THE IMPACTS OF CENTRAL OHIO TRAILS

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And the
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The Impacts of Central Ohio Trails

Executive Summary

The Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission (MORPC) promotes a balanced transportation system for the Central Ohio region that includes greenways and multiuse trails used by Central Ohio residents for bicycling and walking. In 2014, MORPC and the Central Ohio Greenways and Trails Group (COG) determined the need for more thorough information about the impact of trails in the region and commissioned this study, “The Impacts of Central Ohio Trails.” To complete this study, MORPC, COG, and the research team conducted counts of trail users, intercept and online surveys of trail users, interviews of local leaders about the importance of trails in the region, analyses of property values near trails, and an analysis of the costs of trail construction and maintenance.

The results show that trails provide many values to local residents and communities. Some of these values can be measured in dollars; others cannot. Summarized most simply, Central Ohio trails enhance the lives of thousands of Central Ohio residents who travel millions of miles on them annually for recreation, fitness and health, commuting, and other purposes. Trail users value trails, visit them frequently, are satisfied with management by local agencies, and want greater connectivity for bicycling and walking throughout the region. Specific findings include:

- COG trails are heavily used. Analyses of automated counts show that people travel nearly 12 million miles annually on 10 trails in the region.
- Many trail users visit trails three or more times per week, their typical visit is between one and two hours long, and they visit multiple trails in the network. Most of the users are middle-aged; nearly three-fourths have college or graduate degrees, and more than half report household incomes above $75,000 per year. Nearly half visit with friends, and a significant proportion visit with children, indicating trails serve social purposes and meet family needs.
- About one-fifth of users say they spend modest amounts of money, typically between $15 and $20 for refreshments and dining, on a trail visit. Across all trail users, this result indicates an average expenditure by individual trail users of about $3 per visit.
- Trail enthusiasts, especially bicyclists, rated trail surface, traffic safety, free-flowing traffic, and intersection safety as the most important physical characteristics, and they reported satisfaction with management of each of them.
- Analyses of written comments by participants in the on-line survey show that users believe the trails are well-maintained facilities that provide safe access and connectivity to destinations throughout Central Ohio. When asked about needed improvements, participants emphasized greater connectivity, particularly east-west routes that provide better access to destinations like parks and links to roads for commuting to employment.
- Regional leaders echoed survey results: trails provide value to their communities, increase connectivity and access to destinations, produce positive economic impacts, help attract and retain talent, and can contribute to the economic vitality and health of the region in the future.
- Analyses of more than 45,000 residential property sales near trails in Franklin and Delaware Counties show there are no adverse effects on prices associated with proximity to trails.
- The costs of trail construction and maintenance in Central Ohio are consistent with costs reported nationally.
Overall, these results provide the most complete assessment of trail use and the most detailed profile of trail users compiled for Central Ohio. They provide a firm foundation for planning to meet the growing needs of Central Ohio residents. Elected officials have new measures of the volume of trail use, the preferences of trail users, and the costs of trails to consider when deliberating future investments. Public managers have new information about user satisfaction with trail management to guide facility maintenance and investments in treatments to improve traffic safety. Regional business leaders and developers have new information, including data on the demographics of trail users and their expenditures, to inform business decisions. Health care providers have new evidence that trails are locations of choice for the Central Ohio population to exercise and improve health. Nonprofit and philanthropic funders have new data to gauge the potential results of investments in new trail facilities across the region. Property owners and realtors have solid evidence that home values are not affected adversely by trails. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the residents of Central Ohio been engaged directly in shaping the future of the trails they value and use.
1. Introduction

The Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission (MORPC) promotes a balanced transportation system for the Central Ohio region that meets the needs of all users, including bicyclists and pedestrians. MORPC recognizes the importance of trails in the regional transportation system and the critical roles they play in meeting the recreational, fitness, commuting, and health needs of Central Ohio residents. As part of its transportation planning activities, MORPC has invested in the development of a comprehensive trail system and coordinates the efforts of the Central Ohio Greenways and Trails Group (COG), a coalition of local municipal, park district, and nonprofit leaders that promotes trail development in the region and coordinates trail development efforts with stakeholders. During the past 10 years, few regions in the country have been more aggressive than Central Ohio in moving towards becoming a first-class biking and walking destination. With robust investments in trail infrastructure, a heavily used trail network, the second largest urban university population in the country, a growing number of tourists, and an expected addition of 500,000 residents to the region in the next 40 years, the Central Ohio Greenway network is poised to become one of the premier trail systems in the U.S.

MORPC and COG have collaborated on studies to inform trail development, including trail counts and informal surveys of trail users and other stakeholders. These studies have shown that thousands of people use COG Trails (Figure 1). These studies also have supported expansion and connection of trails throughout the region, particularly Franklin and Delaware Counties. COG also maintains a web page that includes maps of trails, information about trails, and resources to support trail development and use: http://www.centralohiogreenways.com/index.php/maps.

In 2014, MORPC and COG determined the need for more thorough information about the impact of trails in the region and commissioned a study on the economic and other benefits of trails. The principal goal of this study was to generate valid and reliable information about the values of trails to share with local business leaders and developers, government decision-makers, residents, and other stakeholders who are working together to develop and manage trails in the region. Secondary project goals were to generate information that agencies can use to support applications for funding, develop trail-related performance measures, and inform operations and maintenance of the growing trail system. To accomplish these goals, MORPC, COG, and the research team completed counts of trail users, intercept and online surveys of trail users, interviews of local leaders about the importance of trails in the region, analyses of property values near trails, and an analysis of the costs of trail development and maintenance.

This report, "The Impacts of Central Ohio Trails," summarizes the findings of this study. In the context of public infrastructure such as trails, the idea of value refers to the importance, worth, or usefulness of the infrastructure. This study shows that trails provide many values to local residents and communities. Some of these values can be measured in dollars; others cannot. Summarized most simply, Central Ohio trails enhance the lives of thousands of Central Ohio residents who travel millions of miles on them annually for recreation, fitness and health, commuting, and other purposes. Business, health, and other local leaders see trails as a key strategy for attracting and retaining talent and for creating the vibrant, connected communities essential to the region’s economic future. Users are satisfied with trail operations and maintenance and believe trails are

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1 MORPC and COG serve a 15 county region including Franklin, Delaware, Licking, Fairfield, Pickaway, Madison, Union, Marion, Morrow, Knox, Perry, Hocking, Logan, Fayette, and Ross Counties. This report focuses on trails in Franklin and Delaware Counties.
well-managed. Despite concerns expressed by some property owners that trails may reduce property values, analyses of thousands of residential property sales near trails show there are no negative effects. Costs for trail construction and maintenance are consistent with costs reported nationally. A challenge for the future will be to meet the needs of residents who desire new trails that increase connectivity throughout the region.

Figure 1. COG Trails

This report is organized around major components of the study. Chapter 2 documents the use of Central Ohio Trails. Chapters 3 and 4, respectively, summarize the results of intercept and online surveys of trail users. Chapter 5 presents findings from interviews of business, health, and other leaders in Central Ohio. Chapter 6 summarizes the analyses of property sales near trails, and Chapter 7 summarizes trail construction and maintenance costs. Chapter 8 presents conclusions. Additional details related to each element of the study are included in a series of technical memoranda submitted separately to MORPC by the research team.