

How Local Businesses Can Serve Trail Users

by Neil Dixon and Bill Ryan*

Multi-use trails provide both community-wide and business specific economic development opportunities. Trails increase transportation linkages, expand and conserve greenways, and can provide a much-needed “shot in the arm” for downtown businesses. Some examples of trail development bolstering economic development include:

- A 2002 study of Wisconsin State Parks and Trail users suggested that daily spending by trail users in Wisconsin ranged from \$24.79 for local trail visitors to \$52.85 for non-local trail visitors.ⁱ
- Visitors to Ohio’s Little Miami Scenic Trail spend an average of \$13.54 per visit just for food, beverages and transportation to the trail. In addition, they spend an estimated \$277 per person each year on clothing, equipment and accessories to use during these trail trips.ⁱⁱ
- The Mispillion River Greenway Trail running through Milford, Delaware is credited with inspiring downtown reinvestment and a net gain in new businesses, with more than 250 people now working in a downtown that was nearly vacant ten years ago.ⁱⁱⁱ

Most importantly, trails have become “the central focus of tourist activities in some communities and the impetus for kick-starting a stagnating economy.”^{iv}

Community Marketing

“Trail users represent a new market niche for existing businesses and entrepreneurs to consider. Communities that provide access to technical assistance can help merchants determine how to best take advantage of new markets while enhancing the core business. Ways in which merchants can achieve this include changing merchandise selection, display and window design, and marketing. For example, a deli might create a snack pack for hikers that includes a Power Bar and bottled water along with more traditional sandwich fare. A shoe store might display snowshoes in the front window. Businesses

serving a broader clientele (i.e., a bike shop) might find locations near the trail to be especially attractive.^v

Lanesboro, Minnesota (Population in 2000: 788) is located in the Root River Valley, a beautiful region of bluffs and limestone outcroppings. Bicycle trails, rural highways, and canoe rentals have brought the scenery of the area to many visitors. Museums, craft, and gift shops have brought the flavor of the local culture to light. Lanesboro has been able to maintain the small town charm that made it attractive in first place and accommodate a relatively large number of visitors. It is an important balancing act; the basis of a community’s appeal needs to be preserved to continue their way of life and also to continue to attract visitors to the community. The town and its businesses have capitalized on the heritage of their community and the surrounding area’s natural and human resources.^{vi}

Sparta, Wisconsin (Population in 2000: 8648) is home to one of the oldest rail-trails constructed in the nation. The Elroy-Sparta trail and other trails in the area draw over 100,000 visitors each year, many from other cities and states. In 1991, Sparta made trails synonymous with its identity by declaring itself the “Bicycling Capital of America.” Sparta’s commitment to its identity is emphasized by the business community: hotels and campgrounds provide free trail passes; restaurants serve healthier fare desired by bicyclists; arts and crafts and novelty shops cater to visiting trail users; and tour operators package bus tours that include lodging, bike rental, and shuttle service to different points along the trails.^{vii}



Innovative Businesses

A number of businesses in these and other communities have taken advantage of their proximity to trails. The following are three examples of innovative marketing and operating practices utilized.

Cuda Café, Deerfield Wisconsin

Service related businesses such as equipment rental, gift shops, and restaurants often spring up near mixed-use trails. In the case of the Cuda Café in Deerfield, Wisconsin (population in 2000: 1971), this also meant a new downtown business. Co-owner Randy Mueller noted that “What started out as a place for riders to stop in and get a Power Bar and a bottle of water evolved into something more.” The menu expanded, and so did the café’s popularity. As the business grew, Mueller remarked that even though determining how many people come in directly off the trail is difficult, he has noticed that many of his patrons “discovered” the café while riding by on the trail. Furthermore, Mueller explained that out of town customers have often seen the café from the trail and decided to come back at a later time. The Cuda Café has shown an innovative approach as both a downtown café and trail-side stop.^{viii}

Scenic Valley Winery, Lanesboro Minnesota

The Scenic Valley Winery was established in 1984 and produces and sells fruit wines and wine-related merchandise such as hand-made wood boxes, corkscrews and coolers. Because their stay often includes biking or water sports, many customers are not able to carry bottles of wine with them. The Winery accommodates this market by shipping their goods to their home and in this way finds that tourists will remember them for holiday needs. The winery also finds that many of their customers are friends and relatives of people who live in the Lanesboro area. The Scenic Valley Winery is a good addition to other businesses in Lanesboro. As the only winery, it adds to an attractive business mix. Its use of local products—such as apples, plums, and wine crates—supplements the local economy.^{ix}

Capron Hardware, Lanesboro Minnesota

Capron Hardware is open year round and has a strong local customer base. It sells hardware items, paint, electrical and plumbing goods, camping and fishing supplies, bait and licenses, household goods, and gifts. The hardware store’s manager, Sue Kenyon, is very aware of its location in an extraordinary community and the store is operated with an eye to its recreational visitor market. Accordingly, it stocks many items useful for those away from home as well as those that live in the community. Capron Hardware is an outlet for Winborn Bicycle Rentals

and rents trail, tandem, single speed bikes and kiddie karts. It also stocks many vacation items such as fishing supplies and bug sprays. Although the hardware store’s business is somewhat seasonal, steady and devoted year-round resident trade and cross-country skiers supplement winter sales and help support what is traditionally a slow time of the year for visitors. Capron Hardware utilizes simple and effective market assessment. They ask the customers what they need and would like to see in the store when they come in.^x

Clearly trails, and the right strategy, bring opportunities for communities and businesses alike to reach out to new market niches and expand tourism-related business. The case studies represented have shown that community consensus-building, the collective marketing of businesses, and innovative business practices can pay off when it comes to serving trail riders in the community.

ⁱ “A proposed Spring Valley to Elmwood Trail: The Extent and Impact of Visitor Expenditures.” Forthcoming UW-Extension Staff Paper by Ed Hass, Bill Ryan, Dave Marcouiller, and Neil Dixon. July 2006.

ⁱⁱ “Economic Benefits of Trails and Greenways.” *Trails and Greenways Clearinghouse*. Rails to Trails Conservancy, Washington D.C. www.trailsandrails.org

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v “Implementing Trail-Based Economic Development Programs: A Handbook for Iowa Communities.” Iowa Department of Transportation, 2000.

^{vi} “Tourism & Retail Development: Attracting Tourists to Local Business.” UW-Extension, Center for Community & Economic Development Report by Bill Ryan, Jim Bloms, Jim Hovland and David Scheler.

^{vii} “A Proposed Spring Valley to Elmwood Trail: The Extent and Impact of Visitor Expenditures.” Forthcoming UW-Extension Staff Paper by Ed Hass, Bill Ryan, Dave Marcouiller, and Neil Dixon. July 2006.

^{viii} Ibid.

^{ix} Ibid.

^x Ibid.

**Dixon is a graduate student studying Urban and Regional Planning at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Ryan is a business development specialist with the University of Wisconsin-Extension, Center for Community & Economic Development.*