Becoming an Advocate for Outdoor Accessibility: Informed Strategies for Collective Action

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TALK + THINK = ACTION

WHAT DO WE VALUE? WHAT'S OUR VISION FOR THE REGION? HOW DO WE GET THERE?

PHASE 1 - SHARED VALUES | PHASE 2 - DESIRED FUTURE | PHASE 3 - IMPLEMENTATION

Image from Southwest Decision Resources

Overview

Becoming an effective advocate for accessible trails involves navigating a complex landscape of funding, stakeholder engagement, and adherence to guidelines. This guide provides a structured approach to advocating for and developing these trails in unison with other relevant stakeholders.

The following information is adapted from conversations with Mark Loseth, facilitator of Southwest Decision Resources in Flagstaff, Arizona. This guide is formed for advocates in The United States with specific case-study based information in Arizona.

Representation and System-Based Advocacy

There is a fundamental lack of accessibility representation in trail building spaces. For this reason, entering the trail-building space as an accessibility advocate often involves pre-existing systems. Effective advocacy requires organization, passion, and persistence.

1 Standards For Universal Design In Outdoor Spaces

The following guidelines are adapted from the ADA (American Disabilities Act)

1. Accessibility Guidelines and Standards

- **ADA Standards**: The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) provides comprehensive guidelines for accessibility. Ensure compliance with ADA Standards for Accessible Design, including:
    - **Width of Paths**: Minimum of 36 inches for clear passage.
    - **Surface**: Stable, firm, and slip-resistant surfaces with a maximum slope of 1:20 (5%) for ramps.
    - **Turning Space**: Provide at least 60 inches in diameter for turning spaces.

2. Design Principles

- **Inclusivity**: Design should accommodate all users, including those with mobility impairments, visual or hearing disabilities, and cognitive limitations.
- **Safety**: Ensure that all features are safe and secure, with clear signage and tactile paving where appropriate.
- **Comfort**: Provide seating, shade, and rest areas to enhance comfort and usability for all users.

3. Pathways and Circulation

- **Width and Grade**: Maintain paths at least 48 inches wide with gentle slopes (not exceeding 1:20) to accommodate wheelchairs and strollers.
- **Materials**: Use materials that are durable, non-slip, and easy to navigate. Avoid loose gravel or uneven surfaces.

4. Seating and Rest Areas

- **Design Considerations**: Ensure benches and rest areas are accessible, with space for wheelchair users. Seating should be positioned to offer views and shade.
- **Height**: Bench heights should be between 17-19 inches from the ground to accommodate different users.

5. Lighting and Signage

- **Visibility**: Use appropriate lighting to ensure pathways and key areas are well-lit, enhancing safety for all users.
- **Signage**: Provide clear, easy-to-read signs with tactile and visual elements. Use high-contrast colors and large fonts.

6. Play Areas

- **Inclusive Play Equipment**: Incorporate equipment accessible to children with different abilities. Ensure surfaces are soft and resilient, with a maximum fall height of 6 feet.
- **Variety of Activities**: Offer a range of activities that cater to various abilities and interests.

7. Water Fountains and Restrooms

- **Accessibility**: Ensure water fountains are at an accessible height with a spout no higher than 36 inches. Provide wheelchair-accessible restrooms with appropriate grab bars and maneuvering space.

8. Landscaping and Features

- **Sensory Gardens**: Include elements that engage different senses, such as textured surfaces, fragrant plants, and water features.
- **Pathway Edges**: Use contrasting colors or textures to define pathway edges and prevent falls.

9. Integration with Natural Elements

- **Environmentally Friendly**: Use native plants and materials that blend with the surroundings while providing accessibility.
- **Adaptive Features**: Design features such as raised planters and tactile trails to enhance the experience for all users.

10. Community Involvement

- **Feedback and Testing**: Engage the community, particularly those with disabilities, in the design and testing phases to ensure the spaces meet their needs.

To see adaptive *mountain-bike specific* accessibility standards, please see https://kootenayadaptive.com/adaptive-mountain-biking-trail-standards/

2 Strength in Numbers

1. **Establish your "why"**
   - **Mission and Vision:** Establishing a clear "why" behind your advocacy work will allow you to approach stakeholders with clear, organized, and digestible thoughts. Your "why" may look like:

     Establishing Adaptive Mountain Bike Trails

     Renewing Signage for Accessible Trails
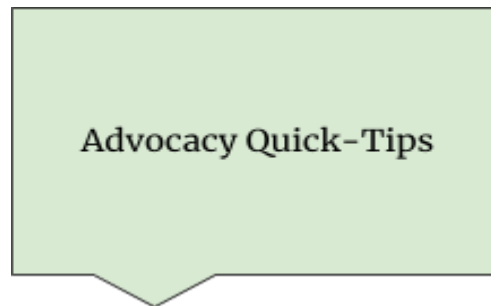
     Improving Standards for Accessible Parks Restrooms

2. **Build your team**
   - **Representation Matters:** Find a team of like-minded individuals in your professional or community network. Able-bodied advocates are

encouraged to directly seek and involve the voices of individuals with disabilities in advocacy efforts where they are not already present.

3. Organize your system

- **Get informed:** Identify the local stakeholders involved in outdoor-planning for your specific "why." Take time to understand the way in which the systems already in place work

Advocacy Quick–Tips

- **Use Soft Language**: Describe trails as designed for "positive biking experiences."
- **Intentional Verbiage**:
  - Emphasize the importance of "collaborative planning" and "stakeholder engagement."
  - Highlight the necessity for trails to be "multi-use and bidirectional."

.Ready, Set, Advocate
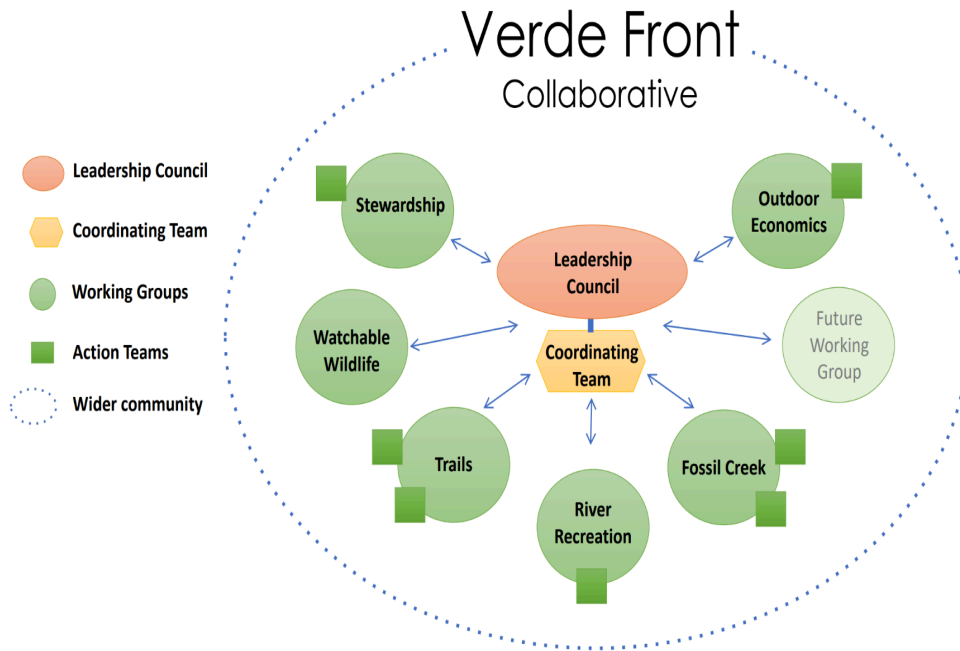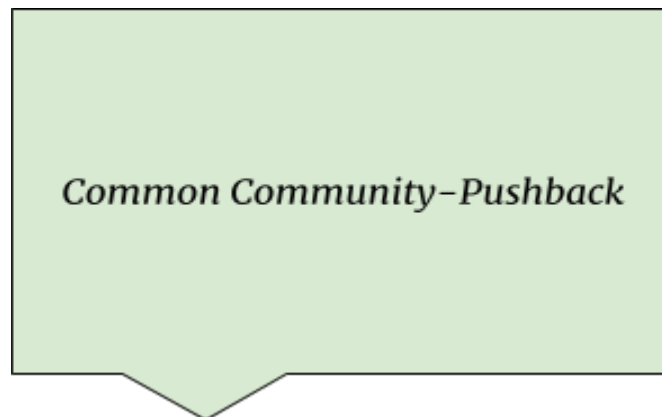
1. **What stakeholders can I expect?**

Image 1. A Case-based example of relevant stakeholders in community planning adapted from a Southwest Decision resources presentation

Wildlife Advocates: Will your plan impact local wildlife? Consider noise-pollution, the impact of motorized systems on the environment, and fundamental ecosystems to your relative region.

Outdoor Economics: How much will your plan cost? Is there available funding for your plan? Is your plan "worth" its cost?

Wider Community: What is the environmental attitude towards accessibility? Do community members understand the value of accessibility?

Common Community-Pushback

- Accessible trails are "boring"
- Accessible trails are "too expensive"
- Accessible trails require "too much manpower"

Trails managed by the *county* are unlikely to be widened due to financial and manpower related constraints.

Final Notes

Advocating for accessible trails requires understanding funding mechanisms, engaging with stakeholders, and adhering to specific trail design standards. By leveraging available resources and fostering collaborative efforts, it is possible to create inclusive and enjoyable trails for all users.

Resources

Trail Accesibility Hub |
https://www.americantrails.org/resources/accessibility-hub
Rails to Trails Conservancy |
https://www.americantrails.org/resources/accessibility-hub
Accessibility Guidebook for Outdoor Recreation and Trails |
**https://www.fs.usda.gov/recreation/programs/accessibility/pubs/htmlpub
s/htm12232806/page21.htm#:~:text=Section%207.4%20of%20FSTAG%20e
xplains%20the%20accessibility%20requirements,and%20signs.%20All%20
of%20these%20requirements%20are%20minimums**.