



## ***White Paper: The Future of Georgia's Trails***

*Prepared by the Georgia Trail Summit, a new organization of concerned volunteer citizens dedicated to creating a world-class network of trails in every corner of Georgia. More than 40 local, state and national trail-related nonprofits and government agencies have endorsed our work.*

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### **Introduction**

Demand for trails in Georgia is on the rise from Rome to Jekyll Island. Trails are loved by cyclists, walkers, history buffs, paddlers, dog-walkers, horseback riders, locals and tourists. And people want more of them.

Better coordination and increased funding is needed to meet public demand and connect trails to each other.

The economic and health benefits of trails are tremendous. Trails offer easily accessible places to exercise while also increasing property values, jobs, tax revenues and tourism spending.

Since building a world-class highway system has been a top priority with Georgia legislators, it's sometimes hard to see that less expensive ways to move people are also attractive. Too often, we support multi-billion dollar projects to build more highways without realizing how effective much smaller investments like paved trails can be, especially in our cities like Atlanta, Athens, Columbus, Augusta, Macon and Rome. A well-placed trail network can only complement roads as another transportation solution. In fact, the main funding sources for trails today come from federal transportation dollars.

When trails' health benefits are considered, it's clear that additional funding sources can be secured. We suggest a three-part solution.

1. Create an organized effort to support a connected trail network around the state.
2. Create a toolkit for local governments and volunteer groups to more easily build trails in their communities.
3. Empower a trail agency, board or organization to serve as Georgia's trail champion.

No matter which lens you look through – economic development, health, tourism, transportation or conservation – trails are winners with multiple, long-term benefits.

### **What kinds of trails already exist and where?**

Georgia already has an impressive network of trails that's growing every year. There are walking trails on soft surfaces, walking and biking trails on paved surfaces, water trails along Georgia's many rivers, equestrian trails for horseback riding, and trails for mountain biking, motorized vehicles and all-terrain vehicles.

Mapping a complete inventory of Georgia's trails is one of our priorities.

Some of Georgia's most popular trails are

- ❖ Arabia Mountain PATH – 33 miles
- ❖ Atlanta BeltLine – 33 miles (6 miles completed so far)
- ❖ Augusta Canal Path – 7.5 miles
- ❖ Chastain Park Trail – 4 miles
- ❖ Chattahoochee River National Water Trail (Atlanta) – 48 miles
- ❖ Columbus Riverwalk and Fall Line Trace – 15 miles and 11 miles
- ❖ Etowah River Water Trail (Dahlonega to Rome) – 163 miles
- ❖ Ocmulgee River Water Trail (Macon to Lumber City) - 200 miles
- ❖ Pinhoti Trail – 140 miles
- ❖ Silver Comet Trail – 61 miles
- ❖ Stone Mountain Trail – 19 miles
- ❖ Taylor Randahl Memorial Mountain Bike Trails (Woodstock) – 10 miles

Several were built by The PATH Foundation, a nonprofit with an excellent success rate of leveraging private donations with government resources. In 2014, PATH completed its 200<sup>th</sup> mile of paved trail in Georgia.

The historic Appalachian Trail begins in North Georgia, traveling for 79 miles and is part of this larger, extremely popular tourist attraction that continues to Maine.

According to the leading national trails nonprofit, Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, Georgia had 82 rail-to-trail or greenway projects proposed or in progress in 2013 in at least 50 counties around the state.

### **While we support both, what are the differences between trails and greenways?**

**Trail:** A designated route on land or water with public access for recreation or transportation. Trails are used for walking, jogging, motorcycling, hiking, running, bicycling, walking dogs, riding in all-terrain-vehicles, horseback riding, mountain biking, canoeing, kayaking and backpacking. Trails often become a designated infrastructure for small businesses like restaurants, retail shops, bike rentals, cultural tourist attractions, farmers markets and other destinations to cluster around.

**Greenway:** A linear open space along a natural corridor such as a river, stream, ridgeline, railroad corridor, canal or other route for conservation, recreation or alternative transportation uses. Greenways can connect parks, nature preserves, cultural and historic sites with business and residential areas. Typically, a greenway includes one or more trails for public use.

### **Why does the public want more trails? What are the benefits?**

Trails are the least expensive and most practical transportation mode to build while providing powerful benefits, especially economic benefits like

- increased revenues to nearby cities, schools and businesses
- increased property values
- increased tourism opportunities for small businesses
- attracting employees who value quality of life issues like outdoor recreation

Trails also

- increase choices for much-needed exercise as Georgia ranks 38th nationally in obesity
- offer clean transportation alternatives to driving
- and get people of all ages out in nature to relax, reduce stress and recharge

Trails can become safe places to commute to work, walk to school and exercise when separated from the road by eliminating the dangers of being directly in traffic. Being close to natural beauty is another large attribute of experiencing a Georgia trail.

Recent studies are proving how trails bring significant economic benefits to communities who build them. For example, the [Silver Comet Trail](#) in rural North Georgia generates \$461 million each year. That's combining increased property values and taxes, and recreational and tourism spending. The trail attracts about 1.9 million users each year. If the Silver Comet Trail was extended, projections rise to \$735 million of positive economic impact each year. The cost of the proposed extension is only \$59 million – more than 400% return on investment for that part of Northwest Georgia.

In Atlanta, the BeltLine is surpassing expectations with the first segment of trail packed to capacity any sunny weekend. Since 2005, more than \$1 billion in new private development was invested, especially in industrial areas previously underdeveloped and abandoned. Redevelopment of the multi-use Ponce City Market complex alone represents a \$300 million investment by a private developer. The building's proximity to the BeltLine Trail is critical to its success.

When completed in 2030, the BeltLine will have 22 miles of rail transit, 33 miles of multi-use trails, 1,300 acres of parks, and 5,600 units of affordable housing in 40,000 anticipated new residential units. The actual cost of the BeltLine is about \$4.8 billion, yet the total projected investment is \$30 billion in public and private funds.

Georgia's water trails are also popular with about one million people enjoying local rivers as paddlers. An impressive \$11.3 billion is spent on canoeing, kayaking and rafting in Georgia every year.

These success stories can be duplicated across the state in both rural and urban communities.

### **What are the opportunities for creating trails for health and economic development?**

#### **Overweight and inactive**

Many Georgians of all ages are considered overweight or obese. Doctors are actually writing prescriptions to make sure patients get outdoors to exercise. The new term is Trails Rx. When a trail is conveniently located nearby, there is no easier way to increase physical activity gradually by walking and cycling. Stress and hypertension are also reduced when we get outdoors, away from TVs and computers, to enjoy Georgia's natural beauty.

Results from a recent study by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation are troubling.

- ❖ 65.7% of Georgians are overweight or obese
- ❖ 30.3% of Georgians are obese
- ❖ 35% of Georgians have hypertension
- ❖ 10.8% of Georgians have diabetes

Increased physical activity is essential to reducing these health issues.

### **Connectivity is key**

While many communities are planning and building trails today, the biggest opportunity is to connect one trail system to another. Why?

- ❖ Trails are a viable and preferred transportation mode when they connect homes to services, retail centers, schools, clinics and places of worship.
- ❖ A longer trail system increases opportunities for bicycle tourism. Longer trails encourage overnight stays, dining and increased spending at local businesses along the route.
- ❖ A connected trail network takes people to places they want to go. Trails can become a safe route for walking and biking to school. Trails are an enjoyable way to walk to a park, a restaurant, a friend's house, a grocery store, to church, to libraries and actual destinations. And longer trails provide the chance to realize the health benefits of longer walks and bike rides.
- ❖ Trails bring communities closer together, making it easy to form relationships between neighbors and neighborhoods. Trail security improves when more people use them.

### **Build upon existing signature trails**

With the popularity of the Silver Comet Trail (stretching from Stone Mountain to Alabama through Atlanta on the Freedom Parkway Trail), the Atlanta BeltLine and many others, excellent opportunities exist for nearby communities to realize similar economic benefits through increased tourism, tax revenues and property values.

For example, the proposed Gold Belt Trail could connect the Silver Comet in the south all the way to Clayton in the north traveling through Dallas, Acworth, Cartersville, Canton, Dawsonville, Dahlonega and Cleveland.

### **Who takes the lead to build and maintain Georgia's trails today?**

While The PATH Foundation has already built 200 miles of trails in Georgia, typically maintained by local parks and recreation staff, primary funding for Georgia's trails come from federal sources. However, one primary source – the Land and Water Conservation Fund will expire in September 2015 creating another urgent reason to find new trail funding.

Today, top funding sources include

1. Transportation Alternatives (TAP)
2. Recreational Trails Program (RTP)
3. Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Improvement Program (CMAQ)

4. Local city and county governments and their parks and recreation departments
5. Private nonprofits and foundations like The PATH Foundation and local community foundations

### Further defining Georgia's funding options

1. A new federal initiative, **Transportation Alternatives Program** (TAP), consolidates 12 formerly eligible activities under six new headings. It's the single largest source of federal funding for walking and biking projects.

In Georgia, TAP funding is managed through the Georgia Department of Transportation by a State Bike/Ped Safety Coordinator and a Transportation Enhancement Coordinator.

TAP funding is determined by dividing the national total among 50 states based on each state's share of FY 2009 Transportation Enhancements funding. Within each state, the amount is set aside proportionately from the state's National Highway Performance Program. The federal share for TAP projects is 80%, requiring a 20% match from the state or other local source.

Sample TAP projects include:

- ❖ On-road and off-road trail facilities — Construction, planning and design of biking and walking trails, known as bike/ped infrastructure
- ❖ Safe routes for non-drivers — Also bike/ped infrastructure, specifically geared to children, older adults and people with disabilities
- ❖ Abandoned railroad corridors for trails — Conversion of rail corridors for pedestrians and bicyclists or other non-motorized transportation users
- ❖ Turnouts, overlooks and viewing areas — Roadside facilities previously included in the scenic byways program
- ❖ Community improvement activities — Rights-of-way improvements like billboards, historic and archeological preservation and vegetation management and erosion control
- ❖ Environmental mitigation — Stormwater management, wildlife mortality and connectivity among land or water habitats to create nature corridors.

2. Federal assistance is available to every state through The **Recreational Trails Program** (RTP) to provide funds to develop and maintain recreational trails and trail-related facilities for both non-motorized and motorized recreation. The RTP is an assistance program of the Department of Transportation's Federal Highway Administration (FHWA).

[Federal transportation funds benefit recreation](#) including hiking, bicycling, roller skating, equestrian use, cross-country skiing, snowmobiling, off-road motorcycling, all-terrain vehicle riding, four-wheel driving and other off-road motorized vehicles.

In Georgia, administration is handled by staff of the Department of Natural Resources, Division of Parks, Recreation and Historic Sites. The staff is advised by a volunteer group called the Trails and Greenways Advisory Committee.

In 2012, Georgia received \$1,740,137 in RTP funds that were distributed by grant applications on an 80-20 match. Recipients can receive up to 80% of a trail project cost and must match those funds with the additional 20%.

3. **CMAQ** funds are related to the Clean Air Act and can be used to build bike trails and related facilities, as well as to publish informational materials like trail maps. CMAQ funds can also be used for public transit, traffic flow improvements, employer-based programs to reduce rush hour traffic and other “innovative techniques and strategies to improve performance of the transportation system,” according to the Federal Highway Administration’s website.

In Georgia, CMAQ funds are managed by the Georgia Division of the Federal Highway Administration based on annual reports submitted to CMAQ every March.

4. Many Georgia communities are successfully realizing their visions to create quality trails by **building coalitions** between grass roots, locally organized and supported nonprofits; city and county governments; local parks and recreation departments; corporate funding and federal dollars.

Good models are happening in Athens, Rome, Lithonia, Savannah and Newton County to name a few.

5. **Private foundations and trail related nonprofits** play a vital role as well. The PATH Foundation has become the go-to expert in navigating the complex approval process for building trails by leveraging corporate and individual donations with local government funding.

Since 2007, MillionMile Greenway, another Georgia nonprofit, has mentored communities and grassroots groups to plan and trails and greenways by providing micro-grants and in-kind services in mapping and marketing expertise.

### **What does Georgia need at the state level to move forward with more trails?**

At the **2014 Georgia Trail Summit**, a group visioning session involved all 153 attendees. These recommended action steps emerged which confirm our commitment to create a statewide trail organization, a comprehensive trail plan, and a trail champion to help communities continue to build and connect more Georgia trails to each other.

- ❖ The majority of the group voted to **meet annually**. One goal is to bring Georgia’s entire trail community together in one place to learn from each other’s successes and setbacks, share resources and information and meet like-minded colleagues to start relationships that can remain active year-round. The next Georgia Trail Summit is set for June 4, 5 and 6, 2015 in Athens.
- ❖ Conduct a **statewide inventory of all trails in Georgia** – existing, proposed and priorities. Simultaneously, identify corridors in urgent need of protection and likely connections from one trail system to another. Identify funding sources of all kinds.
- ❖ Create a statewide **strategic plan** to expand resources and citizen support to build new trails and connect to existing ones.
- ❖ **Educate elected officials** on trails’ benefits through classes and mobile workshops. Speak with an articulate, united voice to make the case to the state legislature. With Georgians demanding more trails in communities around the state, the time is right to move trails from the bottom of the list to top priority.

- ❖ Share success stories of the tremendous economic and health benefits generated by the Silver Comet Trail, Atlanta BeltLine, Appalachian Trail and many others. **Host educational events** for members of the **Georgia Municipal Association (GMA)** and the **Association of County Commissioners of Georgia (ACCG)**.
- ❖ Both Alabama and Florida have trail commissions. Should Georgia **create a trail commission** similar to the Georgia Film, Music & Digital Entertainment Office to actively encourage the business of trail building?
- ❖ Georgia created the [Agricultural Commodity Commission for Equestrians](#) in 2012 when it was determined 173,000 Georgia households own horses. Communities of walkers, cyclists and paddlers on Georgia's trails are far more extensive than those on horseback.
- ❖ Clearly communicate to Georgia's **corporate leaders** the valuable returns investing in trails provide. Encourage their involvement through sponsorships. When attracting employees, companies are learning that access to transit and trails are a top priority for the millennial generation.
- ❖ Just as cities and counties have access to **revolving funds to borrow money** to build sewers and other essential services, similar loans are needed for building trails as land costs continue to escalate. By connecting new trails to existing ones sooner than later, the benefits of trails can be realized now, generating increased revenue through property taxes as just one example. Loans can be paid back over time. This will bypass the difficult and costly task of re-engineering infrastructure to incorporate trails *after* development is in place.
- ❖ Organize **regional trail work groups** that meet more often to share solutions and solve problems.
- ❖ **Involve young people** who are drawn to living an urban lifestyle and prefer walking and biking to a suburban dependency on cars. Communicate and document this genuine cultural shift with **user surveys** and other measurements; trails are not a short-term fad or fleeting trend. Young consumers (who are also voters) will not be returning to the suburbs. Create a marketing strategy to engage new generations with **social media and entrepreneurial incentives**. Host **focus groups** to get their input and preferences.
- ❖ Every region in Georgia has its own **Tourism Project Manager** through the Georgia Department of Economic Development – Tourism Division. Work more closely with them to tell each trail's story and increase revenues and jobs for businesses on existing trails.
- ❖ **Create a toolkit** to share all things trails in Georgia. **Establish a clearing house** or online cooperative where communities in the early stages can learn from communities who have already built miles of trails, bridges, access to water trails, equestrian trails and tourism trails designed around history, culture, wineries and other themes.
- ❖ **Create a comprehensive website** where all trail groups can pool resources while remaining separate entities with their own identities. Some sections can be free; other sections with in-depth information and access to trail experts can be available for a monthly fee. Georgia Trail Summit's website is an excellent start at [www.georgiatrailsummit.com](http://www.georgiatrailsummit.com).
- ❖ **Create a statewide advisory board** that can be affiliated with the state of Georgia with members appointed by the Governor, yet remains independent as advisors and trail champions.

- ❖ One recommendation from a recent Economic Impact Study for the Silver Comet Trail is to form a **Regional Trail Management Agency** to manage the Silver Comet as a revenue center. The agency could set policy and encourage inter-agency collaboration between the Northwest Georgia Regional Commission, the Atlanta Regional Commission and every county the Silver Comet Trail touches. This could become a model for similar trail management agencies in Georgia.

## Conclusion

A forward thinking transportation plan that includes more trails just makes good sense.

No matter which lens you look through – economic development, health, tourism, transportation or conservation – trails are winners with multiple, long-term benefits.

New trails are an absolute must-have in every county.

Consider the Georgia Trail Summit team as a knowledgeable resource to educate and motivate trail planners and legislators to continue to build a first-class trail system in Georgia. Please contact the Georgia Trail Summit.

*White paper authored by Georgia Trail Summit (GTS) committee. For further information reach out to GTS organizer Tracie Sanchez, 706.424.1328, georgiatrailsummit@gmail.com. Follow us on facebook, twitter, web, blog, mailchimp, eventbrite.*

## Sources

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Obesity rankings by state: <http://www.americashealthrankings.org/ga>

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Managing federal Transportation Alternatives funding  
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