

# COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS



# Trails Provide **VITAL LINKS** That **BOOST** Public **HEALTH,** Economic **GROWTH**

The increase in outdoor recreation that resulted from the pandemic has not slacked off. Trails provide a great opportunity for townships to not only give residents and visitors a way to boost their health and happiness but also connect them to township amenities, local businesses, and other municipalities. Discover how your township can develop its trails to benefit the public and the local economy.

BY HANNA MARTIN / ASSOCIATE EDITOR

See our digital edition for a bonus video of expert planners sharing the benefits of trails and how to engage the community.





While some residents worried about an increase in crime when the Warwick-to-Ephrata Rail Trail opened, the multimunicipal path has been an asset to the communities. (Photos courtesy of Warwick Township.)



When four Lancaster County municipalities received a grant from the state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) to conduct a regional rails-to-trails feasibility study, municipal staff were excited at the prospect of bringing an 8-mile-long trail to the residents of Warwick and Ephrata townships and Akron and Ephrata boroughs. They knew the vast recreational, economic, health, and social value of trails, and they were excited to share the benefits with the communities.

However, some residents weren't as thrilled about the idea of a regional trail passing by their properties. Homeowners worried that the trail would bring hikers and bikers from outside the community, followed by an increase in crime.

"Slowly but surely, we just kept talking to people because there's a lot of fear," Warwick Township assistant secretary Barbara Kreider says. "The best thing was to open the trail and see that some things [they feared] didn't occur, and then people saw this really is a good idea, and it grew from there. By opening one small section of the trail across from the municipal building, it made it possible for the rest of the trail to open."

The township's portion of the trail was opened in 2014, with the entire Warwick-to-Ephrata Rail Trail debuting to the public in December 2018. Today, residents enjoy hiking, biking, and rolling along the trail to travel between the municipalities.

"We see everything from runners to road bikers to electronic bikes using it, and we're seeing more and more people that are using it as a primary mode of transportation," township manager Brian Harris says. "If they live in Ephrata Borough and they work in the Warwick or Lititz area, they're taking their bikes to and from as a method of transportation."

### Boosting the local economy

It's no secret that outdoor recreation has increased in Pennsylvania following the COVID-19 pandemic, when



many Pennsylvanians came to rely on spending time outdoors as a primary form of recreation. Between May 2019 and 2020, DCNR reports that the commonwealth's state parks witnessed a 36% increase in visitors. In fact, the increase in visitors coupled with the state's favorable climate has made Pennsylvania one of the top outdoor recreation destinations in the U.S.

The 9.2-mile-long Ironton Rail Trail in Lehigh County, which follows the previous Ironton Railroad and now provides a link between Whitehall and North Whitehall townships and the Borough of Coplay, experienced a significant boom in visitors during the pandemic despite the trail being open for decades.

"The peak usage was 2020 and 2021 when COVID hit and no one really could go anywhere," says Raymond Deutsch, a member of North Whitehall's Recreation Board and the Ironton Rail Trail Oversight Committee. "So they went out walking, and the trail saw 302,000 people in a year. We're usually around 220,000 now, after COVID. We get an awful lot of use each year, and we even get people from outside the area."

The increase in hikers, bikers, and boaters has also given a boost to Pennsylvania's economy. Outdoor recreation contributed \$14 billion to the state's economy in 2021, creating more than 150,000 jobs.

Townships, in particular, have also enjoyed an increase in visitors, who contribute to local economies. Cranberry Township in Venango County, which is home to about seven miles of the Erie-to-Pittsburgh trail system, has observed more customers at local businesses over the decades because of the trail, which connects to other municipalities.

"We're constantly getting feedback from people and how much they enjoy coming here," Cranberry Township manager Eric Heil says. "How they frequent the businesses, not only here in Cranberry Township but also in the City of Franklin... the restaurants, gas stations, gift stores, and craft shops. We're seeing a rise in popularity in short-term rentals and bed-and-breakfast stays. A lot of people will come

from as far away as Pittsburgh and Erie just to make a day or a weekend of it."

Having outdoor recreation options near residential areas also increases property values. Because trails are such an asset, developers in North Whitehall Township rush to build houses close to the Ironton Rail Trail.

"If you live close to a trail, your

property value increases because it's more marketable," township manager Randy Cope says. "When we started building the trail 20 years ago, there were some developments along the trail that had lots, and they were charging \$10,000 more for lots right next to the trail compared to a lot away from the trail." ➤



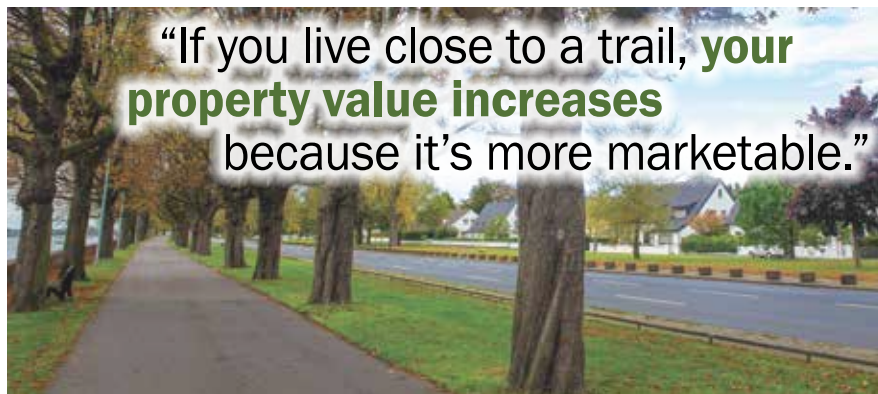
**The Ironton Railroad was built in 1960 to transport iron ore and closed in 1983. Today, visitors to the trail can see a historical locomotive that operated on the railroad.**



**During the pandemic, the Ironton Rail Trail saw upwards of 300,000 visitors annually. Today, the trail still has about 220,000 hikers and bikers. (Photos courtesy of the Ironton Rail Trail Oversight Committee.)**



**"We're constantly getting feedback from people and how much they enjoy coming here."**



### Creating alternative paths

Trails also bring health and recreation benefits to townships, providing a transportation alternative to cars while increasing physical activity. Many

residents of Warwick Township have begun using the Warwick-to-Ephrata Rail Trail as a primary way to get from point A to point B.

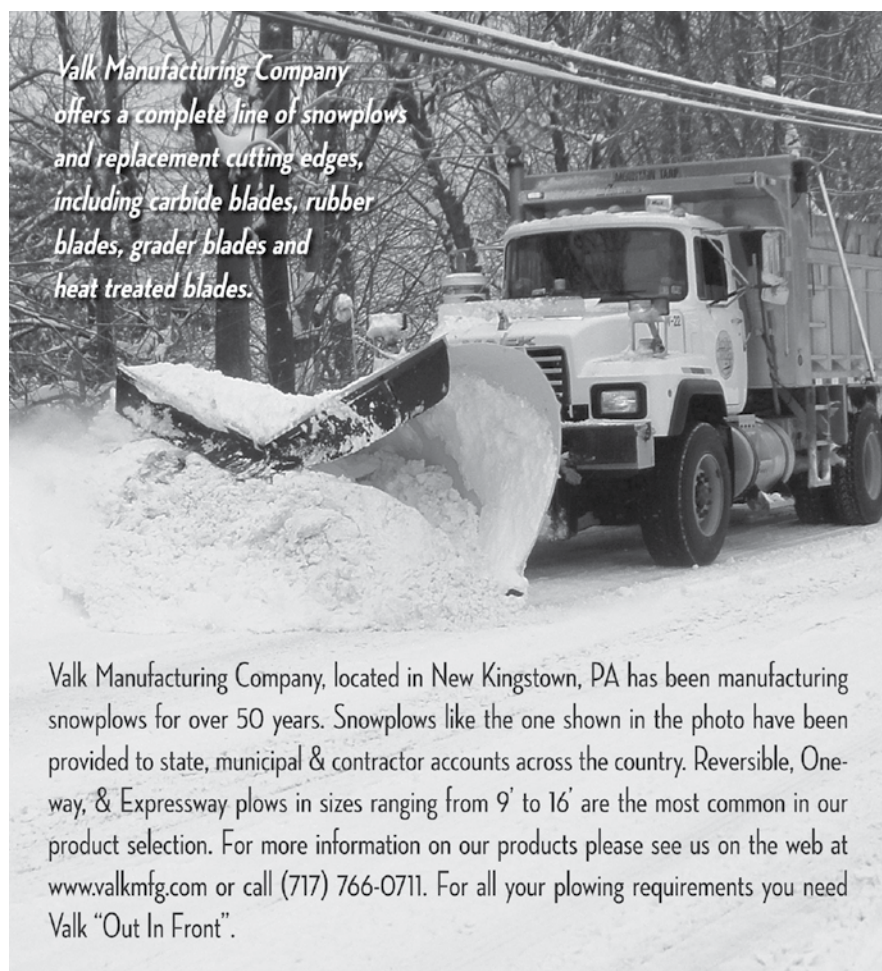
"The trail exposes people to an al-

ternative," Harris explains. "Instead of getting in my car here at the municipal building and driving into Lititz, I can walk a quarter-mile section of the trail and be in the heart of the borough. Especially because our boroughs are already maxed out for parking, I think the trail provides a convenient in and out for people who have the ability to do so."

What's more, trails contribute to healthier, happier residents. According to DCNR and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, walking on any of Pennsylvania's more than 12,000 miles of trails improves mental health, manages weight, reduces the risk of heart disease and diabetes, improves sleep quality, and increases the chances of a longer life.

Doylestown Township's Hike and Bike Committee in the Bucks County community has worked to build a network of 30 miles of trails over the past three decades. Manager Stephanie Mason says that while residents increasingly sought out the benefits of fresh air during the pandemic, the trend of getting outside on a regular basis has stuck.

"Especially during COVID, when people were working from home, they experienced the health benefits of being able to get out and walk or ride their bike on the trails," she says. "They really discovered the trail system, and people value the ability to go on family bike rides or walks and also connect to other neighborhoods so your child can come to my child's house and you feel comfortable with them being on a trail and not having to walk in the road."



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trails and outdoor recreation, municipalities should consider building and maintaining a trail system for residents and visitors alike. Whether your town-

ship has a developed trail network or is considering its first trail, the initial step is to have a strong plan.

Although many townships may be guilty of having a comprehensive plan that hasn't been updated in quite some time, adding language about trails to the plan can help solidify these features as a component of the township's transportation system.

While some comprehensive plans may include language about specific trails, others are broader and focus on supporting trails in general. Many townships, such as Warwick, incorporate language that includes multimunicipal trail-building efforts.

"We plan very well here," Warwick Township's Harris says. "Some municipalities will adopt a comprehensive plan and it sits on a shelf for 20 years. This region has been committed to actively updating that plan and looking at the recreational needs and diligently planning from a recreational perspective. Municipalities that are committed to the planning process are going to have a much better success rate versus the municipality that's on its own island and the comprehensive plan stays the same for 20 years."

In addition to including trails in their comprehensive plan, townships should also mention trails in their zoning and subdivision and land development ordinances. Including trails in the zoning ordinance may help a township's chances of receiving state and county grants and can help expedite projects by avoiding controversies and delays, while including language in the subdivision and land development ordinance can help townships encourage developers to build trails.

"There are a lot of municipalities that say, 'If you build a development, you're going to make a trail connection through it, and then if there's an adjacent trail system already there, you're going to make that one connect,'" says Alexander MacDonald, chief of DCNR's Trails, Greenways & Statewide Planning Section. "When you build that as part of a brand new housing development, it's typically a selling feature."

While trails ideally should be addressed in their own section of the subdivision and land development ordinance, this may require reconstructing the document. Therefore, municipalities can simply amend sections of the ordinance that deal with roads. Additionally, liability, ownership, and maintenance issues can be included in sections about homeowners association open space, while issues concerning developers providing a fee in lieu of trails can be added to sections dealing with recreational parks.

Townships can also create a public trails master plan that includes how the municipality plans for trails, a community profile, the cost of implementation, maintenance, concerns about trails, and recommendations. ➤



**Doylestown Township has worked to build a network of 30 trails since 1992. The township's multimunicipal Hike and Bike Committee works to bring expanded outdoor recreation opportunities to residents. (Photos courtesy of Doylestown Township.)**



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## Figuring out the logistics

After updating the township's comprehensive plan and zoning and subdivision and land development ordinances, municipal staff can start the design process. While this step may be daunting to those who are first starting out, working with a planner, engineer, and DCNR regional adviser can help.

When Greg Primm, manager of Allegheny Township in Westmoreland County, first started with the township in 2009, it only had 2.5 miles of trails. After asking the board about the lack of these amenities, he was told that there was resident opposition to the idea so Primm decided to work on the project, partnering with a planning company and applying for grants. Now, the township has a 9-mile trail.

"It's been a 15-year project," he admits, "but the public works department is just putting the final touches on the last leg of a trail, and it's pretty much all done now. It's bringing a lot of people into the township."

Other municipalities with successful trail systems can also demonstrate the benefits of these features and serve as a regional example for townships just getting started or looking to expand their trail networks.

"A lot of the momentum with planning will come from what other neighboring counties or municipalities are doing," says Carrie Long, a transportation planner with Gannett Fleming. "Maybe they have a river trail already in this county or the township sees what's happening in that borough and wants that benefit to play out in their area. So there's a bit of seeing and trying to replicate."

When deciding the location of



**Allegheny Township in Westmoreland County once had only 2.5 miles of trails. Fifteen years later, the township now boasts a 9-mile trail, complete with a shelter and message board (top) and signage (bottom). (Photos courtesy of Allegheny Township.)**

trails, townships may also want to conduct a trail study. While this may determine the feasibility of a particular trail, it should also determine the type of trail the township wants to build, including whether it will follow a waterway or rail corridor, what property the township will need access to, potential routes, and how the township will ultimately implement it. For example, many townships build along previous

rail lines, as these paths are typically flat or gently sloping and more accessible.

"Who uses the trail?" Michelle Brummer, senior planner at Gannett Fleming, encourages municipalities to ask. "Are we talking just about pedestrians? Are we talking about bicyclists? Are we considering any equestrian community if that's relevant to where this trail might be located? Then you



get into motorized use like ATVs or snowmobiles. Who is the trail for, and what's the surface that's best and most durable for that set of users?"

Townships will need to work with an engineer, planning consultant, and traffic experts to identify potential routes and environmental, legal, and traffic safety issues.

The Montgomery County Planning Commission is currently working on a cross-county trail. As part of the project, the county has worked with engineers and residents to conduct feasibility studies and plan the design.

"The design phase features much more granular work on grading and stormwater management," says Brian Olszak, principal trails and open space planner for the planning commission.

"The particulars that you need for construction require a higher-level scale of research, and consensus among the various stakeholders helps to figure out any potential fatal flaws of certain alternatives so that you don't need to get

too far into a process and realize that it won't work."

However, groups such as the Doylestown Hike and Bike Committee should also play a role in the design process, and particularly in determining where trails should be built.

"We have little subcommittees that go out and walk the area," Mason says. "We also have a bike and hike engineering consultant, and so they'll go out along with volunteers and we'll walk the area and figure out, what do we need to bring a trail to this area? How do we connect to the trail that ends here? What do we need to do?"

### Gathering public support

When designing trails, it's important to consult with stakeholders. Some of the most important — and sometimes difficult — stakeholders are residents. Public meetings are a fundamental part of conducting a trail study as residents often have the most insight into where trails should be built. Dur-

ing a first public meeting, residents may share where they like to go in the community to help townships know where to place trails. During the next meeting, townships can let residents know of potential trail routes and seek feedback.

The Montgomery County Planning Commission recently held several open house public forums for residents to share their recommendations for its cross-county trail. The county found that residents had concrete advice about trail placement.

"We received helpful information that we wouldn't be able to gather on our own," Olszak says. "If someone has lived in a community for several years, they might have background about flooding in a particular area that we couldn't know by just starting only a few months earlier in the process. So we do get very valuable existing condition research but also really a great direction as to how to proceed in the future."

In fact, building public support for a particular trail or trail network is instrumental to the development process. Townships should form a trail committee composed of residents and township staff to determine the best location for trails.

The Doylestown Hike and Bike Committee is an ideal example of a successful trails advisory group, as it has advised the board of supervisors for the past three decades.

"They're a hands-on group," Mason says. "They put the trail map together initially. They also put together the design handbook that we have for our trail. The initial volunteers who were involved back in the early '90s were very hands on."

Oftentimes, securing the right of way from specific property owners or building resident buy-in is the biggest challenge for townships seeking to expand their trail network. However, municipalities can prevent this obstacle by involving the public from the start of the process.

"If there seems to be a lot of con-



**Townships looking to plan more trails should have groups of residents walk or bike different areas to determine the best locations.**





“If there’s another trail effort coming in from outside of the community connecting into their community, **that’s really key for successful trails** as trails like to go somewhere.”

cern, then I think spending more time in that public process is really important and making sure from the very beginning that you’re open and that people understand what a trail study is,” DCNR’s MacDonald says. “Like I said before, a lot of people hear about a study, and they immediately go to, ‘Oh my gosh, this is happening and they’re going to force it on my property.’

“Set expectations right from the beginning,” he adds. “What we’ve seen in some situations where the community just really turns against the whole concept is that maybe a particular person or group gets out there and spreads a lot of disinformation. And then people get very emotional and upset and once you get there, it’s hard to come back from that. So being very clear, upfront,

and open about what the intentions are and what the trail study is not going to do is a good way around that.”

Some residents may be worried about giving up their property or inviting strangers into the municipality. However, Warwick Township cites increased community policing in the areas around the trail. Many residents may also not appreciate new trails until the township shares the benefits in a public forum.

Townships should also let worried residents know that protections for landowners exist.

“The Recreational Use of Land and Water Act provides protections for landowners who allow access through their properties,” DCNR’s MacDonald says. “Usually, you might have someone who likes the idea of trails but is worried about it coming through their property, and so there are protections in Pennsylvania for liability for landowners who allow access through their properties.”

## Connecting communities

When planning trails, townships should also consider other trails they can connect with, as bridging gaps between trails is a major goal of DCNR.

“If there’s another trail effort coming in from outside of the community connecting into their community, that’s really key for successful trails, as trails like to go somewhere,” MacDonald says. “Connecting multiple towns or communities together is something positive, so being open to trails that might be coming into the community and making it part of their comprehensive plan can help.”

Doylestown Township has successfully cooperated with neighboring



**The public should be involved in trail planning from the start. Townships can help ease residents’ anxiety through communication and making expectations clear.**



**Townships considering expanding their trail networks should try to plan paths that connect to neighboring communities.**



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municipalities for decades to implement and maintain its trail system. While its Hike and Bike Committee began in 1992 in collaboration with Doylestown Borough, the committee now welcomes members from adjacent townships and boroughs.

“We’re very fortunate that the elected officials and managers from the surrounding communities cooperate so well together, are so supportive of the trail system, and meet monthly with this group,” Mason says. “You just see the support, camaraderie, and encouragement. The communities write letters of support for grants for each other, and we’ve even partnered on grants and projects together.”

Residents may have other concerns, especially with multimunicipal efforts. Northampton Township in Bucks

County was the fourth and final municipality to adopt a resolution supporting the Newtown Rail Trail, as residents were concerned about crime and privacy. However, the township addressed this problem by staying involved in the design process.

“Initially, there was a lot of resident opposition, particularly from those folks who lived along the rail line,” Northampton Township manager Robert Pellegrino says. “But at some point, we realized that there were a lot more people who wanted the trail. The county was supportive. Our board passed a resolution to support the project. We maintained an ability to be involved in that design process, particularly to ensure that our residents’ concerns were addressed in the planning and design.”

### Maintaining trails

Once a trail is built, townships must maintain and police them to keep them safe and accessible for bikers and hikers. However, many townships say that routine maintenance is the easiest part of the process.

“I would say most of our attention is either probably signage or removal of tree branches or cleanup if we have a big storm, but there’s not a ton of maintenance that really goes into it,”

Warwick Township’s Harris says. “I think the biggest challenge is getting the right of way and getting the property, but once you have these trails, I would say they’re relatively low maintenance.”

Working with trail organizations can help townships with routine maintenance, especially when a township is home to part of a multimunicipal trail. While Cranberry Township is not a member of the Allegheny Valley Trails Association, the group still helps the township, and vice versa.

“We work pretty much hand in hand on getting issues solved,” Heil says. “Whether it be anything from the maintenance of the trails or maintaining the parking lots or signage . . . there’s just a multitude of things we do with Allegheny Valley Trails, and they also do stuff for us. It’s just a great working relationship.”

### Taking the long view

Although residents and township staff alike may be excited about the prospect of building a trail network, the process takes some time. From conducting a trail study and building public support to designing the trail and applying for grant funding, many municipalities cite projects taking five to 10 years from start to finish.

“We’re looking long term, realizing it’s taken 30 years to get to where we’re at and we’re not done,” Doylestown’s Mason says. “The residents who volunteer their time, not only from Doylestown Township or Borough but also from the other municipalities, they know it’s going to take time.”

However, once a township creates the trail network, residents and the municipality will both reap the benefits. In the decades that the Ironton Rail Trail has been opened, the municipalities involved have seen the joy the trail brings residents.

“It’s really cool to see how much of an impact the trail can have on a community and the community pride that comes out of it,” Cope says. “I think there’s a lot of sentimental value for our residents. It’s been a great asset to the community, and we’re looking forward to building more.” ♦



# PUTTING OUT THE WELCOME MAT

## How townships can turn their communities into 'trail towns'

"Trail towns" have been popping up in small communities across the commonwealth. These locations are hubs for hikers and bikers and benefit from increased tourism and even happier, healthier residents.

"A trail town is a village center that welcomes folks who traveled to their town as their trail experience," Gannett Fleming Senior Planner Michelle Brummer explains. "The trail town is like, 'Yes, we would love for you to stop by when you need to rest your feet for a little bit, get a drink, and get something to eat. But we also have a bicycle repair shop here.'"

"They integrate those hospitality and support services into their local economy," she continues, "and they make it convenient for people to step off the trail or locate those businesses and services right along the trail."

Follow the steps below to start your township's trail town journey.

**1 BUILD PARTNERSHIPS.** The first step in successfully crafting a trail town identity is getting public support. Forming a dedicated committee of volunteers will help ensure the work gets done. Consider reaching out to local trail and recreation groups, businesses, community organizations, and the county planning commission. Trail committees can also form relationships with regional trail coalitions and tourism agencies, the state parks services and Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, and even national trail and biking organizations.

When the township reaches out to potential partners, it should tailor its proposal to each group and clearly state the trail committee's mission and vision.

**2 CONDUCT RESEARCH.** After the township has formed a committee and built partnerships, the next step is to conduct a community assessment. Plan a public meeting with local businesses that could benefit from the trail economy, tourism bureaus, trail groups, community organizations, and residents.

On the day of the assessment, divide everyone into smaller groups led by members of the trail committee to walk or bike on different trails throughout the township. Be sure committee members are prepared to answer questions and have group leaders take detailed notes. Finally, follow up with a feedback session.

Townships can also conduct trail research by implementing trail counts to discover who is using the trail and when, surveys to find out what hikers and bikers are doing, and business surveys to learn what businesses the township already has. Based on the findings, create an action plan that outlines strengths and weaknesses, details short- and long-term goals, and addresses business opportunities and potentials along trails.

**3 TRANSFORM YOUR TOWN.** The trailhead is arguably the most important part of the trail, as it's where hikers and bikers will go to begin their treks. Ensure that the trailhead in your township is prepared and well-maintained. Trailheads should have well-marked parking, trash cans and recycling bins, water fountains, bathrooms, signage with the trail rules and a map, benches and picnic tables, and a bulletin board listing town and trail details.

Townships should also consider adding bike repair stations, bike racks, public art, and welcome centers and ensure that the area has good signage. Cyclists and hikers will also be looking for food and drink, lodging, and entertainment, so municipalities striving to become trail towns should recruit nearby businesses and entrepreneurs to open locations in their communities.

**4 MARKET YOUR COMMUNITY.** Finally, townships looking to become trail towns should create an identity around trails.

"I think trail towns are a way for a community to craft an identity or culture around their trail," says Carrie Long, a transportation planner with Gannett Fleming. "It's bringing people in and connecting them to other communities, but it's also a way to build the town fabric around this asset and amplify the value of their trail as part of their township."

Trail branding is a crucial part of marketing for a trail town. Narrow down one key characteristic that describes your trail, and then center branding and marketing materials on that aspect. Townships should also print rack cards with information about the town and trails, as well as distribute brochures and cards to tourism agency offices, trail-oriented businesses, bike shops, and at the trailhead. Finally, townships can offer events such as charity fundraisers, nature walks, or guided tours to promote its trails.