. Remboldt estimated the average trip from Lincoln to Omaha a trail user would spend between \$30 to \$150 along the way, noting that a disproportionate amount of this money was spent in Lincoln before the trip or in Omaha after they had finished.

Beyond the occasional trip with no end destination, Remboldt also sighted the various Community events centered around trail users as positively contributing to their opinion of the trails overall utility, saying, “For the nacho ride, I’ve stopped at Eagle and had drinks and food there many times. Those events are some of my best memories in Lincoln.” However, Remboldt believes these events can be replicated more than the market may be supplying, “There are opportunities in a lot of towns that rely on driving into larger cities to get food... In that situation, if there was a subsidy for a rural grocery store or farmers market, that could become an event to attract people that would really benefit the people that live there, but it would also create more options for trail users.”

In addition to commercial developments that could improve the trail, Remboldt sighted the on trail amenities lacking variety and needing increased way finding further north, “Some way finding would be useful out there, especially after the Platte River Bridge. Deeper into Omaha, Papillion and La Vista, if you’re trying to get to a specific area between Springfield and Papillion, it’s a very wide sidewalk then into a road and back into a sidewalk then you have to kind of cut through a neighborhood.” This can create unexpected delays in a travel delay, potentially resulting in less spending or ending the

trip short to return to their origin.

Jason Buss, President of the Nebraska Trails Foundation, is a trail advocate within the state of Nebraska that has experience in navigating community engagement and legislative challenges that are not uncommon when trying to increase the number of trail miles across the state. Buss sighted miscommunication and differences in opinions on land use as a major setback for trail projects, “The legal trouble that came from those few people (that believe their property value is negatively impacted by trails), is what motivates county attorneys and ultimately the board to pause things that had already been approved for a great deal of time.” Buss emphasized the importance of continued support for communities and residents during times of confusion and opposition as the best route forward, “like a lot of towns and counties, if you don’t show up, your voices are not going to be heard, and if you’re not being heard, then they’re not thinking about you. So we just have to keep our presence if we want to keep having productive, incremental change.”

When looking to the future of planning within Nebraska Buss felt the importance in local elections couldn’t be understated, “People need to pay more attention to who are going to grow communities and provide courageous improvement to the quality of life in those communities.” Electing local representatives that are truly keeping their community’s beliefs and needs in mind while state organizations continue to increase incentives for trail projects is a positive sign for Buss, “We’ll keep moving forward. We’ll keep making trails.” A common thread of persistence toward a



Additional Benefits

common goal of healthier and more connected communities across the state.

Overall, Interviews conducted revealed a strong need across the board to continue to measure potential benefits of trails as our ability to measure external benefits continues and a potential opportunity for increased investment into trail infrastructure and adjacent municipalities in an effort to create a net positive economic impact from increased economic activity from potential investment.

Additional Benefits

Beyond its economic contributions, the MoPac Trail connection offers a range of community-centered benefits that strengthen its overall value to Lincoln and the surrounding region. As a publicly accessible recreational asset, the trail enhances quality of life by providing safe and attractive spaces for outdoor activity, social interaction, and community events. This supports long-term community well-being, encourages active lifestyles, and contributes to the city's broader goals related to public health and livability.

The trail connection also functions as an important transportation route, expanding options for non-motorized travel and offering an alternative to vehicle-dependent commuting. By improving connectivity across key destinations, the project helps link neighborhoods, employment centers, parks, and other community amenities. Enhanced connectivity and access are particularly valuable for individuals who rely on active transportation, creating more direct and continuous pathways throughout the region. The MoPac strengthens Lincoln's multimodal transportation network and supports long-term efforts to reduce congestion and promote sustainable travel behavior.



Source: Great Plains Trail Network

A critical benefit of the connection is the improvement of rider safety. Completing the trail reduces the need for cyclists and pedestrians to travel on or alongside roadways with higher traffic volumes, thereby lowering the risk of crashes and injuries. A dedicated, well-designed trail corridor promotes safer mobility for users of all ages and abilities, encouraging more consistent use. This shift toward regular physical activity also has measurable public health implications¹⁵⁷. Increased cycling and walking can lead to lower healthcare costs, both for individuals and the broader healthcare system. Over time, these health benefits have a chain-mediating economic effect: as users experience improved health outcomes, communities benefit from reduced medical expenditures, increased productivity, and strengthened public health resilience.

A 2001 study of three Nebraska rail-to-trail trails, including the existing MoPac Trail, surveyed 255 households about the impacts of the trail on



¹⁵⁷ Zhu, Ge. "The Effect of Outdoor Activities on the Medical Expenditure of Older People: Multiple Chain Mediating Effects of Health Benefits." BMC Public Health 24 (2024): 1227. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-024-18719-z>



their respective communities¹⁵⁸. It found that the vast majority of respondents saw benefits from the trail in their personal lives and their communities at-large, especially pertaining to community pride and economic activity.¹⁵⁹

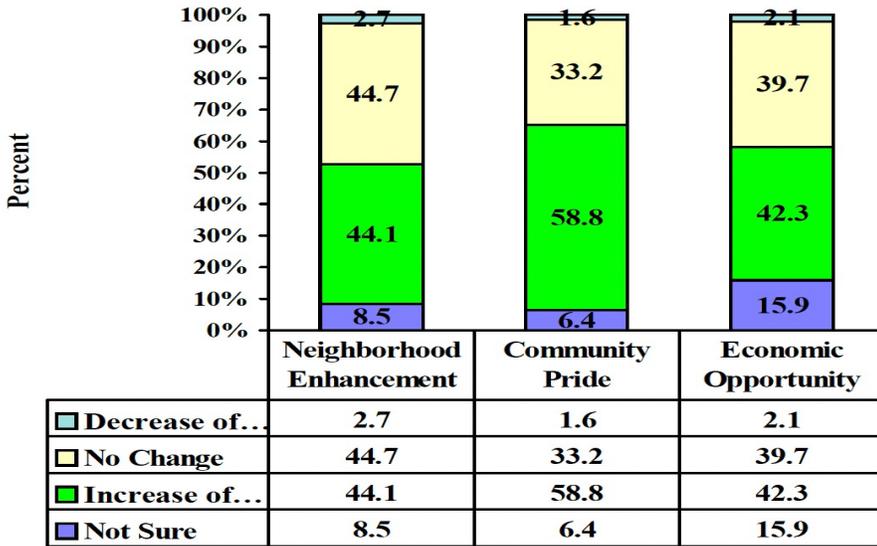


Figure 21: Community Survey Results on Three Nebraska Rail-To-Trail Trails on Community and Economic Impacts¹⁶⁰

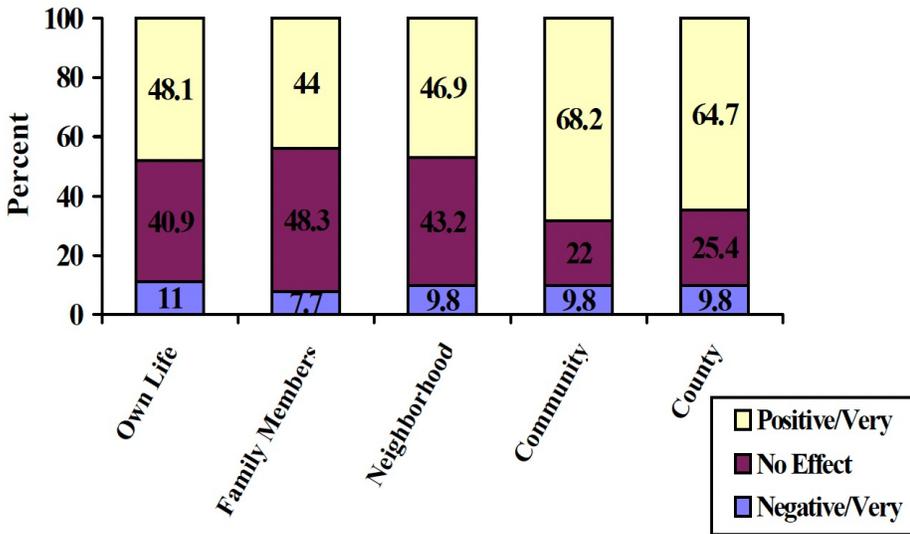


Figure 22: Community Survey on Perceived Influence of Three Nebraska Rail-to-Trail Trails on Residents of Various Levels of Influence¹⁶¹

Although many residents were skeptical of the trails during the planning and development stages, the study found that support increased post-construction and held for decades afterwards¹⁶².

¹⁵⁸ Greer, Donald L. "Nebraska Rural Trails: Three Studies of Trail Impact." October 2001. American Trails. <https://www.americantrails.org/resources/nebraska-rural-trails-three-studies-of-trail-impact>
¹⁵⁹ Greer, Donald L. "Nebraska Rural Trails: Three Studies of Trail Impact." October 2001. American Trails. <https://www.americantrails.org/resources/nebraska-rural-trails-three-studies-of-trail-impact>
¹⁶⁰ Greer, Donald L. "Nebraska Rural Trails: Three Studies of Trail Impact." October 2001. American Trails. <https://www.americantrails.org/resources/nebraska-rural-trails-three-studies-of-trail-impact>
¹⁶¹ Greer, Donald L. "Nebraska Rural Trails: Three Studies of Trail Impact." October 2001. American Trails. <https://www.americantrails.org/resources/nebraska-rural-trails-three-studies-of-trail-impact>
¹⁶² Ibid.



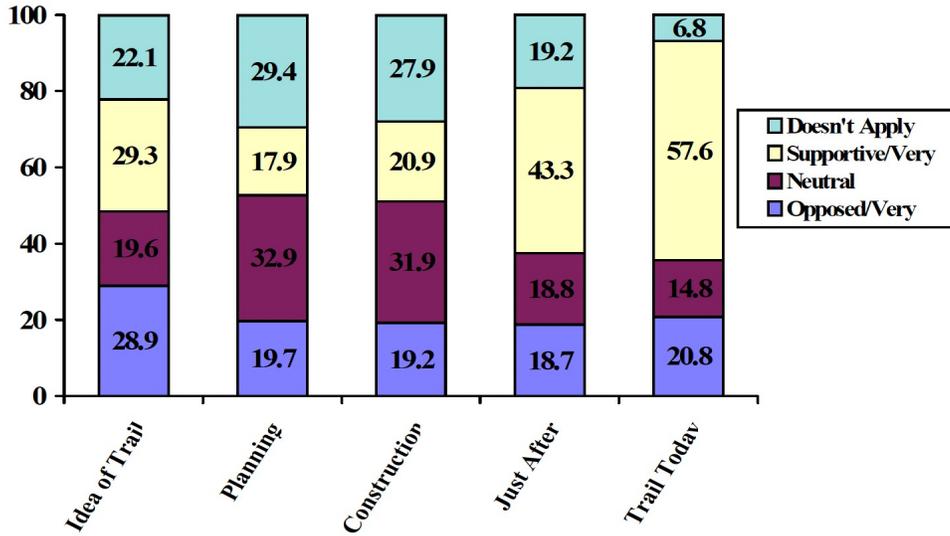


Figure 23: Community Survey on Perceived Influence of Three Nebraska Rail-to-Trail Trails on Residents During Five Points in Time¹⁶³ Implications, Recommendations, and Funding Opportunities

There are three main recommendations from this research that Cass County should employ to improve economic success and community benefits from the MoPac Trail connection implementation.

1. Improve baseline data on trail ridership and economic activity to better document success and develop localized recommendations to increase future benefits.
2. Increase the frequency of-and capacity for-special events along the MoPac Trail.
3. Support local businesses in supporting cyclists.

Under the proposed MoPac trail connection plan, funds for the construction and maintenance of the trail will come from a one-time allocation from the Nebraska State Legislature, as well as ongoing funds from the Lower Platte South Natural Resources District¹⁶⁴. Although this will fund the physical trail, additional financial investment is needed to promote tourism, ridership, and economic development for surrounding trail towns. In order to increase frequency and capacity for special events, as well as support local businesses in supporting cyclists, we recommend that Visit Cass County and the Cass County Economic Development Council partner to recruit corporate sponsorships and volunteer labor for the purchase and installation of wayfaring signage, rest stops, and bicycle maintenance stations along the proposed trail connection. This is likely to increase trail user satisfaction and promote routine ridership.

In addition to funding amenities for the trail user's experience, Cass County should invest in funding for additional events along the trail to generate more revenue for the County. Successful trail events along the MoPac have already generated millions of dollars in economic activity; promoting more events and taking a small portio

Finally, the county should pursue grants such as the federal Community Development Block Grant and Rural Community Development Initiative, or Nebraska's Civic and Community Center Financing Fund, to incentivize the creation of small businesses in trail towns. At this time, the majority of towns on or near the proposed MoPac Trail connection lack consumer establishments, pre-



¹⁶³ Greer, Donald L. "Nebraska Rural Trails: Three Studies of Trail Impact." October 2001. American Trails. <https://www.americantrails.org/resources/nebraska-rural-trails-three-studies-of-trail-impact>
¹⁶⁴ "Mopac East Trail Connector Study." JEO Consulting, October 2024. <https://indd.adobe.com/view/7bf53d2f-17e8-469c-a8b1-565bd4f2e932>

venting these towns from generating commercial revenue from trail users.

Investing in small stores that meet both community and rider needs would allow towns to better capitalize on the potential economic benefit resulting from the MoPac Trail connection. These towns can draw on regional examples where trail-adjacent businesses such as bars or even seasonal ice cream shops thrive in tandem with peak trail use season. The County should also implement a special sales tax rate for businesses along the trail to provide another ongoing source of funding for trail maintenance.

In conclusion, Cass County stands to reap significant economic benefits from the MoPac Trail Connection. The upfront investment of \$15 million is expected to generate millions of dollars in annual tourism revenue for the area. In addition to the economic benefit, the MoPac trail can build community identity, increase community interaction across Nebraska, promote public health and fitness, and finally include Nebraska as a leader in national rail-to-trail initiatives.



UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA - LINCOLN

MOPAC East Trail Extension Report

CRPL 840
