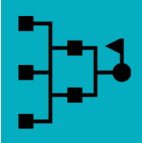


# TRAILS BUILD COMMUNITY



## TRAILS OFFER SAFE SPACES FOR RECREATION AND INVITE SOCIAL CONNECTION

Beyond the widely-documented opportunities for promoting physical (Boone-Heinonen et al., 2010) and psychological health for individuals (Beyer et al., 2014), trails nurture social connection and sense of place (Wood et al., 2010).



**TRAIL PROJECTS STRENGTHEN COMMUNITY RESILIENCE** Resilience can be defined as the outgrowth of several community forces—including leadership, social networks, community infrastructure, and people-place connections—that are “drawn into combined influence” through community agency and self-organization (Berkes & Ross, 2013). Volunteer participation in activities such as trail maintenance work and trail improvement projects “empower the group or community through a series of small successes and learning experiences” (Berkes & Ross, 2013, p. 14).



**TRAILS ARE CATALYSTS FOR INCREASING ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS** By providing residents with direct experience of a community’s natural and social environment through recreation and trail-related stewardship activities, trails promote broader environmental awareness and spur activism (Scannell & Gifford, 2010).

*“Our vision was a trail network that offered something for everyone in the community, from easy walks around Lake Mansfield to a rigorous hike along our piece of the Appalachian Trail.”*

— Christine Ward, Director, Great Barrington Trails and Greenways



## RECOMMENDATIONS

**ACTIVATE TRAILS WITH PROGRAMMING:** In addition to the individual health benefits that accrue from creating and preserving trails, the community benefits of local trails can be enhanced through organized activities. Public events such as trail improvement projects, cultural events, competitions, and guided walks capitalize on trails as social spaces for engaging the broader community.

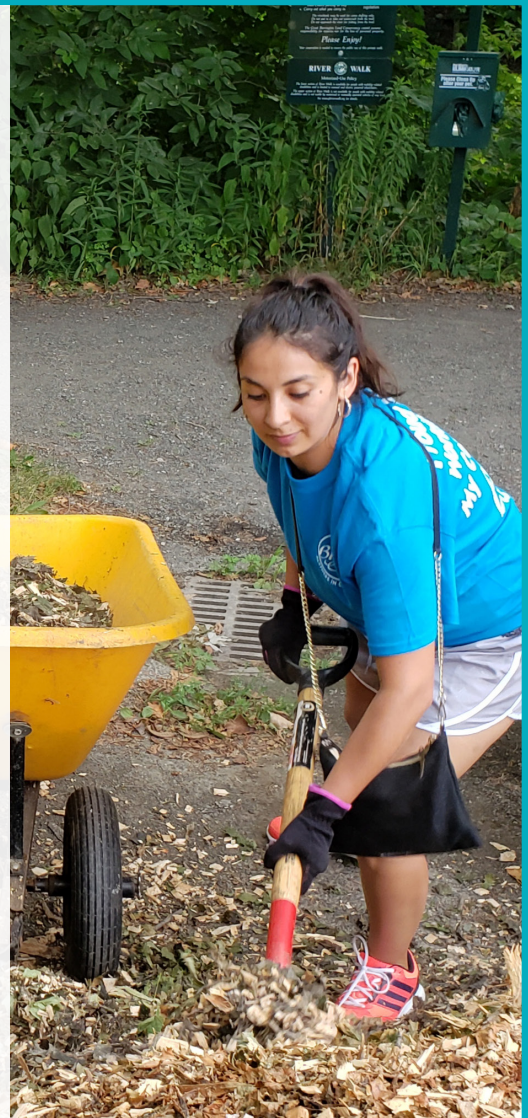
**ANALYZE TRAIL USE IN YOUR COMMUNITY:** Trail counts and user surveys are not only practical techniques for exploring the impact of trails on community quality of life, they also help communities understand the value of their local trails. Trail counts and user survey data are often vital for trail planning and pivotal in funding decisions for trail improvements. A primary goal of [Connecticut Trail Census](#) data is to document trail use that informs specific trail improvements and trail project funding.

**THINK COMMUNITY-WIDE:** Trails can serve as valuable assets to park health and environmental initiatives, transportation planning, or economic development plans. Trails should be integrated into comprehensive community and neighborhood master planning efforts to advance trail development, and protect trail continuity and network integrity as communities change and grow.

# CASE STUDY: GREAT BARRINGTON TRAILS AND GREENWAYS

From the start, [Great Barrington Trails and Greenways](#) (GBTG) has been inclusive and collaborative, exemplifying a community-building approach to trail development. “Instead of focusing on individual trail improvement projects, we believed at the outset that we could accomplish much more with a community vision and by collaborating with partner organizations,” recalls GBTG Director Christine Ward. “Our vision was a trail network that offered something for everyone in the community, from easy walks around Lake Mansfield to a rigorous hike along our piece of the Appalachian Trail.”

GBTG’s work includes everything from strategic planning and trail-related land acquisition to design and construction. But for nurturing a sense of community, Ward sees volunteer trail projects as the heart and soul. “Trail projects bring people together—long-time residents, new arrivals and especially young people—they are nourishing, joyful events where social connections thrive.” Because GBTG works as a collaborative, volunteers have the opportunity to work with different partner organizations as their skills and interests develop, thereby extending and deepening their involvement in the community. This aligns with research by the National Conference on Citizenship that civic engagement is a virtuous circle (2010). GBTG’s relationship with local government has also evolved: what began as a partnership of private organizations has now attracted municipal support in developing and upgrading trails—another indicator of broad community support.



*As communities throughout the U.S. and the world cope with the devastating toll of COVID-19, the pandemic has brought a renewed focus on the importance of local*

*trails. The Trail Impact Series explores how local trails are vital assets for improving physical and mental health, building community, stimulating economies, and fostering climate resilience. The goal is to provide community leaders, trail planners, and advocates with evidence-based information on the benefits of trails, and recommendations for advancing informed design, policy and programming. To view the series visit: <http://s.uconn.edu/trailimpacts>*

Front Image: Great Barrington Trails and Greenways community leaders. Photo Credit: Knowlton Haaland. Above Image: Big Y trail volunteers. Photo Credit: GBTG

**UConn**  
COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE,  
HEALTH AND NATURAL  
RESOURCES

EXTENSION

