Trail Towns & Gateway Communities
Survey Findings and Impact Summary

This comprehensive report provides survey findings from 20 responses received from 19 programs in the U.S. and Canada. This is the first collective study to share insights from program managers into the diverse approaches Trail Town and Gateway Community programs take, the challenges they face, and the perceived impacts they have on their communities. The report outlines the current state of these initiatives and offers valuable recommendations for program managers, policymakers, and stakeholders looking to enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of trail community programs.

Survey & Report Created By:

Amy Camp, Cycle Forward
amy@cycleforward.org

Julie Judkins, Just-Trails
julie.judkins@just-trails.org

Table of Contents

I.   Introduction

A. Background and Purpose

This report summarizes the findings of the Trail Town & Gateway Community Program Impact Survey (Appendix A). The survey was issued electronically through email to program managers in January 2023. The purpose of this first-of-its-kind evaluation was to learn from managers of established initiatives regarding the structure and success of their programs. This report shares insights into the perceived impact of Trail Town and Gateway Community programs and the vital role they play in fostering community engagement, promoting sustainable economic development, cultivating a trail culture, and enhancing the trail experience.

Twenty-one such programs were known by the authors to exist in the U.S. and Canada when the survey was issued. Nineteen programs responded to the survey, and one program provided two responses resulting in a total dataset of 20 responses. Together, these programs impact hundreds of communities across thousands of miles of trails. Remarkably, 90 percent of the programs responded to the survey and 65 percent of managers surveyed plan to operate their programs indefinitely.

Respondents provided insights on how programs are structured, funded, staffed, and managed as well as successes and challenges they face and real impacts happening in trail communities. The high response rate is significant given that the Trail Town and Gateway Community approach is still relatively new. Twenty years ago, the earliest programs were being conceptualized but were not yet established. In the time since, programs have been implemented across a wide geography but have not been collectively studied.

This survey and report represent the first research aimed at developing a macro understanding of the Trail Town and Gateway Community model. Understanding the efficacy of these programs is the first step in strengthening what is essentially a community and economic development model—and conservation tool—for trail communities.

With this survey and report, the authors set out to learn:

- How existing programs are structured
- Challenges faced by program administrators

- Best practices in program management
- The perceived overall effectiveness of operating trail community programs

By understanding the effectiveness of these programs, managers and communities can make more informed decisions to support and improve trail initiatives.

Definitions

A **Trail Town** is a community through which a trail passes that supports trail users with services, promotes the trail to its residents, and embraces the trail as a resource to be protected and celebrated. Trail Towns are built on a relationship between a town, its trail, and those who use and care for it. A community may have been officially designated a "Trail Town," or it may simply espouse the characteristics of a trail-serving community[1].

A Gateway Community typically refers to a town or city that borders public lands, such as national and state parks, wildlife refuges, forests, historic sites, and wilderness areas[2]. In the context of trail communities, however, some programs along U.S. National Scenic Trails use the term "Gateway Community" rather than "Trail Town." The terms are used interchangeably among program managers. For purposes of this report, the term "**Community Programs**" is used to describe communities that were studied.

National Trails are those designated by the U.S. National Trails System Act, which established trails in both urban and rural settings for people of all ages, interests, skills, and physical abilities. The Act established National Scenic and Historic Trails and National Recreation Trails, which today consists of 11 National Scenic Trails, 19 National Historic Trails, and 1,300 National Recreation Trails.

---

[1] *Adapted from the North Country Trail Association's definition for Trail Towns.*
[2] Balancing Nature and Commerce in Gateway Communities, by Jim Howe, Ed McMahon, and Luther Propst; The Conservation Fund and The Sonoran Institute, 1997

B. Top-Line Findings

Program Reach: The Trail Community approach resonates across geographic regions, impacting nearly two dozen programs in 33 U.S. states and one Canadian province. It is a model applied to nine out of eleven National Scenic Trails (NST) in the United States stretching across more than 13,000 miles. As of late 2023, the NST programs were collectively serving 183 trailside communities.

Populations Served: While program managers report serving diverse population sizes, 68 percent of them reported serving populations less than 10,000.

Top Impacts Observed in Trail Communities (as Reported by Managers)

- Increased services, amenities, and business opportunities
- Increased community engagement and trail-oriented events
- Increased federal/state investment
- Increased awareness of trails
- Increased trail improvements and signage

Top Measurements Used in Evaluating Program Success:

- Community member engagement level (events, calls)
- General feedback
- Number of businesses providing trail-related services
- Action plan completion
- Increase in town's marketing and signage
- Qualitative and Quantitative surveys
- Investments in trail improvements/enhancements

Capacity and Impact: No clear pattern emerged connecting better-funded programs with perceived impact. However, a staffed regional program can have a significant impact on participating communities, many of which are under-resourced and would benefit from additional capacity and funding.

Challenges: The survey question, "If you were to initiate your program anew today, what changes would you make?" revealed common challenges, such as the need for structured communication protocols and defined success metrics to improve collaboration, accountability, and program evaluation across trail town programs.

Sustaining Programs: Sixty-five percent of responding program managers report plans to operate their programs indefinitely.

Recommendations: Based on the findings of this report, the following recommendations are offered, which can be viewed in more detail in the Recommendations & Conclusion section.

1. **Invest in Trail Community initiatives.**
2. **Conduct cross-program evaluation.**
3. **Establish a research/resource hub.**
4. **Create a Community of Practice (CoP) and a Trail Town Institute.**
5. **Do not lose sight of the big picture; value trails for more than their economic potential.**

C. Beyond the Survey

This report provides a strong starting point for understanding the work of trail community programs. More research is needed to carefully examine program efforts at the intersection of trails, conservation, resilience, sustainability, community development, and the outdoor economy. In the meantime, a burgeoning Community of Practice (CoP) is emerging among the program managers, providing camaraderie, access to resources, and inspiration to those who are participating.

Besides data from the survey itself, this report pulls from the observations of past and present program managers as well as students at James Madison University who worked with the project team to further analyze the survey data and provide insights from program materials.

The more we know about the structure, successes, and challenges faced by existing programs, the more likely we can build upon a strong foundation to advance the health and vibrancy of trail communities everywhere.

D. Project Team & Acknowledgements

The survey and this report were created by Amy Camp of [Cycle Forward](#) and Julie Judkins of [Just-Trails](#). Camp and Judkins issued the survey (Appendix A) in the interest of advancing the Trail Town and Gateway Community approach and fostering sustainable and resilient trail communities.

Special thanks to Dr. Rob Alexander of James Madison University and his Fall 2023 Public Management for Sustainable Communities class for assisting in analyzing and interpreting the data, and to the following program managers for reviewing and editing this report:

- Dr. Rob Alexander, James Madison University
- Lizzy Gardner, Tennessee RiverLine
- Liz Schmit, Continental Divide Trail Coalition
- Pauline E. Burnes, RLA
- Alice Wanamaker, Delaware & Lehigh National Heritage Corridor

Editing services provided by [Lindsay Majer](#).

Photo Credit: All images made in Canva or taken by authors.

E. Methodology

The Trail Town & Gateway Community Programs Impact Survey was open from January 11, 2023–January 31, 2023. The survey's goal was to gather comprehensive insights from program managers about their participating initiatives. The survey aimed to assess the extent of community engagement, the variety of activities undertaken, and the perceived effectiveness of benefits provided within the program. The methodology employed a structured questionnaire distributed electronically through email to program managers, ensuring a systematic and standardized approach to data collection.

Survey Development & Sampling Strategy:

The survey questionnaire was crafted in SurveyMonkey, and questions were designed to elicit detailed responses on the initiatives undertaken by program managers and communities along the trails. The survey was targeted to program managers along trail systems, within states, regions, and resource-aligned initiatives. Program managers represent both public and private sectors, including nonprofits. The survey was not sent directly to communities, but it asked program managers to provide input on community engagement along the trail resource. The authors leveraged their existing communication channels with program managers and sent a personalized invitation with the survey link explaining the purpose and importance of their input.

Data Analysis:

Quantitative Analysis: Responses were quantitatively analyzed to identify the prevalence of specific activities and benefits within responses. Numerical values provided by program managers were aggregated to depict the frequency of each response.

Qualitative Insights: Open-ended responses were subjected to thematic analysis by coding to program activities. Numerical values were provided to themes and the number of times the themes were mentioned.

Limitations:

Responses are based on self-reporting, which may introduce bias in terms of how activities and benefits are perceived by program managers. Also, the 20-day survey period required a quick turnaround time, which may have constrained participation for some program managers.

II.   Responding Programs

A.   Programs Surveyed

The survey was sent to 22 known programs in the United States and one in Canada. Nineteen programs completed the survey, which was open January 11, 2023–January 31, 2023. Of these 19 responding programs, 20 responses are included in the data analysis. Each responding program

completed the survey once, except the Genesee Valley Trail Town Program, which provided two responses. The 19 programs vary in their longevity, with a roughly equal distribution among those existing for more than 10 years, 5-9 years, and less than 5 years at the time of the survey. The majority of responding entities intend to operate their programs indefinitely, indicating a commitment to sustained activity. Appendix B provides a summary of all programs that participated in the survey and the estimated number of communities served during the survey period.

B.   Program Types/Models

Most of the respondents represent programs that are associated with specific trails. Three programs reported that their programs are statewide in nature, providing services along multiple trails. And one program, the Gorge Towns to Trails program, is centered around a regional asset (the Columbia River Gorge) rather than a single trail system.

Notably, half of the responding programs are part of the National Trail System with nine programs representing National Scenic Trails. Another 21 percent operate programs along waterways or water trails, illustrating that Trail Community programs exist along all trail types.
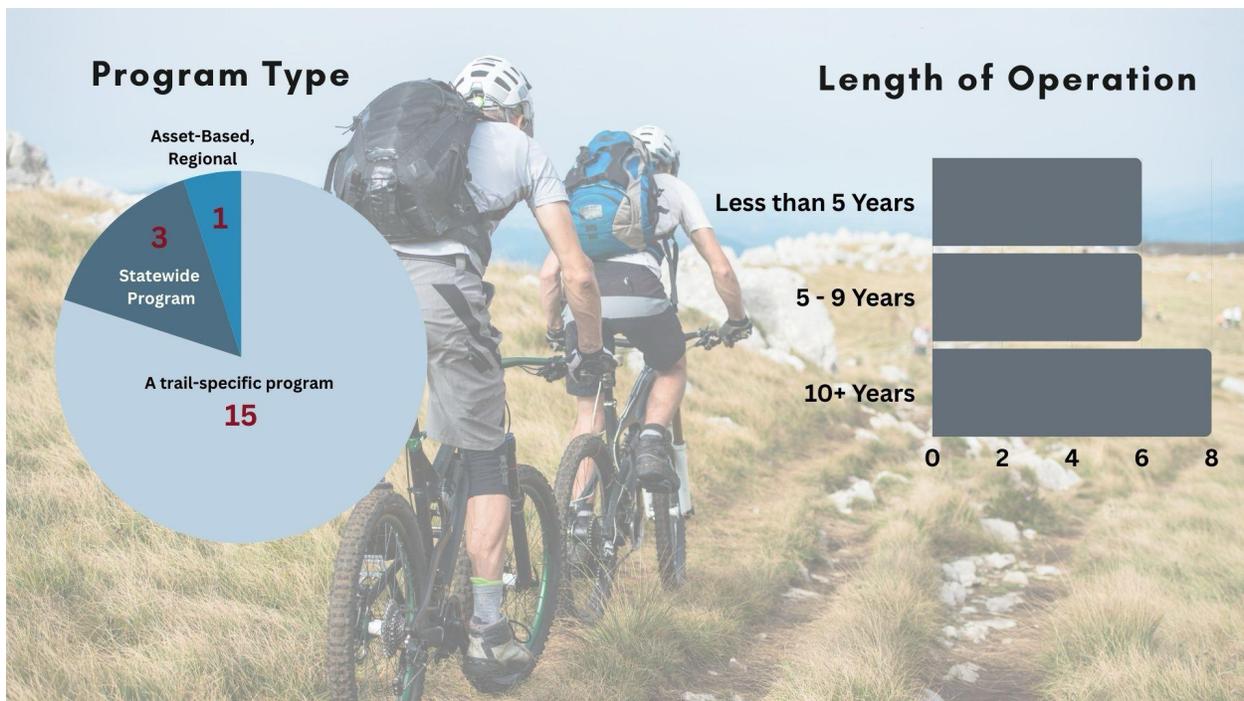
Figure 1: Program Type   **Figure 2: Program Length of Operation**

Forty-seven percent of the responding programs involve communities in a designation process. Twenty-six percent recognize communities as trail towns based on their location along or near trails, but do not have any sort of designation process or requirement. A few organizations take a unique approach to involving communities, for example:

- The Genesee Valley Trail Towns initiative is operated by a municipal alliance/consortium that treats Letchworth State Park as a shared amenity. Member communities are required to complete a community assessment, sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), and pay an annual membership fee.
- Program managers with the Florida National Scenic Trail approach communities based on their proximity to the trail. Interested communities then sign an MOU. Two

communities initiated contact themselves and asked to be designated as a trail town, which was welcomed.
- On the North Country National Scenic Trail, trail groups present the program to municipal officials who then consider becoming involved as a trail town.
- For Empire State Trail Towns, communities apply for "certification" (not "designation").
- For the Tennessee RiverTowns Program, cities and counties enroll in the program and are later awarded designation.

C.   Managing Entities and Organizations

Nonprofit organizations or Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs), particularly those related to trail or conservation efforts, predominantly operate trail community programs. Other management entities include a government/state agency, a university, and a municipal alliance/consortium. Staffing structures vary. Most programs operate with less than one full-time staff equivalent, while some programs use multiple staff members or AmeriCorps VISTA volunteers for support.
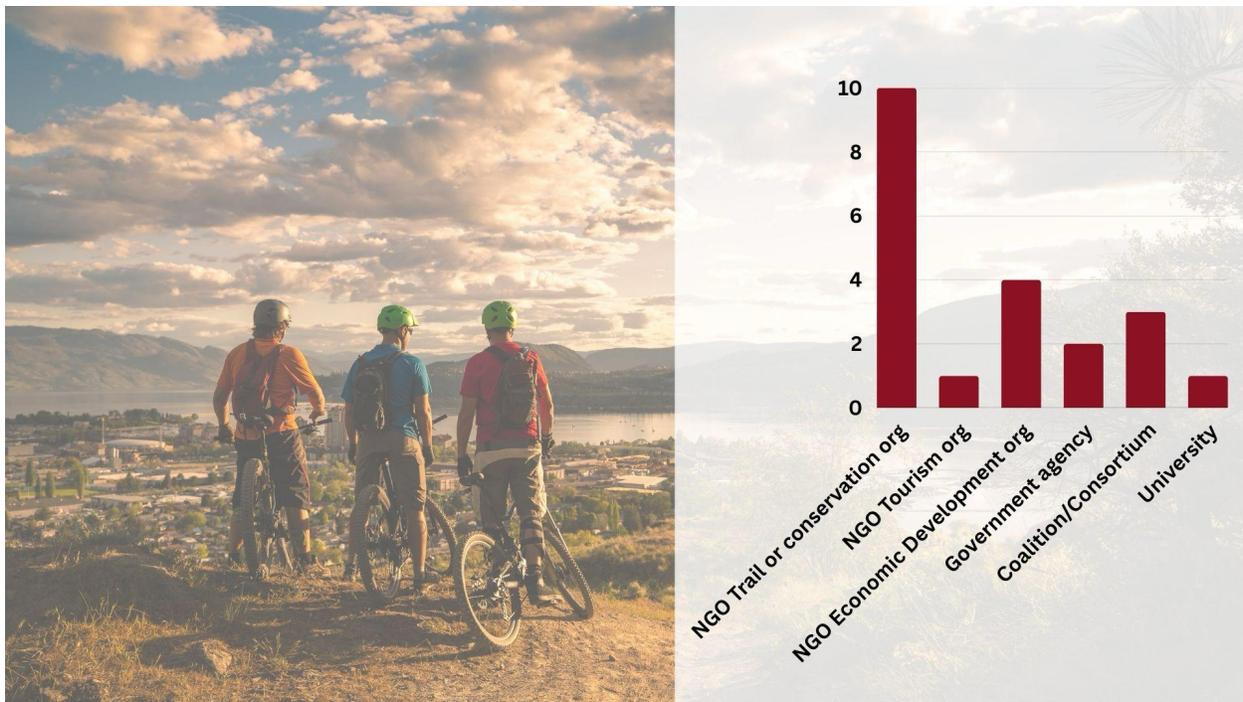
Figure 3: Managing Organizations

D. Program Budgets

Budgets among responding programs are generally modest, with most programs operating on budgets less than US$50,000 or without a dedicated budget at all. This range highlights the resourcefulness of program managers and their likely reliance on partnerships, grants, and volunteer efforts to sustain operations.
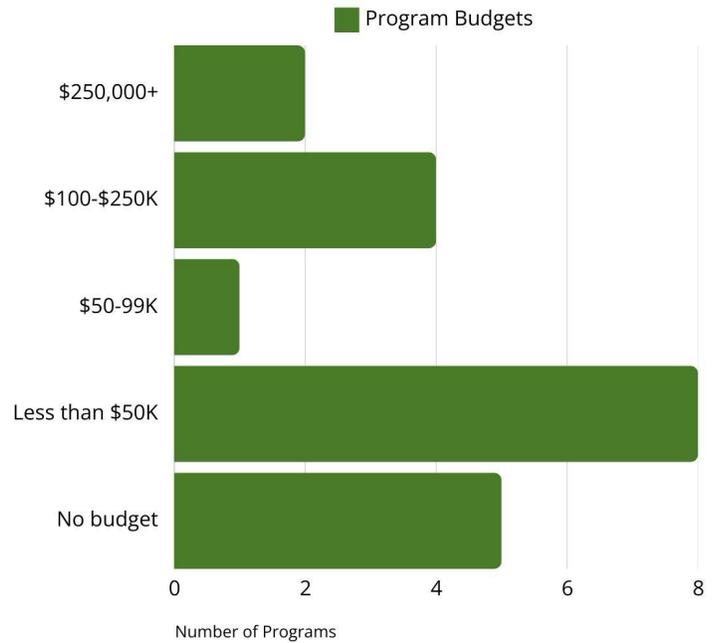
Figure 4: Program Budget

E.   Populations Served

The communities participating in trail community programs are primarily smaller in population size, with 68 percent of program managers reporting that they serve populations less than 10,000.
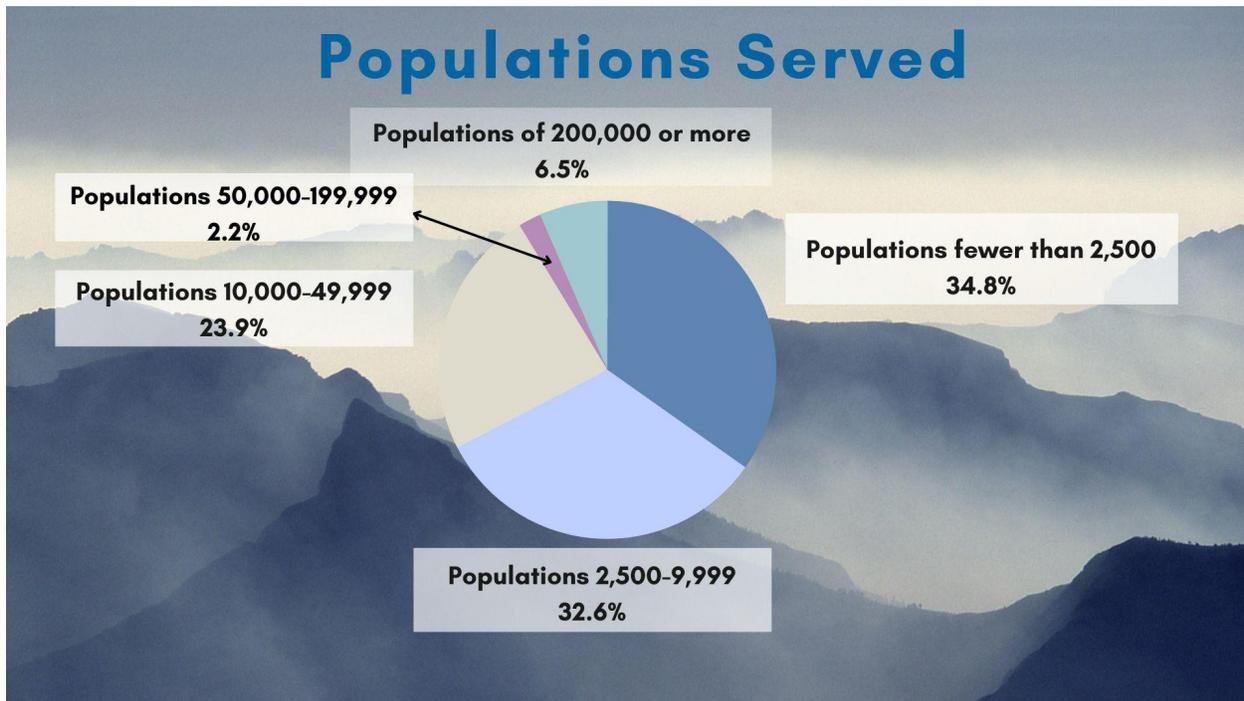
Figure 5: Populations Served

While the majority of participating towns are smaller, there are a few programs engaging communities with populations slightly larger than 50,000 residents. For example, Dayton, Ohio; Gainesville, Florida; and Tallahassee, Florida, all have populations exceeding 100,000. Some programs specifically mention a mix of large and small communities occurring along the length of the trail.

Geographically, these communities span diverse regions, including small, rural towns and villages nestled within larger urbanized areas The geographic emphasis is not solely on population size but also the location of a trail and the availability of services and facilities for trail users.

Survey respondents represent a mosaic of programs dedicated to preserving, promoting, and supporting trails and natural areas across North America, demonstrating a commitment to long-term sustainability and community engagement.

III. Program Components

A. Common Program Areas

Program managers were provided a list of activities and were asked to select activities that they lead or participate in. The analysis reveals a comprehensive overview of the elements offered by these programs. The majority of programs demonstrate a commitment to fostering collaboration, marketing, and infrastructure development. A detailed breakdown of the key elements offered by the programs, including the percentage of programs that incorporate each element, is listed in the figure below.

Figure 6: Key Program Elements

■ Percent of programs offering this element

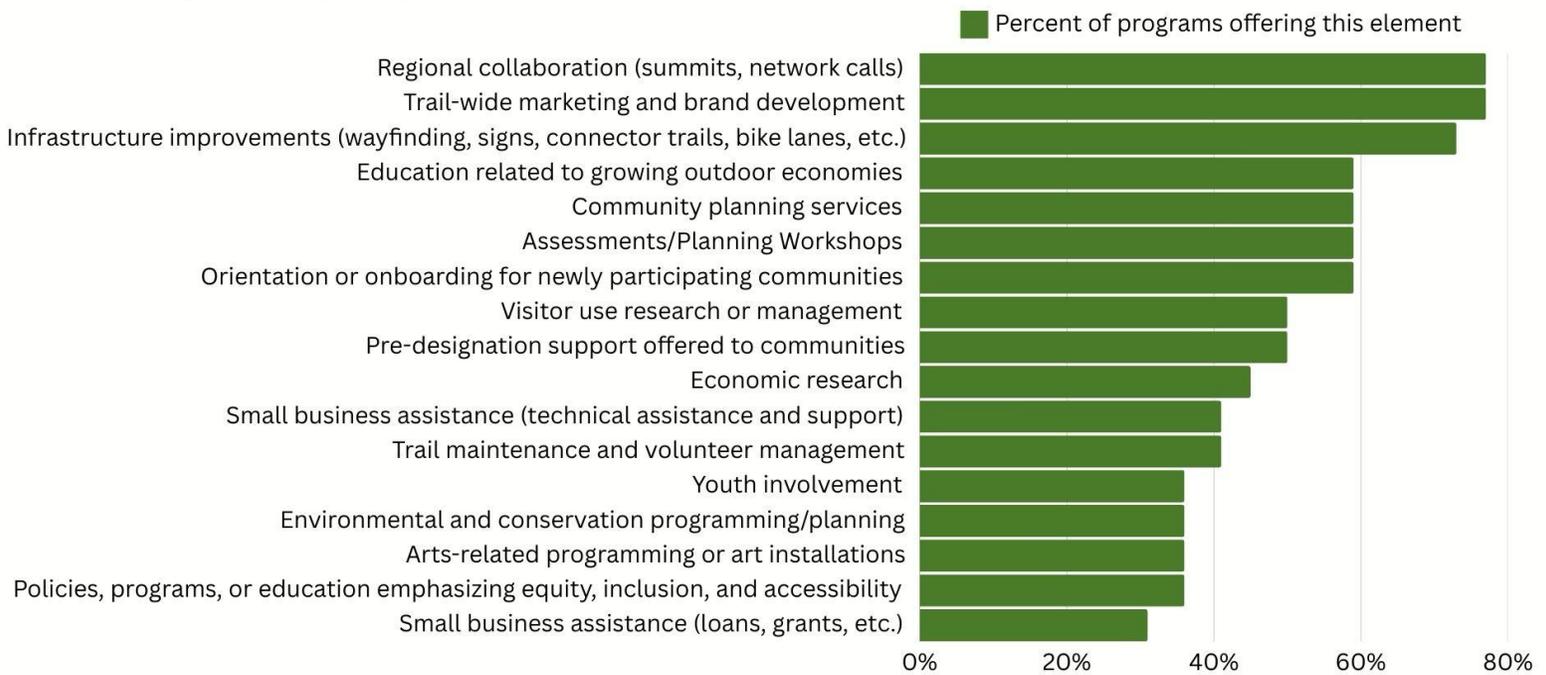| Element	
Regional collaboration (summits, network calls)	
Trail-wide marketing and brand development	
Infrastructure improvements (wayfinding, signs, connector trails, bike lanes, etc.)	
Education related to growing outdoor economies	
Community planning services	
Assessments/Planning Workshops	
Orientation or onboarding for newly participating communities	
Visitor use research or management	
Pre-designation support offered to communities	
Economic research	
Small business assistance (technical assistance and support)	
Trail maintenance and volunteer management	
Youth involvement	
Environmental and conservation programming/planning	
Arts-related programming or art installations	
Policies, programs, or education emphasizing equity, inclusion, and accessibility	
Small business assistance (loans, grants, etc.)	

0%   20%   40%   60%   80%

Less common components (i.e. economic research, small business assistance, etc.) are likely due to a lack of capacity and resources to develop consistent trail-wide efforts. Additionally, it is possible that some of the areas referenced are addressed by other departments and do not fall under the purview of trail community programs. While not included in the list of activities presented to program managers, other key program elements might include efforts for climate resilience, historic preservation, job training and workforce development programs, renewable energy projects and other sustainability programs, or the creation of greater planning efforts related to outdoor recreation and conservation.

B. Trail-Wide Marketing and Brand Development

While marketing is just one of many program components offered through a trail community initiative, it was one of the most commonly cited activities (see Figure 6). There is considerable effort required to brand communities as Trail Towns or Gateway Communities and celebrate them as partners. Branding a Trail Town or Gateway Community has a significant impact on its visibility and appeal. This branding, signifies a welcoming feel for visitors and for those that call it home. Wayfinding, signage, interpretive themes, social media platforms, and printed materials all enhance community recognition. Marketing and brand association are cited as top program elements in this survey data and are reasons communities engage with Trail Town and Gateway Community Programs.

Program managers have developed outstanding resources, incorporating features such as websites with trip planning capabilities and offering toolkits for local communications and marketing support. Some examples include marketing culinary products like Trent-Severn Trail Towns, developing Story Maps like the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, and providing window stickers for businesses like the Appalachian Trail Conservancy's Community Supporter recognition program. These examples further contribute to the overall branding and promotional efforts of the programs, creating a well-rounded and enticing identity for these designated communities. Figure 7 shows the type of marketing and number of programs offering this service.

Figure 7: Common Marketing Components
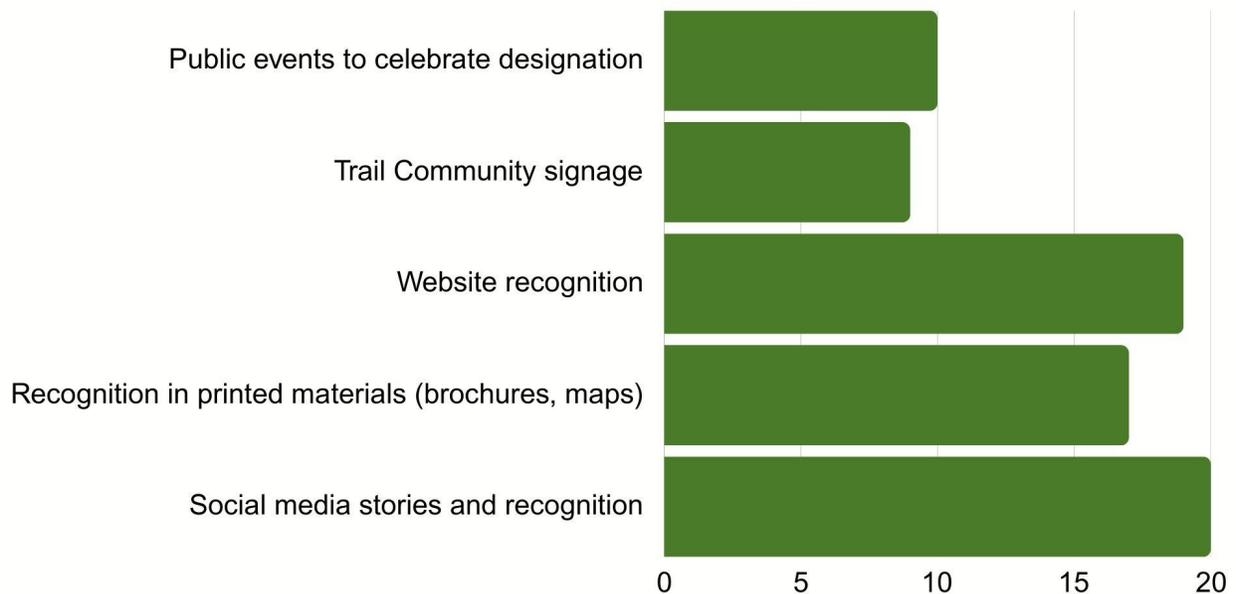
IV. State of Programs and Partnerships: Program Reach, Perceived Impact, and Successes in Trail Communities

A. Program Reach

The Trail Community approach resonates across geographic regions, impacting nearly two dozen programs in 33 U.S. states and one Canadian province. It is a model applied to nearly every National Scenic Trail (NST) in the United States; nine out of the nation's 11 NSTs have a program in place, stretching across more than 13,000 miles. As of late 2023, the NST programs were collectively serving 183 trailside communities.

65%
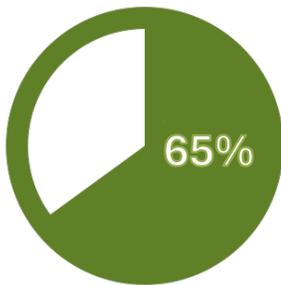
Perhaps this explains why 65 percent of survey respondents plan to operate their programs indefinitely.

In addition to its presence along some of North America's most iconic trails, the trail community approach is applied to trails of varying types, lengths, and geographies, and is a model that is – in the authors' experience – sought after by rural communities.

Figure 8: Map depicting states and provinces with a program presence, courtesy of Cycle Forward.

B. Perceived Impact and Program Successes

Three questions were selected to gauge program managers' perceptions of program impact and how they measure or track success.

1. "**What on-the-ground impacts or transformations have participating communities experienced as a result of your program**?"

Open-ended responses were coded and grouped into 14 categories ranging from increased community engagement and state/federal investment to stewardship, public art, and youth engagement (see Table 1). The impacts and transformations were reported largely in positive terms. Improvements were measured in terms of increases in desirable amenities, activities, relationships, and qualities. The perceived impacts noted in responses are likely those that were top of mind rather than a comprehensive reporting of program impacts. For example, while improvements related to youth engagement and public art were infrequently cited, we know from a previous question that nearly 40 percent of the respondents offer programming in these areas.

The most cited impacts reflect a mix of tangible improvements (new businesses, amenities, events, funding, etc.) and some less tangible strides, such as increased awareness and community engagement.

TABLE 1: Program Impacts and Transformations

Cited Improvement	Times Mentioned
Increased services, amenities, business	8
Increased community engagement	7
Increased events	6
Increased federal/state investment	6
Increased awareness of trail	6
Increased trail improvements, signage	6
Increased recognition of economic benefits	5
Increased planning efforts	4
Increased partners	4
Increased stewardship	3
Public art	2
Increased protection (acquisition, viewshed, conservation)	1
Increased access to education	1
Youth engagement	1

Managers shared stories of community programs increasing awareness of the trail, partnering with trail organizations to install signage and make other on-the-ground improvements, and integrating the trail and trail-related activities into master plans.

"One respondent reported that their water trail initiative raised over $4 million for projects over its 10 years and leveraged an additional $14 million, resulting in new signage, docks, launches, riverwalks, improved sidewalks, events, and more."

One community revived its Active Transportation and Recreation Advocacy group to rally behind its Trail Town designation. Another manager shared that the program offers a platform for community stakeholders to hear from National Park staff and government officials (and, presumably, the opportunity for stakeholders to share concerns with those officials).

Between comments about new services, new businesses, and a thriving outdoor recreation economy, respondents shared evidence that economic opportunity comes along with a Trail Community program.

As one manager said, "Many communities are embracing outdoor recreation as a viable source of income due to their proximity to the trail." And another: "The communities that are connected to the trail system have been able to keep businesses open all year-round, rather than just in the high seasons."

Other respondents shared information about small grant programs that are available to participating communities and community action plans that drive trail-related improvements.

Large-scale events like the Mammoth Hike Challenge along the Ice Age Trail and Trail Days and the Flip Flop Festival along the Appalachian Trail suggest an ethos of celebrating the trails, trail stewardship, and trail users. Whether through events or planning efforts, managers noted increased levels of engagement among local leaders and a more collaborative mindset than what existed prior to the program's existence.

The least frequently mentioned improvements relate to stewardship, public art, land and viewshed protection, education, and youth engagement, suggesting opportunities for increased focus in those areas. It is also possible that the staff participating in the survey had less of a role in these activities than other staff.

2. "**How do you measure the success of your program?**"

In the words of one program manager, "Success isn't just about numbers; it's about the stories we uncover and the connections we make." Nevertheless, success measurement is important to the continuation of this work. Program success is gauged through a variety of metrics, reflecting both qualitative and quantitative aspects. Reported metrics have been grouped and ordered in Table 2.

The most common themes of how programs measure success included interaction and engagement of residents in networking events, qualitative success stories aligning with programmatic goals, periodic surveys, and feedback from local businesses, community leaders, and trail users. Program managers also point to the following metrics for measuring success:

- The number of businesses (joining a program or new business opening)
- The satisfaction expressed by member towns
- The active pursuit of recommendations in action plans
- The engagement level of an active Trail Town steering committee
- Participation in scheduled calls or check-ins
- Attendance at regional or local events
- Youth involvement

By and large, these metrics appear to measure the programs' effectiveness in engaging communities more so than physical improvements. Even so, program managers do report tangible outcomes, such as the installation of program-specific signs and the inclusion of trail-related information in marketing materials. Feedback from local leaders, business expansion, and enhanced visitor experiences contribute to the overall success narrative. Collaboration,

funding, the number of businesses, population, property values, tourism-related metrics, and investments in trail improvements are also considered in evaluating success. For example, the Continental Divide Trail Coalition's (CDTC) approach involves partnerships with Gateway Communities to provide visitors with a positive experience and promote the completion and protection of the Continental Divide Trail.

TABLE 2: Most Cited Evaluation Measures

Success Measure	Times Mentioned	Qualitative vs Quantitative?
Engagement level (at events, calls)	7	Qual
General Feedback	6	Qual
Number of businesses	4	Quan
Action plan completion	4	Quan
Marketing, Signage	4	Both
Surveys	3	Both
Investments in trail improvements/enhancements	3	Both
Success Stories	2	Qual
Active committee	2	Both
Volunteer/Youth participation	2	Both
Improved visitor experience	2	Both
Tourism /bed tax	2	Quan
Website traffic/social media imprints	2	Quan
Sharing data/information with trail manager	1	Qual
New partnerships	1	Both
Funding	1	Quan
Property Values	1	Quan

Tools for Evaluation:

From a more engaged citizenry to completed and protected trails, success measurement is essential and, indeed, a common obstacle. Challenges in evaluating success were acknowledged by several managers, including one whose program was shut down without a comprehensive evaluation.

One manager noted the awesome effect of their program while acknowledging the challenge of capturing and highlighting successes, saying:

> The communities that participate in the initiative have pursued funding opportunities for place-making and infrastructure improvements. These projects, and incremental policy changes made within their communities (on road and sidewalk improvements), indicate that slow, steady progress is being made. However, capturing these improvements, and showcasing them as a collective effort has been challenging.

Specific evaluation tools that were reported included website analytics, geofencing to track visitation to certain areas, community feedback, economic studies, tourism bed tax, property values, changes in population, and overall business creation. Efforts are being made by program managers to explore options for more concrete assessments, and this report recommends supporting this work.

3. "**What specific successes are you most proud of**?"

Connection to place, local identity, placemaking, and branding were overwhelmingly cited as successes that program managers are most proud of. This tells us that managers (and presumably participating communities) are proud of their place along the trail and their accomplishments associated with bolstering their trail community identity. Other frequently cited successes relate to increased partnerships, improved trail access, and increased technical assistance with community and regional planning efforts.

Table 3: Reported Successes

Specific Successes	Times Mentioned
Connection to place/identity, branding/marketing, signage, outreach	11
Increased partnerships	6
Access	4
Technical Assistance/Planning	4
Increased protection (acreage in public lands, planning ordinances, etc.)	3
Increase in business(es)	2
Infrastructure development	2
Sustained management structure	2
Innovation	1
Best practices	1
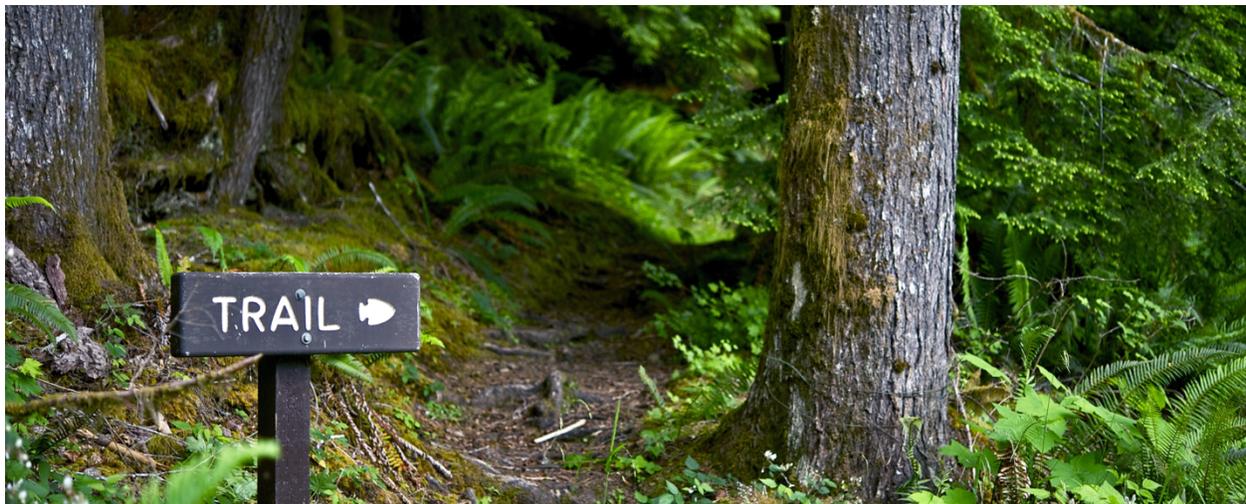
Here is what program managers are saying about their successes:

"Collaborative mindset, sharing resources, new leadership and energy, higher levels of engagement with municipalities, business community and residents. Increased understanding of outdoor recreation economy and value to rural development."

"Renewed appreciation for and emphasis on the trail as more than a local recreation amenity, and emergence of a trail-friendly business networking group, securing a $1M state grant for a priority trail-adjacent project, expansion of city-level festival to all trail town communities, $50,000 in mini-grants to 26 trail-friendly businesses, improved trail crossings at key intersections."
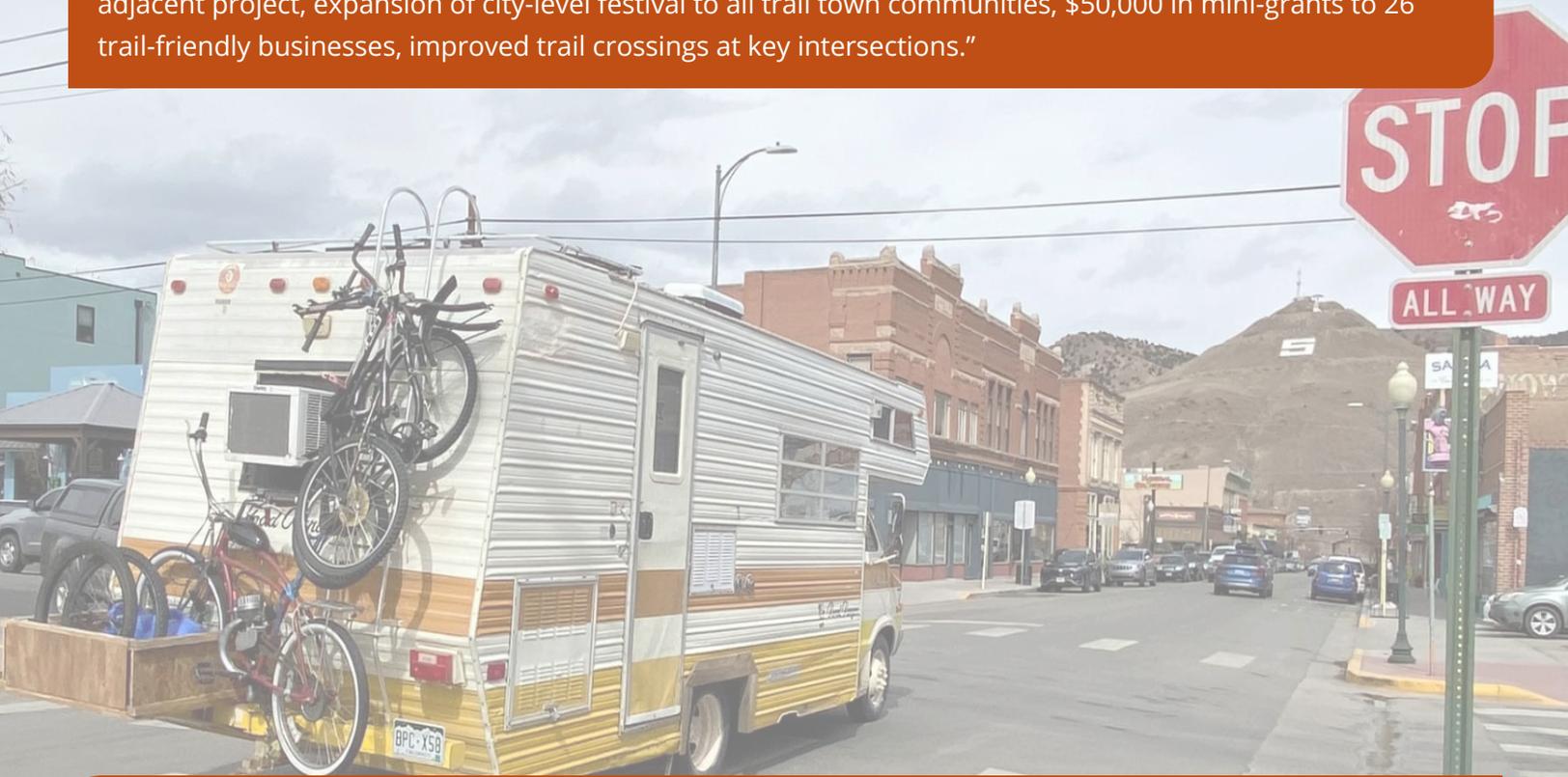
"On-going and expanded … volunteer and trail-related events, improved partnership with trail clubs, asset-based economic development, the leverage of designation to receive investment from federal programs and other technical assistance programs to support planning efforts (such as EPA/USDA FS Recreation Economies for Rural Communities), conservation planning, town & community forests developed for more recreation/open space near downtowns, green infrastructure planning, greenway/trail planning, connections to trail viewshed in protection projects"

V. Additional Analysis

A. Analyzing Perceived Impact

This section further measures the impact of trail community programs as perceived by the managers. A driving question for this project was whether the way the individual programs are staffed, funded, and structured influences on-the-ground outcomes in trail communities. For example, do programs that require a formal designation process or a community financial contribution (or both) fare better than others in terms of results? Do programs that are better resourced in terms of staffing and program budget generate a greater impact?

One of the survey questions used to assess perceived impact was, "As a whole, how would you measure the economic and community health of communities that have been actively participating in your program for 2+ years?" Of those who responded to this question, nearly half (47%) reported that these communities have been "somewhat improved." Five reported "noticeable improvement," and four reported little noticeable improvement." None of the responding managers reported "No improvement of positive change," and comments such as "Program has not been running long enough," filled in the rest. Because this was one of the most pivotal questions in the survey, the project team worked with James Madison University professor Dr. Rob Alexander to cross-reference responses to this question with questions pertaining to program models, staffing, and budgets. The specific correlations that were considered are explained in detail below.

1. The Correlation Between Joining Process and Perceived Impact

The project team cross-referenced the questions about perceived impact and how communities come to be recognized as part of their respective program (i.e. is recognition through a designation process or is recognition based on proximity to the trail). For simplicity, how a community comes to be recognized is referred to as a community's "joining process." Those programs that require a designation or certification process report slightly more impact with one program indicating "noticeably improved"[3] and two programs indicating "somewhat improved"

---

[3]The survey included the following indicators as examples of "noticeable improvement": new and expanded trail-serving businesses, infrastructure improvements, and local enthusiasm for trails.

communities. This suggests that however communities come to be recognized as part of a larger program, at least some economic and community health improvements are to follow.

Regardless, the project team does suggest that communities undergo a formal designation process for the purposes of community buy-in, long-term engagement, and managing community and trail user expectations concerning what it means to be (and visit) a recognized trail community.

2. The Correlation Between Budget and Perceived Impact

No clear pattern emerged connecting better funded programs with perceived impact. In fact, the programs with the largest budget category (more than $250,000) were less likely to report noticeable community-level improvements. Conversely, the five programs with no budget at all reported, on average, "noticeable improvement" in participating communities. Interestingly, those programs with budgets of $100,000-$249,999 reported the most impact with all five of them reporting "noticeable improvement" in participating communities, which fares better than those with budgets below $100,000 a year. This may suggest at least some correlation between adequate funding and on-the-ground results.

3. The Correlation Between Staffing and Perceived Impact

Responding programs reported a variety of staffing scenarios. Most programs have one or more full-time equivalent (FTE) staff or contractor. Those programs with more than a single FTE staff member reported the most perceived impact. A study conducted by the Center on Rural Innovation (CORI) shows that rural communities have been geographically marginalized over time and have greater economic disparities. With trail community programs primarily occurring in rural geographies, it seems to reason that a staffed regional program in these areas can have a significant impact in participating communities.[4]

---

[4]Center on Rural Innovation. "The equity of economic opportunity in rural America." *What's Happening in Rural America* (blog). October 12, 2023

B. James Madison University Class Recommendations

Dr. Rob Alexander of James Madison University and his Fall 2023 Public Management for Sustainable Communities class provided an analysis of the data; this is a summary of the methodology and their key findings. We are grateful to have unbiased input from this group of students.

1. Analysis

Quantitative Analysis: Programs were analyzed based on their activities and categorized into six sustainability concepts: ecology, economy, equity, engagement, social, and governance. The balance of these activities was compared to the programs' reported economic and community health impacts. **Qualitative Analysis:** Open-ended survey responses from national trail programs were coded for recurring themes. **Website Analysis:** The websites of national trail programs were reviewed for their emphasis on equity, environment, and economy.

2. Key Findings

A. Quantitative Differences Between National Trail-Associated Programs and Other Trail Town & Gateway Community Programs:

- Programs associated with National Trails generally have smaller budgets but report stronger economic impacts on communities.
- Programs associated with National Trails face fewer challenges in demonstrating community value but more issues with securing funding and keeping communities involved.
- Programs associated with National Trails offer fewer unique initiatives compared to other Trail Town & Gateway Community programs.

B. Survey Responses from National Trail-Associated Programs:

- These programs focus heavily on economic outcomes, particularly marketing and infrastructure improvements.
- Community engagement is crucial to program success and offers potential for addressing local equity issues.
- Much of the funding comes from state initiatives.

C. Analysis of Program Activities by Sustainability Concept:

- Governance, social, and economy were the most common activity types, while engagement and ecology activities were less prevalent.

- There was no clear connection between the types of activities and improvements in community health or economic outcomes.

D. Website Analysis:

- Most websites frame programs as economic development tools, focusing on tourism and recreation.
- Ecology is often commodified for commercialized benefits, and land acknowledgments (statements acknowledging the history of colonization, dispossession, and ongoing relationship between Indigenous communities and their lands) are rare.
- The Gorge Town website stands out for its emphasis on sustainability and community engagement.

3. Sustainability Recommendations

- Future surveys could better balance questions across sustainability concepts and include more ecology-related activities.
- Programs should strengthen their mission statements and values to align more closely with community needs.
- Add intentional inclusion of Indigenous and local perspectives as well as efforts to move beyond profit-driven approaches.
- Websites need to emphasize trail accessibility and communicate sustainability goals.

VI. Challenges & Resources Needed

A. Challenges

Examining program development retrospectively, the survey question, "If you were to initiate your program anew today, what changes would you make?", created data around some common issues, grouped into two main themes: Communication and Evaluation. Resources, listed as a common challenge, are described in the following section.

Communication:

Across programs, common themes emerged regarding the need for more structured communication protocols. Inconsistencies in communication hinder efficient collaboration between program administrators and participating communities. This underscores the importance of establishing clear channels for information exchange, building network hubs for better communication, and creating a decision-making process for transparency. Creating structures, plans, and systems of accountability for ongoing communication can provide clarity

in expectations and processes and is essential for enhancing community engagement and maximizing program impact. As one program manager suggested, "Institute consistent communication protocols, designation criteria that are reviewed at consistent integrals (renewal/assessment process), and clearer guidance to sustain leadership, track projects, communicate wins."

Evaluation:

Another prevalent concern is the lack of defined metrics for success. Without clear indicators to measure progress and impact, evaluating the effectiveness of the program becomes challenging. Developing comprehensive metrics tailored to the unique needs of each trail town program is crucial for accurately assessing performance and identifying areas for improvement. Instituting designation criteria that are regularly reviewed can ensure that participating communities meet established standards and remain committed to program objectives over time.

B. Resources Needed

Funding was the primary resource need listed when program managers were asked, "What resources would enable you to more accurately measure the success of your program?" The establishment of both qualitative and quantitative metrics to accurately measure strategic goals and facilitate longitudinal studies for tracking progress over time was another frequent response.

Adequate staffing and funding are identified as essential for program sustainability, alongside the recruitment of businesses and the implementation of best practices for tracking visitor spending. Managers also advocate for funding to hire consultants, develop assessment strategies, and create resources, such as a clearinghouse for best practices and cross-program evaluation. For example, survey respondents suggested the following evaluation tools:

- Standardized templates and feedback mechanisms for accurately assessing program impact.
- "More robust and consistent surveying of trail users and trail-oriented businesses to track spending; consumer sentiment; geographic reach, etc."
- Needs for comprehensive data and research to quantify the economic impact of programs and community changes.
- "An online tracking tool to allow communities to detail project priorities (included in their action plan, and separate from) and indicate progress as well as a dedicated resource clearinghouse, including best practices from trail town case studies across the nation. And a statewide or regional networking event that connects trail town communities."

Finally, fundraising efforts are essential for funding needed resources, supporting staffing needs, and organizing annual events and gatherings, which play a vital role in fostering community cohesion and promoting program objectives.

Figure 9: Resources Needed

Most Requested Resources, in order of number of times cited:

1. Tools, resources
2. Funding
3. Tracking (Visitors/Spending)
4. Evaluation metrics
5. Capacity
6. Longitudinal study
7. Technical Assistance
8. Business growth
9. University partnership
10. Network/collective for sharing/mentorship
11. Increased training

VII. Recommendations

While there is no overarching organization that commissioned this report or will receive the following recommendations, it is important to identify improvement opportunities. Whether it is each independent program, federal organizations, or the burgeoning Community of Practice considering these recommendations, they offer a path toward more impactful programs and a more effective model.

1. Invest in Trail Community initiatives.

Section V (Additional Analysis) demonstrates that most programs with at least a US$100,000 program budget report better results than those operating on smaller budgets. Similarly, those programs with at least one FTE staff position fare better than those with fewer (or no) staff. Most responding programs operate on budgets of less than US$50,000 or without a dedicated budget at all. Investing in the programs is an important step in advancing the Trail Community approach and leading to stronger results. In addition to addressing the correlation between increased impact and staffing, increased investment in regional capacity can leverage trail resources while supporting geographically marginalized communities.

2. Conduct cross-program evaluation.

In addition to more program-level research, longitudinal, cross-program research is needed. Trail Community Programs in more than half of the U.S. as well as Canada merit more rigorous evaluation. One specific recommendation is funding cross-program evaluations and impact studies with a focus on economic impact. A number of programs in the study stated that they do not have the funds to objectively evaluate their programs and trails, something that is necessary to build upon the successes to date. More in-depth information about how programs are operated and the success of the overall approach could be immeasurably useful to others.
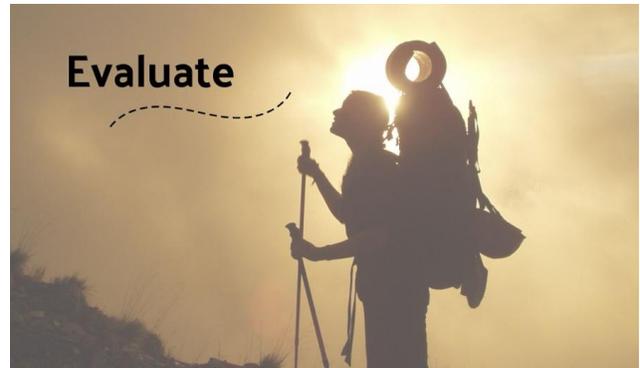
3. Establish a research/resource hub.

With additional research comes the opportunity to make the information learned more widely available. A research/resource hub would bring value to existing programs, organizations considering establishing programs, and others who seek to learn more about the efficacy of the Trail Community approach. The availability of such information would create efficiencies and reduce the number of easily avoided

mistakes made in establishing new programs. Program managers in the survey expressed keen interest in this kind of information stating that so much of the most basic information contained in this report would have been helpful to know ahead of initiating programs. The hub could be an opportunity to curate and organize evaluation tools, case studies, and training modules in a user-friendly, mobile-accessible online platform. It could foster community engagement through forums, webinars, and newsletters, ensuring inclusivity with multilingual resources.

4. Create a Community of Practice (CoP) and a Trail Town institute.

A CoP offers multiple benefits, including the sharing of knowledge, best practices, and innovative ideas to enhance program impact. It fosters collaboration and provides a support network where managers can seek advice and solve challenges collectively. CoPs also promote professional development, consistency in practices, and

greater engagement by helping managers stay connected with evolving program methodologies.

Trail Community programs operate along nearly all U.S. National Scenic Trails as well as several other trails and trail systems. The idea has a foothold across much of North America, yet little is known in how to run a program well. Existing program managers need support in improving upon their programs and countless communities need guidance in considering how to better

connect to their trails. The CoP (of existing program managers) that has loosely been meeting since 2023 on a voluntary basis should be fostered and formalized. The participants have expressed enthusiasm for building relationships and sharing resources, best practices, and lessons learned. Aside from this group, participants in a 2023 Partnership for the National Trail System workshop suggested that a Community of Practice could help elevate the Trail Community model. Additionally, a Trail Town Institute or some similar central body could provide technical assistance and other support. An institute could equip communities with the expertise, resources, and collaborative support needed to sustainably develop and thrive as vibrant, connected trail destinations.

5. Do not lose sight of the big picture.

Trails are more than just paths and more than economic generators. Yes, they are lifelines that contribute to vibrant communities and bolster the greater than $800 billion outdoor recreation economy. But trails are the throughlines that literally connect us, and take us to special places. Trail Community programs amplify this impact by proactively fostering community connections. The Trail Town approach is a form of community and economic development, but we must also recognize that trails exist for trails' sake—for our enjoyment, for protecting habitats, for healing, and for connection to lands that many communities hold as their most valued assets. To ensure a regenerative system for lands and people for our future generations, trails must be managed as vital parts of ecosystems dependent on protected lands in a warming, increasingly less biodiverse world.

We need trails, and Trail Community programs should emphasize their multifaceted benefits while fiercely advocating for their protection. To strengthen these programs, future surveys could better balance questions across sustainability concepts and include more ecology-related activities. Programs should also intentionally include Indigenous and local perspectives and move beyond profit-driven approaches by aligning their mission statements and values more closely with community needs. Additionally, program websites need to improve information on trail accessibility and more effectively communicate sustainability goals. The James Madison University students who assessed current marketing materials identified room for improvement, and we agree—that this shift to a multifaceted view of trails is not only necessary but entirely possible.

VIII. Conclusion

What we know for certain about Trail Community programs is that 83 percent of program managers were invested enough to participate in a first-of-its-kind evaluation of the approach, and 65 percent of responding program managers report plans to operate their programs indefinitely. This is most likely tied to so many of them reporting "noticeably improved" or "somewhat improved" community and economic health among participating communities. Some of the earliest Trail Community initiatives were modeled after the Main Street approach, a framework for reenergizing and strengthening commercial districts, thus community revitalization is an important measure.

Many Trail Communities, often rural and under-resourced, recognize the role that trails play in revitalizing their places. Communities seek to better leverage their trails for purposes of economic health, public health, quality of life, and stewardship of the environment. Having organized, regional programs enable communities to band together and better connect to trails. Connecting by way of trails introduces the possibility of more vibrant places. Regional initiatives can help in both jump-starting and sustaining this work. Trail Community initiatives make a difference and must be both maintained and improved upon.

APPENDICES

Appendix A
Trail Town & Gateway Community Program Impact Survey Questions

Appendix B
Responding Program Information
As of January 2023

Program	Type	Years in Operation	Communities Involved
Appalachian Trail Community™ Program	Trail Specific	10+ Years	51
Arizona Trail Gateway Community Program	Trail Specific	10+ Years	19
Canal Towns Partnership	Trail Specific	10+ Years	10
Continental Divide Trail Gateway Community Program	Trail Specific	5-9 Years	18
D&L Trail Town Process	Trail Specific	5-9 Years	3
Empire State Trail Town Program	Statewide (on two trails thus far)	Less than 5 Years	4
Florida National Scenic Trail Gateway Communities Program	Trail Specific	5-9 Years	15
Florida Trail Town Program	Statewide	5-9 Years	13
Genesee Valley Trail Town Initiative	Trail Specific	Less than 5 Years	10
Gorge Towns to Trails (Columbia River Gorge)	Regional	10+ Years	Not noted
Ice Age Trail Community Program	Trail Specific	5-9 Years	18
Kentucky Trail Towns Program	Statewide	10+ Years	28
Mon River Towns Program	Trail Specific (waterway)	10+ Years	Not noted
North Country Trail Association Trail Towns Program	Trail Specific	10+ Years	30
Preston Trail Towns (WV, currently inactive)	Trail Specific (waterway)	Less than 5 Years	4
Tennessee RiverTowns Program	Trail Specific (waterway)	Less than 5 Years	20 enrolled
Trail Town Program® (PA & MD, including Great Allegheny Passage)	Trail Specific	10+ Years	Not noted
Trent-Severn Trail Towns	Trail Specific (waterway)	Less than 5 Years	9
York County Trail Towns	Regional	Less than 5 Years	7