

BUILDING SUPPORT FOR TRAILS TOOLKIT

September 2025



MARYLAND STATE TRANSPORTATION TRAILS STRATEGIC PLAN



Introduction

Making the case for transportation trail projects often requires collaboration across agencies, organizations, and special interest groups. Public officials and decision makers typically want to have a clear understanding of the benefits of trails and what they will offer the community before committing funds and resources to the project. Building support is the first order of business when starting a trail project. However, trails need support throughout their lifespan, including resurgences of support at key moments such as fundraising or unexpected maintenance challenges. Establishing a strong network of support early in the trail project process can help set the project up for success and have an easier ride through any challenges ahead.

This toolkit is for trail advocates across Maryland, particularly those who are not already engaged in advocacy with their local governments.

It gives an overview of four key elements for building trail project support and achieving long-term success:

- An organized group of trail advocates to champion for the project.
- Supportive representation in local government and, if needed, state government.
- A clear plan for moving the trail project forward.
- Support from key partners and stakeholders that may include local businesses or community organizations.

BUILDING SUPPORT

FUNDING

LAND ACQUISITION

PLANNING

Local Plans &
Priority Letters

Feasibility
Study

IMPLEMENTATION

Concept
Design

30% • 60%
100% Design

Construction

OPERATIONS & MAINTENANCE

FIGURE 1 Trail Lifecycle Phases. Additional toolkits are available for Funding and Operations & Maintenance phases.

Trail Advocacy Groups

Trail advocacy groups can vary significantly in their level of engagement and geographic impact. Some organizations, such as the League of American Bicyclists or Rails to Trails Conservancy, advocate for trails across the country. Many other groups with similar missions advocate at the state or local level, or focus advocacy on a specific trail.

Although national-level advocacy groups can offer help, forming a local organization made up of trail project proponents and allies is recommended to demonstrate commitment to the trail project, organize efforts to garner community and political support, and establish a network of energy and momentum behind the project. Trail projects typically have a better chance at successful implementation when supported by a dedicated, local group. Oftentimes, one person or a few advocates will provide the spark and will serve as champions throughout the lifespan of the trail project, but a network of support is needed to go from the idea stage to design and construction.

Friends Groups and Bike/Ped Advocacy Organizations

Friends-of-the-Trail and bicycle and pedestrian advocacy groups organize across the country in support of local trail projects. Maryland is home to several Friends groups, such as [The Friends of AACo Trails in Anne Arundel County](#). Friends groups can range from informal advocacy groups to 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations. Incorporation enables groups to enjoy a tax-exempt status and opens opportunities for establishing a bank account and raising and receiving donations and grants. For groups that do not have the time and resources to incorporate there are options for working with larger nonprofits that serve as a “pass-through” for donations, often called a fiscal sponsor. A fiscal sponsor is an organization that provides oversight, financial management, and other administrative services to help build the capacity of other organizations that do not have their own 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status. [Fusion Partnership](#) is one example of a 501(c)(3) fiscal sponsor in Maryland. Their mission is to sponsor groups that are committed to making their community better and promoting social change.



FIGURE 2 Friends of Anne Arundel County Trails engage volunteers and the local community in fundraising for trail amenities and maintenance of flowerbeds on the B&A, BWI, Broadneck Peninsula, and WB&A trails (Source: Friends of Anne Arundel County Trails)

Depending on the group's mission and members' skillsets, friends groups can take on a variety of tasks that support a trail project such as raising funds, designing promotional materials, organizing meetings between key stakeholders, or providing maintenance on constructed trails. Through their connections and volunteer support, friends groups and bicycle and pedestrian advocacy groups can play a pivotal role in moving a trail project forward.

Coalitions

Trail coalitions often operate regionally and are made up of agencies, organizations, and individuals with the goal of advancing a regional trail or network of trails. Typically there is one lead or leading agency at the regional or sometimes national level that offers guidance and leadership to the group. Maryland has several established trail coalitions, including the [Maryland Eastern Shore Trail Network \(MESTN\)](#), the [Baltimore Greenway Trail Coalition](#), and the [Capital Trails Coalition](#). Coalitions typically take on a major role in coordinating efforts across jurisdictions and agencies. Facilitating collaboration is especially important for long-distance trails or networks that may have multiple entities responsible for construction, operations, and maintenance.

Role of Government

It is helpful to build a strong case for a trail project prior to presenting it to public officials for support. They will want to be confident in the benefits that a trail can provide to the community. Depending on what is important to a public official, advocates may want to pursue specific partnerships listed later in this toolkit and develop talking points around health benefits, economic impacts, environmental benefits, or improvements to quality of life. Public officials will want to know whether there is widespread public support for the project, and they may also want to know the costs to develop and maintain similar trails in other communities. Ultimately, trail advocates need to convince local officials to formally start the trail planning process, typically with a feasibility study for the trail.

At each level of government – from county councils to the State – there may be mandated advisory councils, committees, or commissions that advise agencies on projects like implementing a new trail. These groups usually have appointed citizen members in addition to agency representation and are required to make their meetings public. These meetings provide a periodic opportunity for the general public and advocates alike to learn, comment, and discuss needed trail projects. For example, the [Maryland Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committee](#) is staffed by MDOT and includes representatives from the State departments of

Commerce, Disabilities, Health, Natural Resources, Planning, and Education as well as the State Police and Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission. Residents representing different regions of the State and cross-sections of the population are also members of the committee. Working with similar cross-departmental committees, bicycle and pedestrian advocacy groups can encourage support of local trail projects.

Friends groups, bicycle and pedestrian advocacy groups, and coalitions can play a role in kickstarting the trail planning process by organizing and facilitating meetings with local government councils, mayors, county executives, or other elected officials to make the case for the trail project. When a trail project requires support across different levels of government, it is often best to start at local levels, like cities or towns, before going to the county or state level. For example, requesting a resolution of support from local boards and commissions could be a strategy to garner funding or demonstrate commitment to other higher levels of government. In unincorporated areas of Maryland, it is even more important to build coalitions with community associations or groups which are usually informal but often represent a community's interest in front of county councils.



FIGURE 3 The Eastern Shore Land Conservancy has helped organize the Maryland Eastern Shore Trail Network, a coalition of local government stakeholders and bicycle/pedestrian advocacy groups that envisions a connected trail network that criss-crosses the region. Learn more in the Easton Rail-Trail case study.

Who to Engage

Typically, trail projects require involvement of several state and local agencies, and sometimes federal agencies as well. Transportation trail projects often require collaboration across agencies that do not typically work closely together. With trails serving a dual purpose as a transportation and recreational facility, consideration should be given to the involvement and roles of both transportation and parks & recreation departments. The involvement of each department may vary depending on project specifics, institutional capacity, funding sources, and ultimate ownership of the trail but having support from both will be critical. It is important to initiate conversations among the different agencies early and keep track of their stated roles and responsibilities in a potential trail project. Links to some of the key Maryland transportation and parks and recreation department and agencies are listed below.

TABLE 1 Departments and agencies at each level of government with roles in transportation trails

Level of Government	Transportation	Parks & Recreation
Federal – Department	US Department of Transportation (USDOT)	US Department of Interior (DOI)
Federal – Office or Administration	Federal Highway Administration (FHWA)	National Park Service
State – Department	Maryland Department of Transportation (MDOT)	Maryland Department of Natural Resources (DNR)
State – Office or Administration	State Highway Administration (SHA) See also: MDOT’s other modal administrations when the right-of-way is under their supervision	Maryland Park Service Office of Outdoor Recreation Office of Land Acquisition and Planning
Regional	Urbanized Areas: Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) Rural Areas: Tri-County Councils	N/A
County	Planning, Transportation, Public Works, or similar department	Parks & Recreation or similar department
Incorporated City or Town	Planning, Transportation, Public Works, or similar department	Parks & Recreation or similar department
Quasi-Governmental Groups	Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), Main Street groups, tourism board, community or homeowners’ associations (HOAs)	

Trails and MDOT’s Modal Administrations

While SHA is often a key partner in transportation trail projects due to their ownership of most state roads, other modal administrations within MDOT may be relevant depending on the location of the trail project.

- **Maryland Aviation Administration (MAA):** Manage trails at BWI Marshall Airport.
- **Maryland Transit Administration (MTA):** Often owns active and unused rail corridors across the State.
- **Maryland Port Administration (MPA):** Oversees most waterfront facilities in the Port of Baltimore.
- **Maryland Transportation Authority (MDTA):** Operates all tolled bridges, tunnels, and roads in the State.

Planning Process

Trail advocates play a crucial role in the planning process for a new trail. One key way advocates support the process is by keeping track of the trail's inclusion in various government documents and plans. Ensuring that a trail project is identified within regional transportation or trails and greenways plans is an important step in showing that the project has been vetted and has some institutional support. Most counties or municipalities update their plans on a routine basis and conduct public engagement as part of this process. The importance of ensuring that citizens and trail advocates participate in engagement activities should not be overlooked. Once a trail project is identified in a local transportation or bike/ped plan and is part of a county's priority letter, it is more likely to be eligible for funding that can support further planning, design, construction, and maintenance. Getting a new trail project included in a planning priority letter can require some patience, depending on local planning processes and priorities. Some jurisdictions may consider including multi-modal access and Complete Streets as priorities in their local plans as a way to signal support for these types of projects, without naming a specific project or trail.

For projects seeking federal transportation funding, it is important to have them included on the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) for eligibility for federal grants. In areas not represented by an MPO, county-level support in a priority letter is important so that the project can be added to MDOT's State Transportation Improvement Program (STIP). Additionally, for trail projects seeking state or federal recreation or conservation grants, it is important to have them added to a county's land preservation, parks, and recreation plan (LPPRP). Local trail advocates can play a major role in supporting the trail planning process by ensuring their trail project is included in all documents and plans.

A feasibility study is typically completed following initial identification of the trail project in local, county, or regional network plans. Feasibility studies are used to identify opportunities and challenges, evaluate alternative routes, and oftentimes include a concept design

Plan Checklist

Is your trail project in:

- ☒ Your county or municipal transportation plan or bicycle/pedestrian plan?
- ☒ Your county or municipal comprehensive plan?
- ☒ Your county's land preservation, parks, and recreation plan (LPPRP)?
- ☒ Your county's annual transportation priority letter to MDOT?
- ☒ Your region's Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS)?
- ☒ Your Metropolitan Planning Organization's or the State's Transportation Improvement Program?

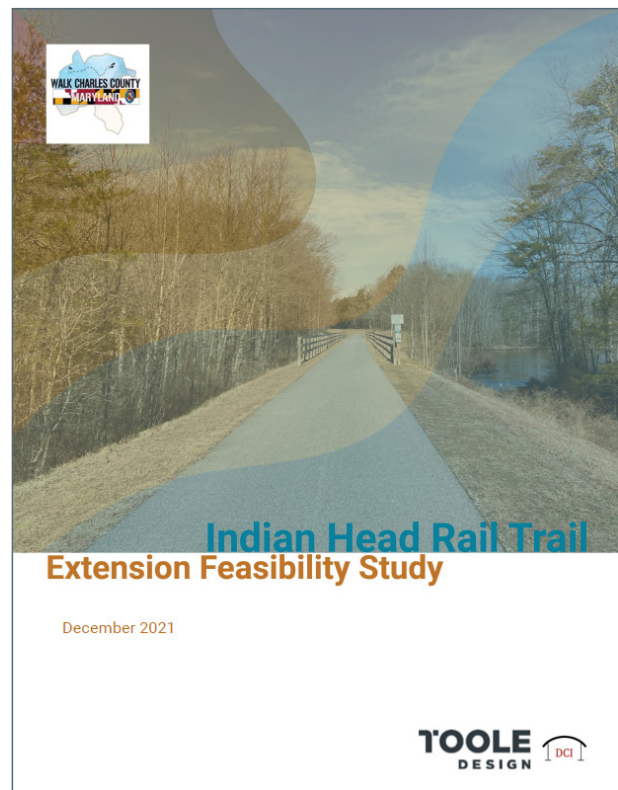


FIGURE 4 The Indian Head Rail Trail Extension Feasibility Study helped identify a preferred alignment for Charles County, who is using the study to advance the project towards the next phase of design.

along with high-level cost estimates for trail construction. Most feasibility studies also include a public engagement process to gather input and concerns and gauge support. These studies, although high-level in nature, are a critical first step in trail project planning. While often done by local governments, sometimes MPOs, trail advocacy or partner organizations need to take on the role of coordinating feasibility studies before local governments have the capacity to engage fully on a project. Many grant opportunities for trail design and construction, including those funded by MDOT, will require that a feasibility study be completed for eligibility. Learn more about funding feasibility studies in the Funding Transportation Trails Toolkit, which explores options such as the MDOT Kim Lamphier Bikeways Network Program grant, often used for the preliminary stages of planning and feasibility for transportation trail projects and open to local governments and non-profits alike.

Once a feasibility study has been completed, a jurisdiction may consider a “quick build” project in applicable locations to evaluate the potential transportation trail. If the project repurposes existing roadway and does not require new paving, the “quick build” project can be a low-cost treatment. These projects qualify as minor retrofit project types in the Kim Lamphier Bikeways Network program and can also be nominated to SHA for the Maryland Quick Build Program, which builds upon MDOT’s 2024 Complete Streets Leadership Academy (CSLA) quick pilot program. A past CSLA project in Howard County repurposed an auxiliary motor vehicle lane into a temporary shared use path. The CSLA report details this process, the data collected, and how some of the quick build safety treatments were made permanent.

The role of trail supporters doesn’t stop once the trail is open, however. Operations and maintenance are crucial to the ongoing success of any trail, and trail advocates can play a key role in the continued stewardship of the trail. Learn more about trail maintenance in the Maintaining Transportation Trails Toolkit.

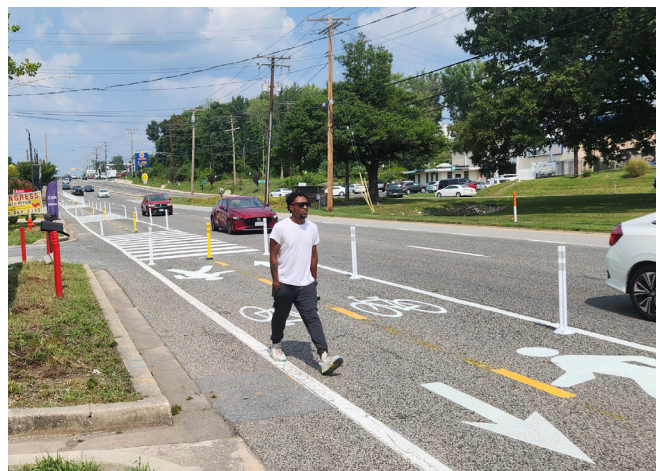
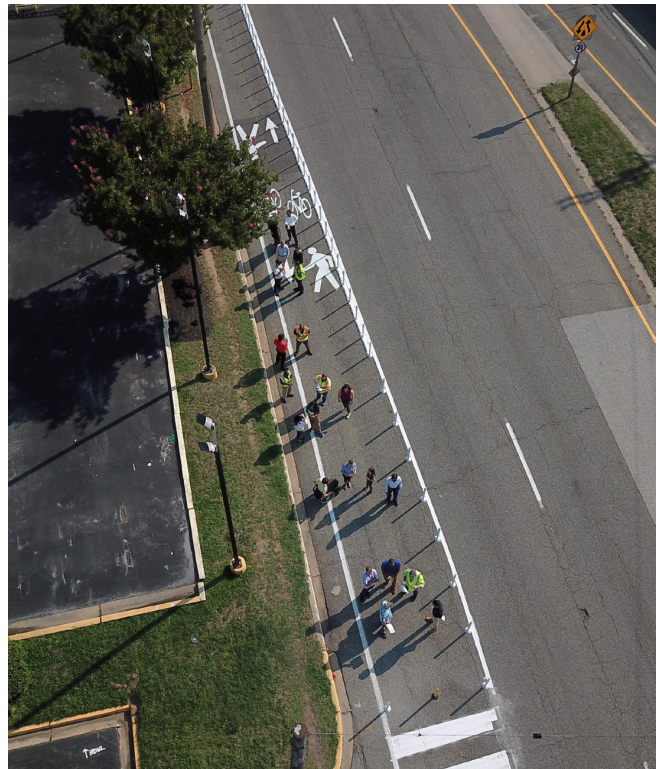


FIGURE 5 The [Maryland Complete Streets Leadership Academy Report](#) provides details and findings from completed “quick build” projects that improve safety for people walking and bicycling, such as this temporary shared use path on US 1 (Washington Boulevard North) in Howard County.

Partners and Key Stakeholders

Building support among partners and stakeholders beyond the trail advocacy group is not only necessary, but also increases the positive impacts that trails can have. Growing your trail coalition to include people across sectors will help more people understand the value of a proposed trail project and what it can bring to them. While a broad coalition is important, it is also critical to identify the goals and policies that guide decision making in your jurisdiction, such as Vision Zero, equity, carbon reduction, or other sustainability goals. Consider the following types of groups and organizations in your community and explore the overlapping interests that they may have with transportation trails.

Land use regulators, such as planning departments, councils, or boards, can ensure trails and multi-modal access are considered in long-term land use and transportation planning initiatives on local and state levels. These regulators are in position to integrate trail and vulnerable road user (VRU) access into comprehensive plans, other locally adopted plans, and development review processes. When included in these plans, trails and shared use paths may be built as part of larger road reconstruction or highway interchange projects instead of stand alone projects. Additionally, Complete Streets review of roadway projects requires evaluation of how multi-modal elements, like transportation trails, are included.

Environmental organizations who have missions based in conservation and sustainable land use are often strong partners for trail projects. For example, the Eastern Shore Land Conservancy (ESLC) provides local and regional advocacy for sustainable land use policies. ESLC has helped lead the Maryland Eastern Shore Trail Network to mutually advocate for a regional system of interconnected trails that will bring benefits to communities and ecosystems through land corridor conservation. For more information, see the Easton Rail Trail case study.



FIGURE 6 Howard County Streets for All coalition advocates for more bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure, including trails. It was led by the Horizon Foundation, AARP Maryland, and the American Heart Association in partnership with 19 other local organizations, including community associations, bicycle/pedestrian advocacy groups, and environmental organizations. Organizations serving populations who are more likely to walk or bike for their trips, such as people with autism and new immigrants, also participate in the coalition.

Community foundations are also potential supporters of trails projects depending on their mission and priorities. As place-based organizations, they are often more likely to support projects that are impactful at a local level, such as trails. Community foundations may also take an interest in trail projects because - as opposed to the usual program-level support they often provide - trails are physical infrastructure that continue to provide benefits to the community even after their financial support ends. For example, the Horizon Foundation, Howard County's community health foundation, has a mission to improve public health in the community, especially for those who face the most significant barriers to achieving good health. One of the Horizon Foundation's advocacy and policy focus areas is Complete Streets. Since 2016, the foundation has been advocating for projects and policies that support bicyclists and pedestrians, including transportation trails. The foundation has recently transitioned leadership of the coalition they founded to the local bicycle advocacy group, Bike HoCo.

Public health agencies and organizations are frequently strong supporters of trail projects due to the well documented mental and physical health benefits that trails and active living offer communities. The Talbot County Health Department relocated to a new facility in 2024 that is directly accessible from the Easton Rail Trail. The department cited the enhanced public accessibility and direct access to the trail as one of the primary benefits of the new location. In a similar vein, a Centers for Disease Control Healthy Places grant helped form the initial idea for the Terrapin Run Trail in Somerset County in the late 2000s. The Parks Department received the grant to support the work of mapping out promoting existing and proposed trails across the county to support active living. For more information about the Terrapin Run Trail, see the Funding Transportation Trails Toolkit.

Chambers of commerce and economic development and tourism-focused organizations can be excellent champions for trail projects when they can see the benefits. The economic benefits of trails can often make the biggest splash when trying to build support. Economic impact analyses have been completed for the Great Allegheny Passage in Western Maryland in 2008, 2012, 2015, and 2021. The [Great Allegheny Passage Economic Impact Report, November 2021](#) showed that spending from tourists using the trail generated approximately \$19 million in tax revenue in 2019 with \$8.7 million in tax revenue going back to state, county, and local governments. It is estimated that the trail supported almost 1,400 jobs in the year of the study. Economic development and business groups may be particularly attuned to signature or iconic trail projects, which can help revitalize spaces and bring visitors to an area, such as in the Carroll Creek Linear Park case study.

The impact of trails to catalyze additional improvements surrounding them varies from project to project. In areas where trail project's impact on property values could displace longstanding residents, **housing and community development corporations** should be involved to address gentrification concerns, engage the community in trail planning and implementation, and develop programs that can help people stay in place so that existing residents can partake in the benefits of the trail once it is built.

Stakeholder Checklist

Have you considered including groups and organizations that focus on the following issues in your trail project?

- ☒ Environmental conservation and restoration
- ☒ Wildlife appreciation (e.g., birding)
- ☒ Public health and active living
- ☒ Bicycling, running, walking, and other outdoor recreation activities
- ☒ **Chambers of commerce and economic development**
- ☒ Hotel, hospitality, and tourism development
- ☒ Historic preservation and interpretation
- ☒ Community and capacity building
- ☒ Housing and community development corporations
- ☒ Organizations serving populations that are less likely to drive for transportation (e.g., people with disabilities, seniors, new immigrants)



FIGURE 7 The impact of the Great Allegheny Passage Trail (above) and other trails that criss-cross Allegany County has oriented the county's tourism office to prominently feature trails and the outdoors in its brand, website, and marketing materials.

Addressing Common Trail Concerns

Concerned landowners along a trail project corridor can be a common occurrence for trail projects. Lack of information and misconceptions can often fuel concerns, so it is important to work with all trail-adjacent parties early on in the trail planning process. Listening to concerns and taking a genuine approach of curiosity and compassion can go a long way towards gaining supporters. Cross-sector coalitions offer an advantage

to addressing concerned landowners because these organizations often include trusted groups and agencies outside of the usual realm of trail sponsors and advocates. For example, the Eastern Shore Land Conservancy (ESLC) frequently works directly with farmers on land conservation projects. The established relationships from this previous work puts ESLC in a strong position to start conversations about trail projects that may be adjacent to farmland. Rails to Trails Conservancy has developed a set of techniques, summarized below, that have been found to work well when facing concerns about trail projects. .

1. Reach Out

Do not wait for nearby residents to learn about your proposal by reading about it in the newspaper. Talk to them directly, circulating an open letter or giving a presentation at a community gathering.

2. Listen

Take time to understand why adjacent landowners are concerned about the trail. Many of their concerns stem from fear of the unknown. Listen carefully, address specific concerns, and try to arrive at solutions that benefit as many people as possible. While you may think these concerns are unreasonable, adjacent landowners take their interests seriously. Never trivialize their concerns.

3. Find Allies

Among the people who live adjacent to the proposed trail, you may find bicyclists, walkers, runners, horseback riders, families with active children or individuals with disabilities—all of whom represent likely trail supporters. Seek out these individuals, explain the trail's benefits, and urge them to get involved in supporting the project.

4. Get Involved

Establish a trail advisory committee and ask adjacent residents to serve along with advocates and user groups. Often, when given a chance to participate in the process, a group of adjacent landowners may be more willing to work toward developing solutions.

5. Enlist Converts

Invite a landowner who was once concerned about a trail to come and speak in your community. Hearing the story of how someone who used to be concerned about a trail becoming a trail advocate can help allay the concerns of future trail neighbors.

6. Build Consensus

If you are having difficulty building consensus, consider enlisting a third party to identify the concerns of adjacent landowners. Bring in someone who is respected and trusted by both sides, such as an official from a state or national agency.

7. Be Positive

Although it may be difficult at times, do not react in anger to claims from potential stakeholders that are concerned about the trail. No matter how unpleasant a discussion becomes, always treat everyone with fairness and sincerity. Be firm, factual, and reasonable.

8. Work Hard

Do not let outspoken individuals sidetrack your project. Identify individuals who are still undecided or have milder levels of concerns. Work hard to address the concerns of these individuals and convert them to your cause; they can add to your majority and help persuade other more hardened individuals.

9. Work the Media

Favorable coverage in the media helps defuse negative arguments and generate support for your cause. Give your project the best opportunity for positive exposure by supplying television, radio, and newspaper reporters and editors with interesting and accurate factual information.

FIGURE 8 Tips and techniques for working through concerned trail-adjacent stakeholders adapted from [Rails to Trails Conservancy's Trail Building Toolbox: Working with Opposition and Neighbors](#).

Case Studies

The following three case studies are examples of trail projects across Maryland that showcase best practices and lessons learned in garnering support for trails. Each of these projects had a unique set of challenges to overcome, but building support and advocacy play a primary role in the success of all three projects.

- Easton Rail-Trail and the Eastern Shore Land Conservancy, Talbot County (Eastern Shore)
- Capital Crescent Trail and the Coalition for the Capital Crescent Trail, District of Columbia and Montgomery County (Capital Region)
- Carroll Creek Linear Park, City of Frederick (Capital Region)

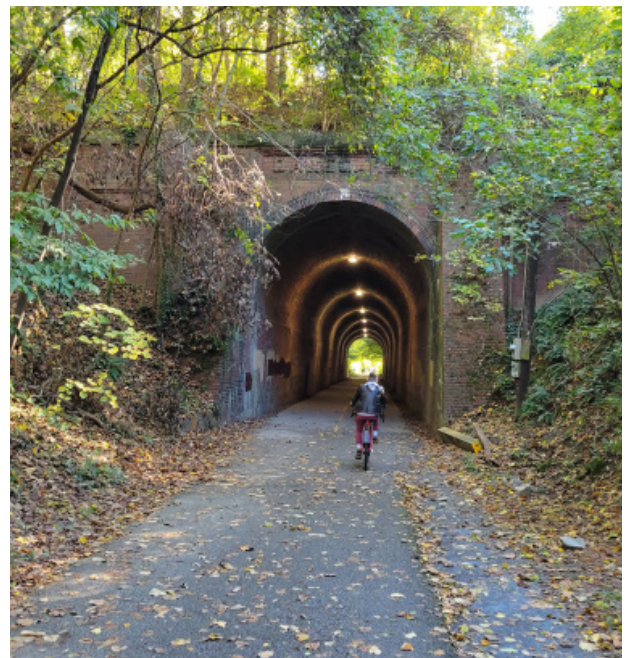


FIGURE 9 Clockwise from left: TAC members receiving a guided tour of the Carroll Creek Linear Park in Frederick, the Easton Rail-Trail in Easton (Source: [LeafsHockeyFan/Flickr](#)), and the Dalecarlia Tunnel along the Capital Crescent Trail in Montgomery County.

Lead Agencies

Town of Easton, Maryland
Eastern Shore Trail Network
(MESTN), and Eastern Shore
Land Conservancy (ESLC)

Location

Easton Talbot County
(Eastern Shore)

Surfaces

Paved (asphalt)

Trail Length

5.65 miles

Easton Rail-Trail



FIGURE 10 People walking on the Easton, Rail-Trail east-west connector.

The Easton Rail-Trail was constructed along the Clayton Line—an inactive rail corridor that runs from Marydel through Queen Anne and into Easton that was ultimately acquired by MDOT. The Easton Rail-Trail’s original north–south segment was developed roughly a decade ago and is completely within the town’s boundaries. The trail has since expanded to include an east–west connector that reaches Port Street Commons, a newly developed affordable housing complex. Easton’s trail system now totals approximately three miles, forming a “cross” shape that links key destinations within town and reflects the municipality’s long-term vision to connect all neighborhoods through active transportation infrastructure.

While the trail itself is relatively short, it has played a significant role in helping catalyze broader trail coordination efforts on Maryland’s Eastern Shore. The trail provides a visible example of high-quality infrastructure in a small town, an example that has helped galvanize regional conversations around connectivity and equity in trail access. The Eastern Shore Land Conservancy (ESLC), a regional land trust, built on this momentum to help convene the Maryland Eastern Shore Trail Network (MESTN), a coalition of planners, advocates, and agency staff committed to expanding trail access across jurisdictions.

Municipal and In-House Capacity

Easton stands out on the Eastern Shore for its internal planning and engineering capacity. The town employs a full-time engineer and maintains an active and involved planning department—resources that many peer towns lack. Easton’s leadership has used these tools to push forward trail development, even in the face of opposition. In one recent example, the town proceeded with trail construction through a new residential development despite initial

homeowner resistance. Because the town had secured pre-negotiated easements before the development was built, they retained the legal right to move forward. Although residents initially opposed the trail, they have since become active users and supporters.

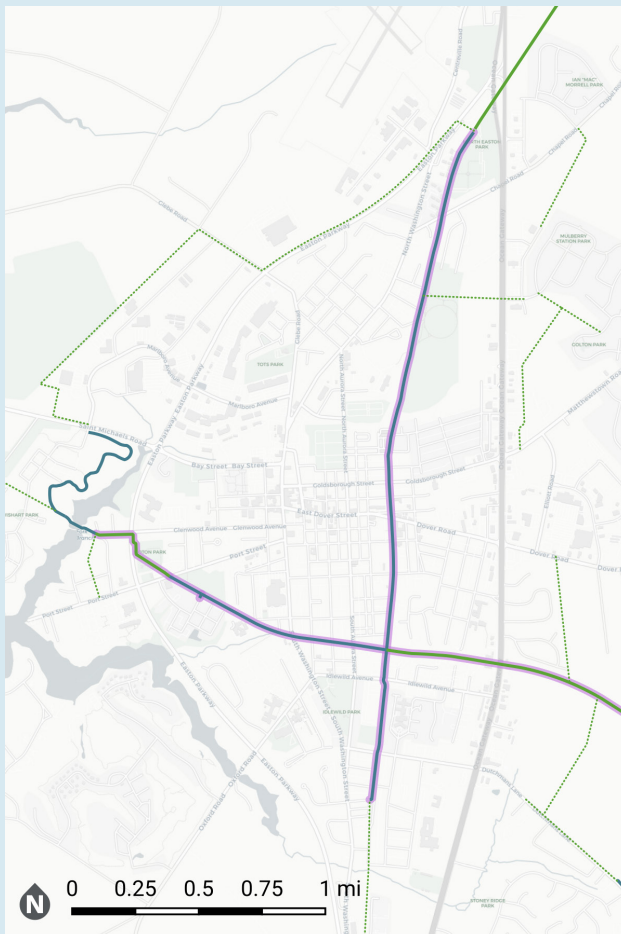
Easton has also demonstrated a proactive approach to land acquisition and funding. The town secured \$5 million from Maryland DPR's Program Open Space to purchase 200 acres of wooded land near its southwest border, land now slated to become a major new park and trail hub. That effort was supported by only \$200,000 in local matching funds (split between the town and county), underscoring how small communities can successfully leverage state-level programs with minimal local investment.

Coalition of Local Leadership

The Easton Rail-Trail helped catalyze the formation of MESTN, a coalition of counties, nonprofits, and local champions working to connect the region's fragmented trail segments. The coalition emerged from a 2022 workshop hosted by ESLC that highlighted the region's lack of trail infrastructure compared to Central Maryland. Since then, MESTN has secured technical assistance from the National Park Service's Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program (RTCA), released a strategic

The Frederick Douglass Rail Trail and Regional Momentum

The Easton Rail-Trail now serves as the eastern gateway to a planned regional trail spine: the Frederick Douglass Rail Trail (FDRT). The FDRT would extend over nine miles north toward Cordova and Tuckahoe State Park, and eventually into Caroline County, using the same rail corridor. The project received technical assistance through the RTCA program to support a feasibility study around 2019. Progress stalled during the pandemic due to staffing shortages and turnover, but local partners now report renewed momentum. Agencies like MDOT and DNR have re-engaged, and with staffing improvements, the project is now considered "almost shovel-ready"—pending bridge upgrades and right-of-way negotiations.



MAP 1 Easton Rail-Trail Network with existing (blue) and planned (green) segments.

plan, and is finalizing a charter to establish a standing board of directors. Through this effort, Easton's trail system has served not just as a model, but as a launchpad—helping show other small towns and rural counties what's possible when local governments take the lead, build partnerships, and stay committed through early resistance and bureaucratic delay.

The Role of the Land Trust

While the original trail predates ESLC's involvement, the conservancy has since taken on a key role in regional trail coordination. As a land trust, ESLC brought deep relationships with local landowners, a working knowledge of conservation-focused funding mechanisms like Maryland DPR's Program Open Space, and a reputation as a neutral, credible convener. This allowed ESLC to build support for trail planning across different levels of government and among stakeholders who may not traditionally align with one another. ESLC's land use expertise also positioned it to manage stakeholder relationships with sensitivity to property rights and community context—making it a strategic partner in situations where concerns about access or development might otherwise stall progress.

Opportunities and Barriers to Sustained Investment

Easton's experience reflects a broader pattern: well-designed trails attract users, raise adjacent property values, and foster a stronger sense of community. Residents walk and bike the trail frequently, with the east–west extension now serving as a vital connection to Port Street Commons and Easton Parkway. ESLC has documented increases in property value near the

trail through a value-per-acre analysis conducted by a consultant. The study demonstrates that proximity to parks and trails is a strong predictor of assessed land value, which was a finding that can help justify long-term maintenance and expansion costs to elected officials and taxpayers alike.

Despite strong local leadership, trail expansion in Easton—and throughout the region—faces familiar coordination challenges. A key obstacle is crossing US 50 (Ocean Gateway) to link the Easton Rail-Trail to the planned FDRT segments. Local partners noted that proposals to accommodate trail users have been deemed infeasible, even as new traffic signals have been added to support adjacent private developments. The contrast has raised questions about how safety priorities are applied across different types of projects. Proposals to slow traffic have been met with resistance, even as similar traffic-calming measures have been implemented to serve private commercial developments.

Key Takeaways

- **Visible local success can seed broader coalitions.** The Easton Rail-Trail helped catalyze the formation of MESTN by providing a tangible example of trail potential in a small town setting.
- **Land trusts can play a powerful supporting role.** ESLC's credibility with landowners and existing policy relationships positioned it as an effective trail convener, especially in areas without a formal trail authority.
- **Upfront legal tools paired with engagement build trust.** Easton's use of pre-negotiated easements reduced conflict during construction, while outreach helped shift public sentiment after implementation.

Capital Crescent Trail



FIGURE 11 Recently constructed section of Capital Crescent Trail in downtown Bethesda connecting existing trail to future rail-with-trail along the Line.

The Capital Crescent Trail (CCT) is a rail-trail, which uses the route of the former Georgetown Branch railroad to connect Georgetown, DC, to Bethesda, Montgomery County. From 1997 to 2017, the trail continues as the “Georgetown Branch Interim Trail,” a crushed stone trail west of Downtown Silver Spring. That section has been closed since 2017 for construction of the Purple Line. However, as part of that project, this eastern section is being rebuilt, widened, extended, and fully paved. As of this writing, reopening is scheduled for early 2026.

A Multi-State, Multi-Agency Effort

The section of this trail within the District of Columbia is managed by the National Park Service as part of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal National Historical Park. The section in Maryland between the DC/Maryland border and Downtown Bethesda is managed by the Montgomery Parks division of the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission (M-NCPPC). The wider, extended section between Bethesda and Silver Spring is being constructed by the Maryland Transit Administration and will be managed by the Montgomery County Department of Transportation once it opens. The extension to Silver Spring will complete a direct connection between the CCT and the Metropolitan Branch Trail (MBT). The Purple Line project will also complete the Silver Spring Green Trail, providing a direct link between the CCT, MBT, and the Sligo Creek Trail.

Lead Agencies

National Park Service (for segments in the District of Columbia)

Montgomery Parks (DC border to Downtown Bethesda for segments from the DC/MD border to Downtown Bethesda))

Montgomery County DOT (Downtown Bethesda to Silver Spring) (for future segments between Downtown Bethesda and Silver Spring)

Location

District of Columbia, Bethesda, Chevy Chase, and Silver Spring, Montgomery County, Maryland; Georgetown and Palisades (Capital Region)

Surfaces

Paved (asphalt, concrete)

Trail Length

7.1 miles (open), 4.3 miles (under construction)

Building a Cross-Sector Coalition Over Shared Interests

The Coalition for the Capital Crescent Trail is a non-profit created in 1986, the year CSX notified regulators it intended to abandon the Georgetown Branch railroad. This was three years after Congress had amended the National Trails System Act to allow railbanking, permitting rail corridors to be turned into trails while preserving the potential to be reverted to rail use. At the initial abandonment of the rail line, there were a number of competing interests, including developers who wanted to build on parts of the corridor, proposals to use the corridor for mass transit or rebuild the rail line for an excursion line, and neighbors who wanted to expand their backyards — some of whom sued to prevent the County from buying the corridor and developing the trail. By the end of 1988, advocates from the Coalition, Potomac Pedalers Touring Club, and others — including some, such as the Greater Bethesda-Chevy Chase Coalition, who were interested in preventing the corridor's use for mass transit or other potential uses — succeeded in convincing the Montgomery County Council to purchase and railbank the Maryland section of the corridor and develop the trail. In the same month the Council voted to acquire the right-of-way, the Coalition published their Concept Plan for the Capital Crescent Trail. The 1988 concept plan lists 35 member organizations of the Coalition, including:

- Civic organizations (e.g., Citizens Association of Georgetown)
- Conservation groups (e.g., Audubon Naturalist Society, Sierra Club)
- Cycling groups (e.g., NIH Bicycle Commuting Club, Washington Area Bicyclist Association)
- Walking, hiking, and running organizations (e.g., Potomac Appalachian Trail Club, DC and Montgomery County Road Runners)

More Than 30 Years of Active Trail Stewardship

The National Park Service initially acquired rights to the portion inside the District of Columbia in 1989, though it would take until the end of 1990 to complete the purchase. The Coalition then worked with members of Congress, including testifying before the House Appropriations Committee, to have funding allocated in the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991. This helped pay to remove the former railroad infrastructure, clear and pave the path, and build part of the River Road bridge — some of the original pavement has, as of 2025, lasted more than 30 years. While debate over the proposed light rail line between Bethesda and Silver Spring continued into the 1990s and beyond, the Coalition (including organizations that specifically opposed the rail line) worked with the County Council and agencies to study and install the interim trail on the right-of-way.

The Coalition has continued to work with Montgomery Parks and the Montgomery Parks Foundation since the Trail was built and opened in 1995. The Coalition's website [records](#) more than 30 letters, official comments, and testimonies submitted to Montgomery Parks, the Planning Board, Maryland governors and Secretaries of Transportation, the National Park Service, and



FIGURE 12 A cyclist rides through snow on the Capital Crescent Trail near the Dalecarlia Tunnel (Source: [Jay Mallin/Flickr](#)).

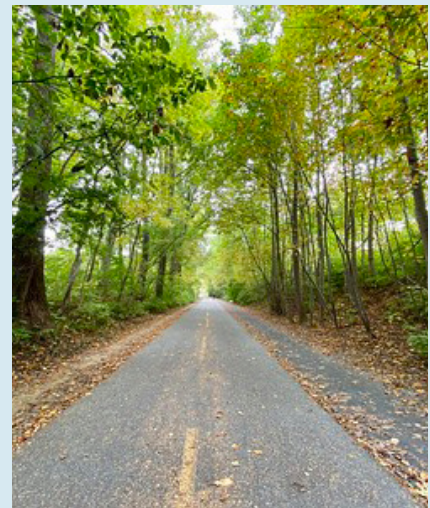


FIGURE 13 Capital Crescent Trail in early fall (Source: [Joe Flood/Flickr](#)).

others. Their advocacy and fundraising have resulted in several improvements since the trail was opened:

- The Georgetown Branch Interim Trail was built and opened for trail use in 1997,
- The rail tunnel under Wisconsin Ave in Bethesda was paved and opened for trail use in 1998,
- The rail trestle over Rock Creek was rebuilt and opened for trail use in 2003,
- A plaque honoring longtime advocate and former Coalition chair John Dugger was installed at a rest area south of the Dalecarlia Tunnel in 2014,
- Neal Potter Plaza, a rest area and monument just off the River Road bridge which honors former County Executive Neal Potter, Rails-to-Trails Conservancy co-founder David Burwell, and Coalition donor Lee Wick Dennison, was constructed in 2018.
- Additional rest areas have also been built in and near Downtown Bethesda, including [Ourisman Plaza](#) and Wiener Plaza.

Members of the Coalition additionally assisted Montgomery Parks in developing the 2001 Facility Plan for the Capital Crescent and Metropolitan Branch Trails. The Coalition performed trail use surveys in 1996 and 2000; at the request of Montgomery Parks, the survey was repeated in 2006 and submitted to M-NCPPC, which published a report of the findings the following year. The 2006 survey recorded more than 500 users per hour at peak periods and an average hourly use of 240 people—more than twice the rate of the county’s second-most popular trail, the Sligo Creek Trail, and an increase of more than 50 percent since the 1996 survey.

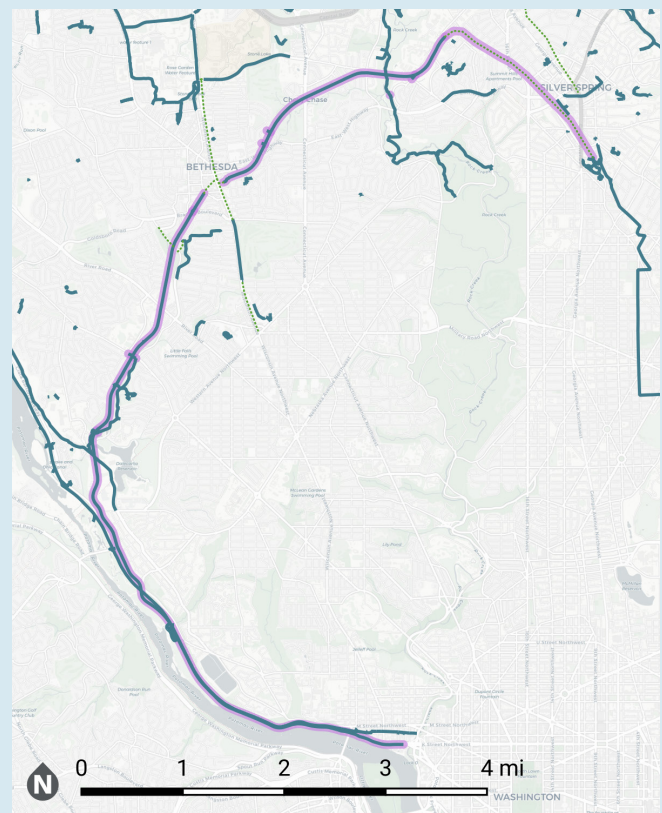
The Coalition Today

The Coalition continues to work with local businesses and residents to advocate and fundraise for the trail, including encouraging both the National Park Service and Montgomery Parks to repave and widen their sections of the trail—which are more than 30 years old, and only 10 feet wide. The Coalition’s [“Repave and Widen” page](#) notes that both sections have suffered from frost and root heaving, subsidence, and overgrowth, and cites AASHTO, Maryland State Highway Administration, and Federal Highway Administration guidance, which all suggest the trail should be widened by several feet due to its tremendous popularity. According to Montgomery County, the trail has long been one of the most heavily used in the country; the trail counter at Ourisman Plaza

in Bethesda recorded more than 725,000 visitors in 2024, and more than 7.5 million since being first installed in late 2014. Based on this, the trail should be at least “12 feet paved width with 2 foot unpaved shoulders on both sides,” the Coalition says, noting that this is the plan for the rebuilt eastern segment. The Coalition adds that an optimum width would be 14 feet plus shoulders, especially as future developments, such as the reopening of the Bethesda–Silver Spring section and replacement Wisconsin Avenue tunnel, “will most certainly increase recreational and commuter traffic on the trail.”

Key Takeaways

- **Form coalitions and partnerships** wherever possible to expand advocacy capacity.
- **Look for unexpected partners** — even if your partners don’t all agree with each other on all issues, you can still all work together on the things you do agree on.
- **Use railbanking provisions to preserve former rail routes** that may be potential future rail-with-trail opportunities as temporary trail routes, providing safe travel and recreation spaces in the interim.
- **Design for the future** — design and construct trails with widths and materials for all users.



MAP 2 Map of the Capital Crescent Trail

Carroll Creek Linear Park



FIGURE 14 Carroll Creek Linear Park

Carroll Creek Linear Park is a 1.3-mile long park through Downtown Frederick and was constructed alongside its namesake creek, a tributary of the Monocacy River. After multiple severe flood events in the 1970s caused significant damage to the city, the park was conceived as a flood-control project to save historic downtown Frederick.

Rather than move the city center—which dates to the mid-1700s—to higher ground or dig a large channelized flood control ditch, the Linear Park was developed to provide flood protection in a way that would also be an economic development engine, and it has delivered. FEMA was able to remove Downtown Frederick from the 100 Year Floodplain Map, and the corridor has generated almost \$300 million in public and private development in the surrounding area. The corridor has also generated, completed, and planned private construction, including more than 400,000 square feet of new or renovated mixed-use spaces providing an estimated 1,000 jobs at new office spaces, retail store fronts, and almost a dozen restaurants, breweries, and distilleries, plus a new downtown hotel and conference center, which broke ground in late 2024.

Turning Necessity Into Opportunity

Construction of the flood control infrastructure began in 1985 and was completed in 1993. The project, which was partly inspired by the River Walk in San Antonio, TX, included installation of a pair of box culverts on each side of the creek, each with a 20-foot-square cross section, and a weir—a low-head dam used to control water flow and level—at the western entrance to downtown. The two pairs of box culverts provide enough capacity that the creek has not overflowed since installation. Even during 2021's Hurricane Ida, which brought seven inches of rain and caused extensive flooding throughout Frederick County, The Carroll Creek flood control system worked

Lead Agency

City of Frederick Department of Economic Development, Parks Department

Location

City of Frederick, MD
(Capital Region)

Surfaces

Paved (asphalt, brick, concrete)

Trail Length

1.3 miles; connects to planned and existing trails at both ends

“Pedestrian and bike transportation was a significant component of us wanting to deliver this urban park.”

*Richard G. Griffin, Director of
Economic Development
City of Frederick*



FIGURE 15 The weir at the western end of Carroll Creek Linear Park (Source: [Thisisbossi/Wikimedia Commons](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Carroll_Creek_Weir.jpg)).

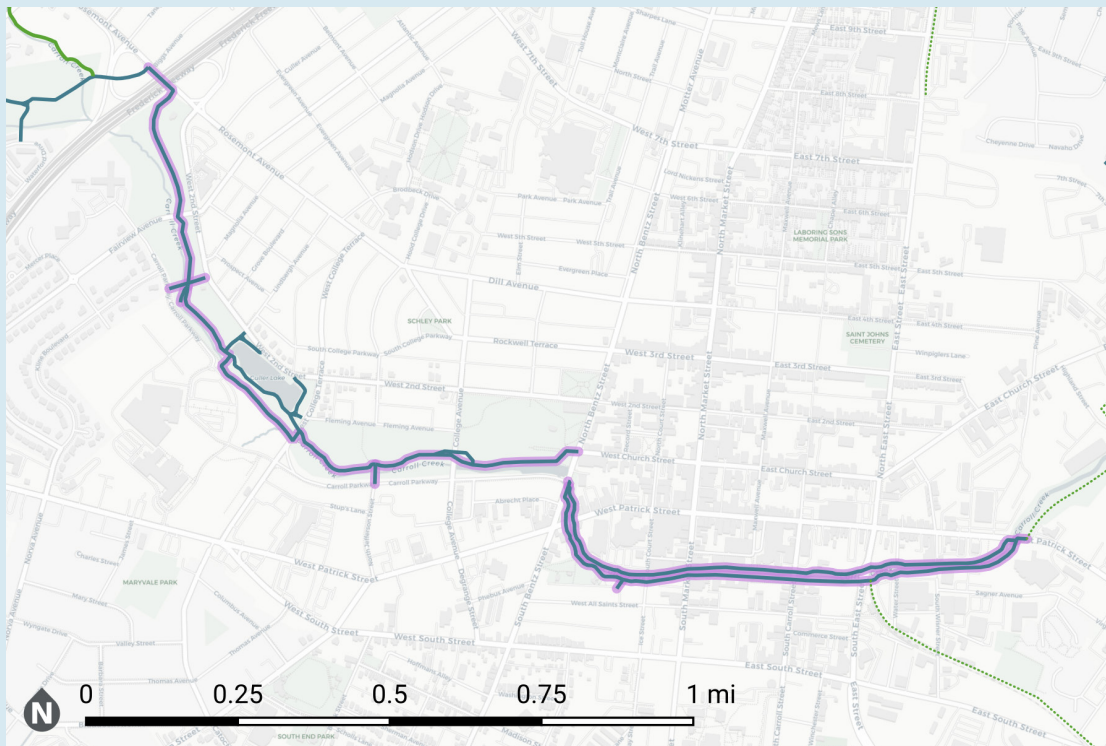
well...and there [were] no issues or damage as a result of the storm. As a part of the flood control project, the City acquired a wide swath of land on each side of the creek, part of which became the Carroll Creek Linear Park. The remaining land was sold as development sites by the City, with an additional one-time fee applied to help fund the construction of the linear park.

Although there are walkways on both sides, the south side of the creek was made the primary multi-use pathway. The park was designed to accommodate festivals and large events and still maintain a clear path at least 12 feet wide. Because several downtown streets' bridges over Carroll Creek were too low for the Linear Park paths to go under them, users cross those streets at grade, through a series of mid-block crossings. All use distinctive red brick in the asphalt and crossing signage at street level. Heavier vehicular traffic in some locations led to the City developing a large speed table for Market Street and a full traffic signal at East Street. These improvements have made it safer for trail users and others crossing these busy streets.

The park and related flood control project was a bold initiative of the City of Frederick to encourage downtown revitalization and economic development following years of decline and devastating floods.

International Economic Development Council, Project of the Year (Neighborhood Development Initiative, Population 50,000–200,000), 2008

An Economic Development Juggernaut



MAP 3 Map of the Carroll Creek Linear Park.

The cost to construct the entire vision — \$60 million for the flood control works itself, another \$27 million for the park improvements, and \$77 million (and counting) in to redevelop the surrounding properties — caused a substantial delay in its realization. Four-term mayor Ronald Young, who took office between the devastating floods of the 1970s and championed the recovery and redevelopment efforts through the 1980s, lost reelection in 1989 as the flood control construction began. Although a few park improvements were made in the 1990s, it was a 12 years later, under the early-2000s administration of new mayor, Jennifer Dougherty, who

was herself a Downtown Frederick business owner, that the long-awaited Carroll Creek project resumed. Phase 1 of the Carroll Creek Park project, from Court Street to Carroll Street, was completed in 2006 at a cost of about \$11 million. The City paid for more than 80 percent of the first phase, and it won 2007 Project of the Year from the Maryland Chapter of the American Planning Association. The following year it won an Excellence in Economic Development Award from the International Economic Development Council, which called it “a world-class mixed-use urban park,” “a bold initiative of the City,” and “an excellent example of using a park and waterway as a catalyst for neighborhood revitalization.”

Successive mayoral administrations continued the project, led by the City’s economic development department and a task force of city alders, residents, and the Downtown Frederick Partnership. Phase 2, which extended the linear park improvements to the west and east, was completed in 2016 at a cost of \$16 million, though this time the City covered only about 53 percent of the funding; the state’s Transportation Enhancement Grant and other programs provided almost 40 percent. The second phase received a 2017 “Award of Excellence — Best Institutional Facility” from the DC|MD chapter of NAIOP, the Commercial Real Estate Development Association. The rehabilitation and conversion of the former Union Knitting Mills building into breweries, event, and office space additionally won a 2023 Economic Development Project of the Year award from the Maryland Economic Development Association.

Carroll Creek Linear Park now extends 1.3 miles from Baker Park on the west end to where the creek crosses East Patrick Street on the east end. Future plans include a new park and path extension to reach the Monocacy River, about another 1.5 miles northeast of Patrick Street. Another planned trail would then extend approximately 10–15 miles south along the Monocacy River to meet the C&O Canal Towpath along the Potomac River east of Point of Rocks.

Key Takeaways

- **Major infrastructure projects such as flood control** works can also provide space for parks, paths, and transportation trails.
- Although it may be difficult to get such projects started, once underway the attention, awards, and benefits **help keep them going and suggest further extensions.**
- **A judicious investment in public spaces can trigger greater investment in private development.**



FIGURE 16 Water lilies and other flowering plants add color while filtering the creek’s water, and several bridges spanning the creek provide a canvas for sculpture and other art (Source: [Domingo Mora/Flickr](#)).

Building Support Resources

[AARP Pop-Up Placemaking Toolkit](#)

[Baltimore Greenway Trail Coalition](#)

[Capital Trails Coalition](#)

[Coalition for the Capital Crescent Trail](#)

[Federal Highway Administration \(FHWA\) Bicycle and Pedestrian Program](#)

[Fusion Partnership](#)

[Great Allegheny Passage Economic Impact Report](#)

[Maryland Department of Natural Resources \(DNR\): General Information](#)

[Maryland Department of Natural Resources \(DNR\): Maryland Park Service](#)

[Maryland Department of Natural Resources \(DNR\): Office of Land Acquisition and Planning](#)

[Maryland Department of Natural Resources \(DNR\): Office of Outdoor Recreation](#)

[Maryland Eastern Shore Trail Network \(MESTN\)](#)

[MDOT: Maryland Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committee](#)

[MDOT: Maryland Complete Streets Leadership Academy Report](#)

[MDOT: Maryland MPO list and maps](#)

[MDOT: Maryland Partners and Planning Resources](#)

[MDOT: Maryland's Bicycle and Pedestrian Plans and Programs](#)

[MDOT: Modal Administrations](#)

[National Park Service Community Assistance Programs: Programs and opportunities](#)

[Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Center: Advancing Trails to Support Multimodal Networks](#)

[Pennsylvania Environmental Council Inclusionary Trail Planning Toolkit](#)

[PeopleForBikes Advocacy Academy Video Series](#)

[PeopleForBikes' Guide to Effective Local Bike Advocacy](#)

[Rails to Trails Conservancy's Trail Building Toolbox: Working with Opposition and Neighbors](#)

[Rails to Trails Conservancy's Trail-Building Toolbox: Building Community Support](#)

[Rails to Trails Conservancy's Trail-Building Toolbox: Building Relationships with Public Agencies and Officials](#)

[Rails to Trails Conservancy's TrailNation Playbook: Coalition Building](#)

[State Highway Administration: Bicyclist and Hiker Information](#)

[The Friends of AACo Trails in Anne Arundel County](#)

[The Progress Fund: Trail Town Program Guide](#)

[US Department of Interior \(DOI\) Office of Grants Management](#)

[US Department of Transportation \(USDOT\) Navigator: Grants, webinars, resources](#)