

A NORTH ADAMS BICYCLE/PEDESTRIAN PATH: QUESTIONS, CONCERNS, FACTS AND ANSWERS

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COMMON BENEFITS

As noted consistently in surveys conducted across the county, the creation of trails, bike/ped paths and greenways benefit the communities in which they are located. The paths are designed to accommodate most users, including families, seniors and wheelchair users, and often serve as linear parks, traveling past open green space and linking public spaces. The outdoor setting draws people out of their homes, offering a place to exercise, to socialize with neighbors, or quietly relax. Studies routinely show that once bike/ped paths or walking trails are in place, the vast majority of residents living near them use them, many daily or weekly, inevitably increasing their level of walking or other moderate physical exercise. The convenience of being able to access the path that is in such close proximity to their home is the dominant factor in their use of it. This is locally demonstrated on the Ashuwillticook Rail Trail, where 88% of survey respondents state that the most important benefit of the Trail is that it provides a safe opportunity for recreation for those in their household. All but a few respondents noted that household members had used the Trail within the past 12 months, with almost half stating that they used it once a week or more. Ninety-one percent of respondents walked the Trail and 73.5% biked it. In a time when our population is increasingly obese, the convenience of establishing a bike/ped trail is ever more important to the health of our community.

Bike/ped paths have dependably provided economic benefits to the communities in which they are located. Visitors to the path frequent local businesses and often spawn new emerging businesses along their corridors. Both residential and commercial property values increase along and in close proximity to the path, leading to increased tax revenues. These paths also provide a safe alternate transportation route for those who wish to bike to work or to run errands. This is especially important in a city like North Adams where a significant percentage of the population does not own a vehicle.

COMMON CONCERNS

Residents across Berkshire County have voiced a desire for additional bike/ped paths within or near their communities. Throughout the public planning process for the *North Adams Vision 2030 Master Plan*, residents in every meeting and from each neighborhood have rated the creation of a bike/ped path as one of the highest priority goals that the city should undertake. Creating a bike/pedestrian path within or near existing residential development is cause for concern among some North Adams property owners, particularly where the proposed route will travel in close proximity to their homes. Typical concerns raised by North Adams homeowners who attended a public forum in October 2014 include the potential increased crime, noise and litter, coupled with a decrease in privacy and property values. While these concerns are valid and must be addressed to minimize homeowner impacts, studies conducted on similar paths across the country indicate that these fears are unsupported by experience.

Hundreds of studies conducted across the U.S. have been conducted on the social and financial impacts of creating publicly accessible recreational trails and greenways. The Federal Highway Administration, state and regional transportation agencies fund many of these studies, often partnering with universities to gather, analyze and publish the results. Many of the studies are based on surveys, reflecting the perceptions and experiences of landowners abutting or within close proximity of specific paths or greenways. Other studies gather and analyze data such as crime statistics or real estate assessment and transactions related to paths and trails. The purpose of this fact sheet is to provide residents with a summary of overall findings from these studies and provide links for those who would like to investigate particular subjects in more depth. Recommended reading are these summary reports:

- Berkshire Regional Planning Commission. 2014. *Ashuwillticook Rail Trail Abutter Survey, Autumn 2014*. Abutter survey of landowners along the Ashuwillticook Rail Trail in the Berkshire County, MA. Interviews with local law enforcement are also included in the report. <http://berkshireplanning.org/reports-and-documents>.
- Belmont Community Path Advisory Committee. 2014. *Belmont Community Path Final Report*. Chapter 6 summarizes findings from the across the country, providing direct references and links that make it easy to follow up on any one particular study. The report can be found online at http://www.belmont-ma.gov/sites/belmontma/files/file/file/belmont-community-path-advisory-committee_final-report_2014-06-07.pdf.
- Feeney, S.; Schenectady County Department of Planning. 1997. *The Mohawk-Hudson Bike-Hike Trail & Its Impact on Adjoining Residential Properties*. Summary of abutter survey in New York State, where the trail travels through rural and urban settings. http://headwaterseconomics.org/wphw/wp-content/uploads/Trail_Study_18-mohawk-hudson-bike-hike-trail.pdf.
- Indiana Univ. 2001. *Summary Report Indian Trails Study, A Study of Trails in 6 Indiana Cities*. <http://www.in.gov/indot/files/z-CompleteDocument.pdf>.

CRIME & SAFETY

Studies from across the country reveal that recreational trails are a reflection of the area in which they are located, regardless of their urban, suburban or rural settings. Crime statistics and direct communications with law enforcement agencies (CA, CO, DE, NC, NY, MA, WA) confirm that bike/ped paths do not bring crime into the neighborhoods in which they are located. Conversely, many crime statistics and studies indicate that the rate of crimes on and along path/trail corridors is less than in adjacent areas. This is often attributable to the increase in the number of recreational users, where the influx of people brings new watchful eyes into the area.

Surveys completed by homeowners abutting or living in close proximity to bike/ped paths note that while major crime does not increase on or near the path, some property owners report nuisance impacts from trail users. Most commonly cited impacts nationwide are illegal motor vehicle use, pets, decreased privacy, illegal parking, noise and litter.

An abutter survey of the Ashuwillticook Rail Trail revealed that the vast majority are satisfied with the trail as a neighbor, with only five of 69 respondents stating a dissatisfaction. Impacts noted most often from Ashuwillticook abutters involved litter, loitering and dog waste. According to the police chiefs of Adams, Cheshire and Lanesborough there have been no major crime incidents involved with the Trail.

Additional reading:

- Love, J.A. 2005. *Greenways and Crime on Nearby Properties: An Investigation of Reported Crimes Along Three Greenways*. Martin, Walter; Ludden, Tom; Furuseth, Wwen; Nixon, Shane. (date NA). Comprehensive study in the area of Chapel Hill, NC mapped reports of crime over time in the neighborhoods of three greenways both before and after they were opened, and compared trends in crime to other areas that were matched for socioeconomic variables but did not have trails. There were trends toward a slight decrease in crime near two of the trails a slight increase in crime near one of the trails.
- Univ. N. Carolina, Charlotte. 2005. *Preliminary Assessment of Crime Risk along Greenways in Charlotte, NC 1994-2004*. A systematic analysis of property crime on or adjacent to a greenway during a 4-year period within Mecklenburg County, NC. Data suggest that greenway-adjacent properties do not incur greater risk of crime than other properties within the same neighborhood statistical area. On the contrary, greenway-adjacent properties had lower crime rates 75 percent of the time and in one year 2001, greenways actually appeared to be safer than the broader community.
- Crewe, K., 2001. *Journal of Urban Design* 6, 3:245-264. "Linear Parks and Urban Neighbourhoods [sic]: A Study of the Crime Impact of the Boston South-West Corridor." Study examined crime along 5-mile greenway in Boston. No significant increase in crime was found for those living next to the corridor. In fact, there was less crime, as compared to houses bordering quiet commercial streets, and significantly less crime than for those buildings abutting a busy arterial street.
- Tracy, Tammy; Morris, Hugh. 1998. *Rail-trails and Safe Communities, the Experience on 372 Trails*. Rails-to-Trail Conservancy and National Parks Service. Rates of muggings, assaults, rape, and murder on trails were significantly lower than in the general population.

MITIGATING ABUTTER IMPACTS

While it is widely expected that a bike/ped path will provide an array of benefits to residents and businesses of North Adams, it will undoubtedly mean that some residents will see an increase in people traveling through their neighborhoods or, in some areas, near their properties. However, reducing the impacts of those travelers can be achieved through direct resident input and careful design.

- Careful placement of amenities such as parking, trailheads, benches and picnic areas can attract users to specific sites, while the absence of such amenities encourages them to travel straight through to sections that host such amenities.
- Fencing, shrubbery and other mechanisms can be installed to provide some measure of privacy and security. As a precaution, fences are frequently erected along trail corridors to protect abutting landowner from the impacts of a newly developed path or trail. It is interesting to note, however, that abutters often create access points from their property to the trail, often with a lockable gate, or in some instances remove the fence altogether. This has occurred along the Minuteman Trail in Massachusetts and Farmington Valley Greenway in CT. In Avon, CT almost 12,000 feet of chain-link security fence was removed at residents' request because they deemed it unnecessary and unattractive.

- It will be of utmost importance to post signs about rules and trail etiquette along the bike/ped route, where respect for abutting private property should be clearly stated. Establishing fines for offenses of most concern could be considered.
- In areas where homes are located in close proximity to the bike path, local officials could consider adopting etiquette similar to that promoted on nature trails, including courtesy and quiet zones where appropriate. Signs should be posted in these areas alerting users of expected behavior.
- Engineers, town officials and local residents can work together to identify sites where installing lighting (and possibly surveillance cameras) may be desirable, as they may alleviate abutter concerns and proactively reduce impacts before they occur.

PROPERTY VALUES

A 2006 survey organized by the National Association of Home Builders and National Association of Realtors found that trails were cited as the most commonly sought after community asset, above public pools and parks. Several studies have been conducted on the impact of trails and greenways to property values and sales, and almost unanimously they note that, all other factors being equal, the presence of trails/greenways increases the value of properties located along or in close proximity to them. Several studies use hedonic price modeling to determine the cost difference by linear foot distance between the trail/greenway and the property.

Realtors across the country use nearby trails and greenways as a promotional tool to sell homes faster and at higher prices. This is evidenced in real estate ads across Massachusetts, including properties near the Ashuwillticook Rail Trail in Berkshire County and the Norwottuck Rail Trail in neighboring Hampshire County. A review of real estate ads for Adams, Cheshire and Lanesborough reveals that the Ashuwillticook is often listed as a prime amenity for homes located on or near the trail. Additional reading:

- Karadeniz, Duygu. 2008. *The Impact of the Little Miami Scenic Trail on Single Family Residential Property Values*. Univ. Cincinnati School of Planning. Hedonic price model study on sales prices of residential homes sold within 1 mile of Little Miami Scenic Trail in Ohio during 2003-05. The analysis suggests that each foot increase in distance from the trail decreases the sale price of a sample property by \$7.05. In other words, being closer to the Trail adds value to the single family residential properties.
- Lindsey, Greg; Payton, Seth; Man, Joyce; Ottensmann, John. 2003. *Public Choices and Property Values: Evidence from Greenways in Indianapolis*. Indiana Univ. – Purdue Univ. Indianapolis, IN. Average price for all homes sold in greenway corridors was nearly 10 percent higher than the average price for all homes.
- Pinellas County Metropolitan Planning Organization, September 2001. *Pinellas Trail Community Impact Study*. A homeowners survey indicates a high percentage of those living near the trail perceive it as an asset. Property values are increasing at a rate faster than for homes not near the trail. 90% of realtors said that home sales near the trail had increased “somewhat” or “significantly”. Crime rates are the same as elsewhere in the county.
- Zarker, Gary; Bourey, James M. 1987. *Evaluation of the Burke-Gilman Trail’s Effect on Property Values and Crime*. Seattle Engineering Dept. and Office of Planning. According to real estate agents property near the trail is easier to sell and on average sells for 6% or more money.