

# Unlocking Trails in the Garden State

Opportunities for New Jersey  
Counties to Accelerate Trail  
Development

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## DEFINING TRAILS

When we think of trails, the archetype often includes challenging hikes in remote areas with difficult terrain and steep elevation changes. However, trails also include paved paths that connect communities and are used for walking, rolling, or biking. They provide a space for exercise, access to nature, and nonmotorized transport, secluded from cars and typically nestled within nature. These trails extend across suburban, urban, and rural landscapes, allowing for connections within and between communities. They provide immense health benefits, both mental and physical, while also promoting sustainability. However, there is an opportunity to reap immense economic benefits that are often lesser-known. In this report, the aforementioned benefits are explored through an examination of well-established trail benefits from across the United States, as well as compelling work in New Jersey to improve trail development processes.



## ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT BENEFITS OF TRAILS

Trails are often framed primarily as environmental or public health amenities, but this framing understates their significant economic development potential. A growing body of evidence shows that trails contribute to workforce attraction, increased property values, tourism, and job creation. As communities seek cost-effective strategies to support economic growth and quality of life, trail investment merits closer consideration as a core economic development tool.

For instance, millennials now make up the largest generation in the U.S. workforce, and their preferences are reshaping housing and transportation markets. Approximately 63% of millennials report a preference for living without a car, increasing demand for walkable and bikeable

neighborhoods.<sup>1</sup> Walkability consistently ranks as a high priority for the general public, not only among younger residents but across age groups. Trails support these preferences by providing safe, connected infrastructure that reduces reliance on automobiles and enhances everyday mobility.

Numerous studies show that properties located near trails experience increased values, reflecting strong market demand for access to recreational and active transportation amenities.<sup>2</sup> Beyond individual property gains, trails enhance a community's overall desirability. They help attract new residents, retain existing ones, and contribute to a higher quality of life—factors that are increasingly important in regional competition for talent and investment.

The outdoor recreation industry now outpaces the oil and gas industry in overall economic impact.<sup>3</sup> This sector is fundamentally built on access to trails for walking, biking, hiking, and other outdoor activities. As a result, trails function as foundational infrastructure for a rapidly growing segment of the economy. Communities that invest in trail networks position themselves to capture a share of this economic activity while diversifying their local economies.

Trails not only serve local residents but also drive tourism, particularly when they connect towns to larger regional or national networks. Visitors drawn by trail systems contribute to local spending on lodging, food, and retail. Between 2011 and 2021, cities that invested more heavily in parks and open spaces experienced higher job growth rates, attracted more investment and start-ups, and had lower unemployment rates than cities that invested less.<sup>4</sup> These findings suggest that trails and open space investments can yield long-term economic resilience.

Trail development also compares favorably to traditional road infrastructure in terms of job creation. Pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure projects generate approximately 8 to 12 jobs per \$1 million in spending, compared to about seven jobs per \$1 million for road projects.<sup>5</sup> This higher employment impact makes trail investments an efficient use of public funds, particularly during periods of economic recovery or workforce transition.

## RESEARCH FOCUS

The purpose of this research report is to better understand how counties in the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission (DVRPC) region of New Jersey are developing and funding trails. The research specifically focuses on the use and application of county open space trust funds (OSTF) for trail development. This builds upon our previous work with the Voorhees Transportation Center at Rutgers University on the report, [Funding Opportunities and Programmatic Insights for Advancing Shared Use Paths, Trails, and Greenways in New Jersey](#), in which county OSTFs were identified as a potential tool for trail development. There are four counties in the DVRPC region of NJ: Burlington, Camden, Gloucester, and Mercer. Despite attempts to interview staff from each county, we were unable to reach Gloucester County; therefore, this report only focuses on our research and interviews with Burlington, Camden, and Mercer counties.

1 <https://blog.nature.org/2018/07/26/economic-development-and-trails-is-conservation-missing-opportunities/>

2 <https://www.americantrails.org/resources/trails-make-economic-sense>

3 <https://www.americantrails.org/resources/trails-make-economic-sense>

4 [https://www.tpl.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/TPL-Park-Investment-and-Economic-Vitality-in-Cities-09\\_19\\_24.pdf](https://www.tpl.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/TPL-Park-Investment-and-Economic-Vitality-in-Cities-09_19_24.pdf)

5 [https://bikeleague.org/sites/default/files/PERI\\_Natl\\_Study\\_June2011.pdf](https://bikeleague.org/sites/default/files/PERI_Natl_Study_June2011.pdf)

# BURLINGTON COUNTY

A paved trail with fallen leaves, a grassy area, and a river with trees in the background.

*Burlington County's Delaware River Heritage Trail segment in Florence.*

## OPEN SPACE TRUST FUND HISTORY AND OVERVIEW

The Burlington County Open Space Trust Fund (subsequently known as “The Fund”) was established in 1996 by the County Commissioners, a group of five elected officials who serve three-year terms. The Fund was created through a public referendum in tandem with the Open Space Strategic Plan, which was designed to highlight preservation opportunities in the county.

It is supported, in part, by a tax levy of 3.5 cents per \$100 of assessed property value. The Fund was originally utilized to preserve farmland because land was being taken by large subdivisions.

- ➔ Over time, the Fund expanded to include park development, maintenance, historic preservation, and open space protection.
- ➔ Trail development became part of the program as parks were connected, though it is not a primary funding focus.
- ➔ The Fund supports a wide range of projects and has a sunset date of 2036.
- ➔ In 2025, an interview with the program coordinator provided insight into the county’s trail system and future plans.

## FUNDING AND ADMINISTRATION

The Open Space Trust Fund is overseen and administered by the Department of Resource Conservation. However, they work with County Commissioners and the Finance Department to create a capital involvement budget that formalizes annual budgets and oversees activities over the next three years. Both anticipated and current grant funding from state and federal levels are input into decision-making. This also includes how much money is being carried over and how much is anticipated to be spent. For the 2025 fiscal year, revenue was around \$25 million.

- ➔ Burlington County maintains a discretionary fund that allows flexible use of funds as opportunities arise, such as property acquisition.
- ➔ To date, approximately \$28.5 million has been received from state and federal grants to support trail projects from planning through construction.
- ➔ In June 2025, the county received a \$75,000 DVRPC grant to plan an extension of the Delaware River Heritage Trail, creating a 13-mile county segment.
- ➔ Prior to the federal Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, also known as the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, significant federal funding was obtained through the Federal Highway Administration via the New Jersey Department of Transportation (NJDOT).
- ➔ Additional trail funding sources include the [Transportation Alternatives Program](#) (TAP), administered by DVRPC; the Circuit Trails Community Grant Program; and the William Penn Foundation.
- ➔ Early trail planning and feasibility studies are supported by the [Regional Trails Program](#) (RTP) and the [Transportation and Community Development Initiative](#) (TCDI), both administered by DVRPC.

- ➔ The county prioritizes planning and design so projects are ready when major construction funding becomes available.
- ➔ Trail construction costs average about \$1 million per mile for a ten-foot-wide trail, with federal agencies often covering a large share of construction expenses.

## TRAIL DEVELOPMENT

As mentioned previously, Burlington County's trail network began as a network of regional parks; it has since become an intricate system connecting population hubs with open spaces and nature. The goal is also to make it easier to commute to popular areas in Burlington County without a car, and to connect neighboring counties. Currently, 22 miles of trails exist in the county, with a goal of 150 miles. However, 125 miles of planned trails are scheduled for future construction. Several projects, identified below, demonstrate this progress and vision.

- ➔ The Southern Regional Trails project began as a preliminary planning effort to connect local open space and county corridors to the [Rancocas Greenway](#).
  - ⇒ Funding from the DVRPC supported a feasibility study, with costs split evenly between the DVRPC and the county.
  - ⇒ The county contracted Taylor Design Group to analyze routes, conduct fieldwork, and identify potential challenges.
  - ⇒ The goal is to develop a 50-mile regional trail connecting the county.
  - ⇒ Multiple public information sessions have been held, with the feasibility study expected to be finalized later in the year.
- ➔ The [Delaware River Heritage Trail](#) and the Rancocas Greenway are two major trails in the region, but a 13-mile gap separates them from each other.
  - ⇒ The County is planning a new trail loop from Trenton to Camden to connect the two segments.
    - Connecting the Rancocas Greenway requires a bridge over Route 130.
  - ⇒ The design and feasibility of connecting the trails, including a Local Concept Development (LCD) study, are currently being explored through a TCDI grant from DVRPC.
    - LCDs require extensive public participation, including engagement with Native American tribes and environmental impact studies.
    - The process identifies a preferred route, which can be funded through county funds and additional grants.

## CHALLENGES

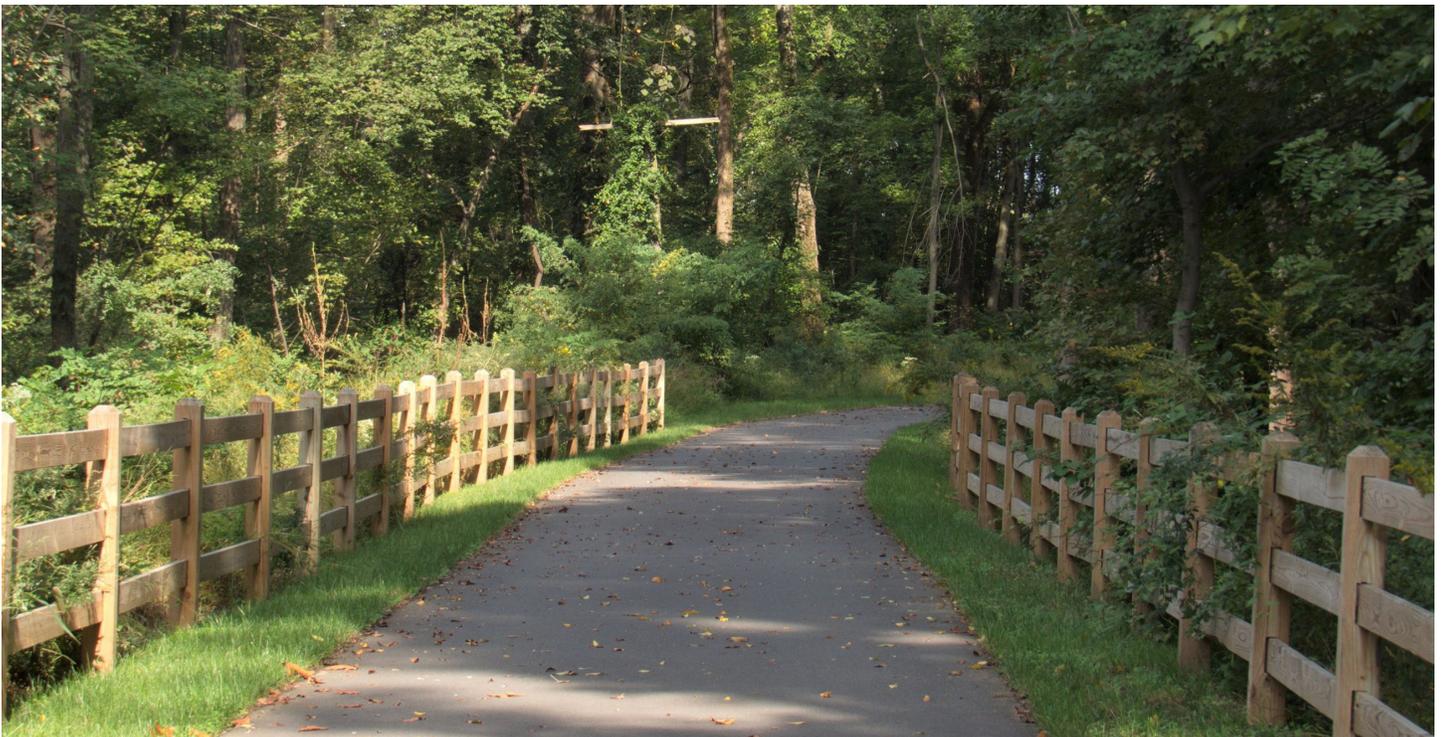
When asked about challenges to trail development in Burlington County and what would be needed to expand trail development, the most significant obstacle is the funding gap for design. Funding is generally available for construction and feasibility studies, but securing design funds is difficult.

- ➔ Federal funding is hard to obtain, and Open Space Trust Fund money is limited by stipulations and competition.
  - ⇒ Capacity is also an added challenge, particularly for smaller counties that lack full-time staff to manage large trail projects and their associated grant requirements.
- ➔ NJDOT has a certified pool of consultants for project estimates and designs, but the pool is small and hard to access.
  - ⇒ Expanding the pool of consultants could help more trail projects move forward across counties with varying capacities.
- ➔ A potential solution to overcome these obstacles is for municipalities to pilot a single trail design project to secure funding and demonstrate benefits.

## BEST PRACTICES

One of Burlington's strengths is its effort to involve the public in trail development.

- ➔ Burlington County engages the community through surveys, focus groups, and stakeholder meetings to guide trail projects.
  - ⇒ Currently updating its Open Space Master Plan (originally from 2002), with a new plan expected in 6–9 months.
  - ⇒ The planning process allows for public re-engagement and informs residents and elected officials.



*Burlington County's Delaware River Heritage Trail segment in Florence.<sup>6</sup>*

6 <https://www.co.burlington.nj.us/1921/Delaware-River-Heritage-Trail>

# CAMDEN COUNTY



## OPEN SPACE TRUST FUND HISTORY AND OVERVIEW

The Camden County Open Space, Recreation, Farmland, and Historic Preservation Trust Fund (subsequently known as “the Fund”) was created in November 1998 through voter approval.

- ➔ The Fund supports preservation of parks, natural areas, historic sites, and farmland.
  - ⇒ It is funded by a \$0.02 tax per \$100 of assessed property value.
    - The Fund’s 2025 revenue was about \$12,034,810.
- ➔ The Fund is managed by Recycling and Environmental Affairs, which oversees multiple programs.
  - ⇒ The Camden County Open Space Preservation Trust Fund Advisory Committee collaborates with the Board of Commissioners on implementation.
  - ⇒ Projects must apply with detailed plans to receive funding.

## FUNDING AND ADMINISTRATION

The Fund supports open space, recreation, farmland, and historic preservation.

- ➔ Projects across the different categories can apply for the Fund, with specific amounts reserved for each category.
  - ⇒ Recreation projects receive \$25,000 grants to enhance existing publicly owned recreational facilities.
    - On average, 30–35 recreation grants are awarded each year.
  - ⇒ Historic Preservation projects that support the preservation or stabilization of sites eligible for the New Jersey Register of Historic Places are eligible for \$50,000 grants.
    - Historic Preservation projects typically have fewer applicants, around 8–10 per year.

Both municipalities and nonprofits are eligible to apply for funding. However, in Camden County, non-profits must coordinate with the municipality in which the project will take place and obtain a resolution of support from that municipality.

- ➔ Grant amounts for municipalities are based on population:
  - ⇒ Municipalities with a population greater than 15,000 are allowed two grants.
  - ⇒ Municipalities with a population of less than 15,000 are allowed one grant.
- ➔ The County Fund only covers construction and materials; feasibility, design, planning, and consulting must be funded separately, often supplemented with federal or state money.
  - ⇒ The Fund primarily categorizes trail projects as recreation enhancements.
- ➔ Feasibility studies are not required before applying for grants from the Fund.

The application process consists of several steps that require significant involvement.

- ➔ Applications are submitted to the Camden County Open Space Trust Fund Advisory Committee, made up of elected officials, county representatives, and appointed members.
- ➔ The committee or a subcommittee reviews applications for completeness.
- ➔ The Recreation Facility Enhancement Subcommittee conducts site visits.
- ➔ Projects are ranked using a point system to determine prioritization.
- ➔ Additional information may be requested, and the committee makes recommendations.
- ➔ The Camden County Board of Commissioners will complete the review by August.
- ➔ Grants are awarded at the September Commissioner Board meeting.
- ➔ Funding must be spent within 18 months of signing the grant agreement; unused funds are returned to the Open Space Trust Fund

While the Open Space Trust Fund provides support at the local level, large trail development projects in Camden County rely primarily on federal funding.

- ➔ Camden County has received approximately \$35 million for trail construction, with nearly all of that funding from federal grants, such as the Transportation Alternatives Set-Aside (TASA) program.
- ➔ In 2023, the Camden County Parks Department received \$19 million from the U.S. Department of Transportation's RAISE grant program to develop the [LINK trail](#), part of the Circuit Trail network.
- ➔ Additional funding sources include:
  - ⇒ DVRPC: \$200,000 in 2017 to design a 4.5-mile segment of the LINK trail
  - ⇒ TAP: \$1.2 million in 2018 for one mile of trail construction
- ➔ In 2019, a Request for Order (RFO) awarded a \$4.95 million contract to NV5 to design two-thirds of the LINK trail.
  - ⇒ The remaining third of the LINK trail is owned by Conrail, creating challenges; negotiations are ongoing for land use.

## TRAIL DEVELOPMENT

The largest trail project in Camden County is the LINK trail, which, once completed, will be around 34 miles and connect many communities within the county. It is expected to be completed in the late 2020s or early 2030s; however, it is largely dependent on funding availability.

- ➔ Camden County held public meetings and engaged residents to identify a preferred trail route.
- ➔ A 2017 feasibility study examined the economic impact of the trail.
- ➔ NV5 projected the trail could generate \$19.5 million annually from out-of-town users; the

actual impact may be higher, especially when accounting for inflation.

- ➔ The study estimated the trail would create 114 jobs and support \$9.8 million in economic output, including \$4.2 million in labor income within the county.
- ➔ The trail is expected to increase property values for nearby homes:
  - ⇒ Average increase of \$7,300 for homes within a mile
  - ⇒ Up to \$11,500 increase for homes adjacent to the trail
- ➔ County staff noted that the trail benefits small businesses, citing increased local business activity in towns like Audubon.
- ➔ The trail has been broken into segments for design and construction purposes.
  - ⇒ A newly planned 1.2-mile segment will run from Merchant Street in Audubon to Station Avenue in Haddon Heights, costing around \$3 million.
    - They are now able to put out a bid for construction, and construction is expected to start by the end of the year, with the trail being built by the spring.

Currently, there is a trail collaboration between Pennsauken Township in Camden County and Palmyra Township in Burlington County.

- ➔ They are working with one consultant for a portion of the Delaware River Heritage Trail.
- ➔ Additionally, the South Jersey Transportation Planning Organization is working to link trails in Cape May, Camden, and Atlantic County into a trail called “Camden to the Cape,” which would span 105 miles and attract many tourists.

## CHALLENGES

Although Camden County staff did not express concerns about staffing capacity, they noted the struggles this can create.

- ➔ Federal grants often require full-time employees, disqualifying many smaller municipalities.
- ➔ Trail construction faces permitting issues that can slow progress.
- ➔ Concerns exist about trail longevity and future conditions; Camden County is addressing this by building up the ground around trails.
- ➔ Funding remains a consistent challenge.

## BEST PRACTICES

The primary highlights of Camden County’s trail work include its 2016 feasibility study approach and close coordination with elected officials.

- ➔ Conducted a feasibility study in 2016 before establishing the LINK trail.
  - ⇒ The study assessed both environmental and economic impacts of trails.

- Trails are often valued for wellness benefits, but the study highlighted their significant economic potential.
- ⇒ The study serves as a resource for Camden County and other counties to demonstrate the economic benefits of trail development and support its expansion.
- ⇒ Coordinated and engaged local elected officials to advance trail projects.
- ⇒ For example, Jeff Nash, a Camden County elected official since 1991, is a strong advocate for trail development.
- County Commissioner Nash effectively garners public support to help launch and maintain momentum for current and future trail projects.



*Camden County's LINK Trail segment in the city of Camden.*

# MERCER COUNTY



## OPEN SPACE TRUST FUND HISTORY AND OVERVIEW

The Mercer County Open Space Trust Fund was established in 1989 through a voter referendum and the Open Space Tax and was fully dedicated to farmland and open space preservation.

- ➔ The Open Space Trust Fund (OSTF) now supports:
  - ⇒ Farmland and open space preservation
  - ⇒ Recreational development
  - ⇒ Historic preservation
  - ⇒ Land stewardship
- ➔ Fund allocation (per Mercer County Preservation document, June 2024):
  - ⇒ 50% for farmland and open space preservation
  - ⇒ 30% for recreational development and historic preservation
  - ⇒ 20% for stewardship
- ➔ The Planning Department oversees the OSTF and its programs.
  - ⇒ Currently, the Fund is primarily used for land acquisition rather than trail-related projects.
    - OSTF funds the Mercer County Open Space Preservation Program, providing grants to municipalities and nonprofits for open space projects.
  - ⇒ The Fund is supported by a tax of \$0.03 cents per \$100 of assessed property value.
    - Its revenue for 2025 was about \$39,482,203.37.

## FUNDING AND ADMINISTRATION

As mentioned previously, the Open Space Trust Fund is currently utilized for land acquisition, where both municipalities and nonprofits can apply for funding.

- ➔ There is no preference for either, but applications must explain how their project aligns with the current Open Space Plan.

Regarding larger-scale county-level projects, funding mostly comes from the state.

- ➔ Currently, there is not much federal funding available, and the money from those grants often comes with many caveats and more red tape than their state counterparts.

## TRAIL DEVELOPMENT

Mercer County has several trail systems, in addition to projects currently in the planning or implementation phase.

### ➔ [The Lawrence Hopewell Trail](#) (LHT)

- ⇒ Conceived by employees of Bristol-Myers Squibb in 2001 to support an active lifestyle in the neighboring communities.
- ⇒ Links a main street business district, corporate campuses, parks, preserved open space, schools, and towns as it travels through Lawrence and Hopewell Townships.
- ⇒ Since 2002, board members of the Lawrence Hopewell Trail Corporation, a nonprofit dedicated to building and maintaining the LHT, have worked with major sponsors to design and build the trail, raising over \$9 million for the project.
  - To date, all but four miles of the eventual 22-mile loop are complete.
- ⇒ A unique feature of the trail is that it has been built using environmentally sensitive construction techniques and materials (such as porous pavement).

### ➔ [The Johnson Trolley Trail](#) (JTT)

- ⇒ An existing trail that runs along the old right-of-way line of the former Trolley Rail Line.
- ⇒ In 2023, Mercer County successfully applied for and received a \$175,000 grant from DVRPC's TCDI program to undertake a feasibility and concept development study for the alignment.
  - The study identified alignment to connect and extend the existing segments into surrounding bicycle and pedestrian facilities, creating an active transportation corridor originating in the City of Trenton, passing through Ewing and Lawrence Townships, and extending to the Municipality of Princeton.
    - This would allow for safer off-road connections between residential, commercial, and retail areas of Mercer County, and connect numerous employment and educational institutions, enabling employees and students to travel without requiring motorized transportation.

## CHALLENGES

Mercer County has the benefit of lots of trails being constructed, and it serves as an example. However, county staff raised some challenges and concerns regarding trail development.

- ➔ Planners mentioned that land can be acquired and dedicated to trail use; however, when evaluating a trail's longevity, one must consider maintenance, which can be challenging to determine who is responsible and who will fund continued maintenance.

## BEST PRACTICES

One unique aspect of trail development and funding in Mercer County is a new project planned for December 2025. As mentioned previously, their OSTF did not fund trail development projects, but this program is working to change that.

- ➔ This new program would provide funding for planning studies, engineering, design, and construction.
- ➔ It will address funding gaps mentioned by other counties by allowing municipalities to access additional money to build trails more efficiently and effectively.



*Mercer County's Johnson Trolley Trail segment in Lawrenceville.<sup>7</sup> Photo by Anya Saretzky.*

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7 <https://circuittrails.org/find-trails/johnson-trolley-line/>

## SUCCESSFUL THEMES ACROSS ALL THREE COUNTIES

With each of the interviewed counties making trails a priority, they each have strengths that have propelled them in the world of trails. However, overall, a few common practices observed across these counties have led to the success they are achieving today.

- ➔ Strong community involvement is essential to the success of trail projects.
- ➔ Public engagement helps planners understand residents' needs, priorities, and values.
- ➔ Multiple funding sources are necessary, as a single source is rarely sufficient for planning, development, and maintenance.
- ➔ Collaboration among local governments, organizations, and residents is crucial.
- ➔ Trail development benefits the entire community, with residents generally supportive of expanding public green spaces.
- ➔ Accessibility is a priority to ensure all residents can enjoy the social, environmental, and health benefits of trails.

## TAKEAWAYS FOR HOW COMMUNITIES CAN BETTER SUPPORT TRAIL DEVELOPMENT

Communities can more effectively support trail development by ensuring elected officials prioritize trails in local and regional planning efforts. Residents play an important role in this process by attending county public meetings and voicing their support for trail initiatives. Paying close attention to trail development within one's region is especially important during the planning phase, when public involvement is strongly encouraged. Active participation in these meetings helps advance projects through required feasibility studies, which are often necessary before trail construction can begin.

In addition, creating a local organization dedicated to promoting trails can help strengthen advocacy efforts and highlight the importance of trails to community health, connectivity, and quality of life. Such organizations can sustain momentum, engage stakeholders, and build broad public support. Communities can also benefit from streamlining permitting processes to make trail development easier and more efficient, reducing delays that can slow progress. Finally, smaller communities interested in pursuing trail development should explore opportunities through programs such as TAP and consider consulting projects to identify potential funding sources and development strategies.



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks again to all of the county planners and representatives who took time out of their busy schedules to answer questions and provide information on their county. Their impressive dedication and efforts have created trail projects that will continue to benefit their community and have lasting impacts on future generations.



[NJFUTURE.ORG](http://NJFUTURE.ORG)

Founded in 1987, New Jersey Future is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization working to build sustainable, thriving communities across New Jersey. We advance smart, equitable growth that prioritizes redevelopment, strategic infrastructure, inclusive and affordable neighborhoods, protected natural lands, and transportation choices beyond cars. Through research, policy, advocacy, coalition-building, and hands-on support, we turn ideas into real-world solutions.



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