

Frequently Asked Questions About Trails

Do trails attract crime and vandalism to neighborhoods?

No. There is no evidence that trails cause an increase in crime. In fact, trail development may actually decrease the risk of crime in comparison to an abandoned and undeveloped corridor. And several studies show that people prefer living along a trail than an abandoned corridor. Typically, lawful trail users serve as eyes and ears for the community.

How can trails be made as safe as possible?

Trail advocates should be sure to address security concerns beginning in the planning stages and continuing through the development of a trail's management plan. The trail's design, such as landscaping, can also enhance safety in a manner that limits deep shadows and hiding areas, or installing emergency telephones in key areas along the trail. Various safety programs can be used once the trail opens, ranging from limiting use to daylight hours to establishing volunteer trail ranger programs and from holding periodic "safety days" to instituting regular police patrols.

What about public and private liability?

Generally trails are covered by the overall insurance policy of the public entity that manages the trail. Public liability risks from trails are small relative to other public services like roads, playgrounds and swimming pools. By taking safety concerns into account when designing and maintaining your trail, you can lower their risks. With respect to liability risks to trail neighbors, private landowners are protected by recreational-use statutes in all states except Alaska and in the District of Columbia. Under these statutes, a landowner who does not charge a trail access fee will not be held liable for injuries sustained on his/her property unless an injured person can prove "willful and wanton misconduct on the part of the landowner."

What about the privacy of those living near the trail?

According to a National Park Service study, "The Impact of Rail-Trails", most adjacent owners experience a minimal loss of privacy from the establishment of a trail. Often, trail design specifications will call for additional vegetative screening to be added to the trail corridor to protect privacy. Fencing is expensive and rarely necessary, although some landowners do erect fences - often with a gate so they can access the trail.

Do trail crossings create traffic hazards?

No, when properly designed. Where crossings exist, well-placed warning and directional signs - both on the road and the trail - can prevent problems and help trail users and motorists avoid dangerous situations. In addition, trail advocates can work with the community to develop user education programs that teach trail etiquette and bicycle safety.

How should user conflicts be addressed?

Creating the best trail possible requires tailoring trail design and permitted uses to the communities through which it passes. There may be circumstances or trail characteristics that make some uses impractical in certain areas. To prevent conflicts, a

trail should be wide enough - generally 10 feet minimum - and at least 12 feet wide for urban and suburban trails, or where heavy use is expected. Naturally, trail rules should be posted at trail heads and near major road crossings, as well as in any trail related literature. Your trail could form a User Advisory Committee, made up of representatives from different users groups and trail neighbors, to discuss and solve problems.

Who will pick up the litter?

Trash has not presented much of a problem on most trails. Some trails have successfully adopted a "pack out what you pack in" position, while others have regular maintenance schedules to empty well-placed waste and recycling receptacles. Whatever method you choose, proper sign placement along the trail and in trail brochures will help ensure its success.

What about illegal parking?

As trails become more popular, parking can be a problem, so this topic needs advanced consideration. Of course, parking lots should be placed at trail heads. Also investigate the possible use of underutilized parking areas of nearby institutions - such as churches during the week, or office buildings on weekends. Advocates should also encourage people to walk or bike to the trail instead of driving, which might encourage the development of on-road bike lanes. For persistent problems, enforcing strict parking regulations may be necessary until additional parking areas are available.

Information obtained from:

Rails-to-Trails Conservancy
1100 Seventeenth St., N.W., 10th Floor
Washington, DC 20036