



Blazing Trails

By Robin Dropkin and Wally Elton

New York is building a statewide trail network one locality at a time

Imagine stepping out your door and finding a convenient and comfortable pathway that leads to your workplace, community library, local school, or favorite shopping area. Or hopping on your bicycle and following a paved but traffic-free route to a more distant park or the restaurant you've heard about in the next town over.

Across New York today, many local citizens are doing more than envisioning an enhanced quality of life through multi-use trails in their communities—they are banding together to make it happen. Recognition that fuel prices are likely to rise again, the growing awareness of global climate change, the health risks posed by sedentary living, and the economic boost trails can give communities have strengthened the resolve of these advocates and attracted new allies from business, government and healthcare providers.

Often, potential corridors for these community trails are already in place, thanks to abandoned rail lines, utility rights-of-way or canal towpaths. In some cases, there may even be trail segments in use that simply need to be connected. Yet, progress is often slow, in part because local residents don't know how to mobilize constituencies, overcome obstacles that nearly always emerge, or find adequate and appropriate funding. But there is help available.

A statewide effort called Healthy Trails, Healthy People is enabling novice trail advocates in communities small and large to tap into, and learn from, the experience and expertise of others who have already successfully met similar challenges.

New York State already boasts an extensive system of rail and canal trails—1,200 miles currently in place, with more under development—as well as such renowned hiking trails as the Finger Lakes Trail, part of the Appalachian Trail, and the spectacular footpaths of the Adirondacks. All of these provide important recreational opportunities for New Yorkers and draw thousands of tourists to the state each year.

Over the past two decades or so, however, interest has grown in creating trails that are closer to where people live and work. Trails that offer both recreation and alternative transportation to a range of users, from walkers and bikers to stroller-pushing parents and



The extensive trail system in New York offers more than 1,200 miles of trails for recreation and transportation.

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in-line skaters. Often called multi-use, shared-use or community trails, these have become an important component of nationwide efforts to decrease traffic congestion and air pollution, and to address the well-documented health risks of our generally inactive lifestyle.

In 2004, with funding from the Department of Health, Parks & Trails New York launched its Healthy Trails, Healthy People program by helping five local community groups develop trails. Today, through this program, citizen groups and local governments in nearly 30 cities, villages and towns across the state are in various stages of developing



Parks & Trails NY, Jennifer Vagiani

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multi-use trails that will help revitalize their communities and improve the health of their residents. These projects are laying the foundation for a statewide trail network of the future, and it is hoped that such work will inspire others to do the same. Here are few examples:

Peru's River Trail

Like many New York communities, the hamlet of Peru in Clinton County grew along a river that provided power for grist mills and sawmills. In turn, these mills supported early settlers and later bustling local industries (here, lumber and iron). Today, there are few signs of the earlier economy that once sustained the village. But the river, the Little Ausable, remains. Now a group of residents, Friends of the Little Ausable River Trail, seeks to restore the river's central role in the community by creating a 3.5-mile trail along it that will connect three town parks with a school and other destinations.

Through the leadership of Adele Douglas of the local friends group, the Town of Peru recently received a federal Transportation Enhancement grant of more than \$500,000 to build the first 1.5 miles of trail. Combined with sidewalks, this trail will complete a loop through the historic mill area and the hamlet's center. With easement agreements from key private landowners in hand, and final approval from the State Department of Transportation expected soon, construction is likely to start this summer. Then, once again, the Little Ausable will bring vitality to the community and its people.

Says Douglas, "We had this opportunity for a really nice trail right in the hamlet that could link past and present while connecting other major destinations. There were many hurdles to jump, but now that we see construction ready to begin, we know it was worth it. Support

from the community, the town board and Parks & Trails New York kept us going."

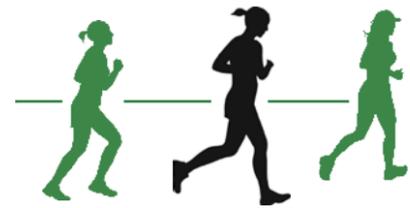
Chenango Canal Trail

More than a century ago, the Chenango Canal served as a vital transportation link between Utica, on the Erie Canal, and Binghamton, 97 miles to the south on the Susquehanna River. The railroad ended the canal's useful life, and more recently, highways put the railroad out of business. Today, residents of several communities believe that this historic route can once again connect and invigorate communities through its transformation into a trail.

Since 2001, the Chenango Canal Association has worked to preserve and restore the one intact, five-mile section of the original canal in the town of Madison. The association developed a trail along the old canal towpath that provides walkers, bikers, equestrians and skiers with a scenic recreational

Interactive website showcases 110 community trails:

Begin your exploration of New York State's multi-use trails with Parks & Trails New York's new online TrailFinder site. Interactive maps provide detailed information for 110 multi-use trails across the state, including trailhead parking areas and nearby Bed and Breakfasts that welcome bicyclists. Check it out at www.ptny.org/greenways/maps.shtml.



New York State Conservationist, June 2009

resource and a chance to explore a bit of the past.

But association president Diane Van Slyke has a grander vision. In her plan, the abandoned 19th- and 20th-century canal and rail corridors, including the existing towpath trail, can be brought back to life as a non-motorized transportation link spanning nearly 20 miles between the villages of Clinton and Hamilton. Local advocates and municipal officials have mapped specific routes, identified adjacent landowners and funding sources, developed community support, obtained needed permits, and are ready to begin construction.

Meanwhile, 25 miles to the south in the city of Norwich, the Chenango Greenway Conservancy is creating another link in the chain. Although little evidence of the old canal remains there, the group is developing about six miles of trail along the Chenango River. This trail can connect with the former canal and railroad routes both north and south of Norwich, thus bringing another segment of this historic transportation corridor back to life.

Chittenango Creekwalk Trail

For three decades, residents of the Madison County village of Chittenango sought unsuccessfully to create a trail that would link neighborhoods and



Trails aren't just old train tracks or canal towpaths; many communities have integrated them as valuable recreation and transportation devices in urban settings.

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destinations along Chittenango Creek. But when a 2003 village revitalization study proposed the trail again, residents Donna Lynch and Bill Nickal rose to the challenge, and this time, new interest in the multiple benefits of trails resulted in a favorable outcome.

The project's goal was to create a 3.3-mile Chittenango Creekwalk & Neighborhood Trail System that linked neighborhoods to parks, schools, the business district, and the Erie Canalway Trail. Unsure how to proceed, the group working on the project held a workshop to solicit ideas and generate support.

The outcome was a report that presented recommendations for trail development, promotion, partnerships, and funding. As a result, the village government became a committed partner and now provides an annual budget and the assistance of the public works department. Property owners have agreed to easements for the first trail segment. With \$70,000 in hand from fundraising events, legislator support, local donations, and grants, including \$37,000 from the Central New York Community Foundation, the first trail section will be built this summer, and local leaders are confident that the rest of the network will follow.

According to Creekwalk co-chair Donna Lynch, the assistance of Healthy Trails, Healthy People gave the project credibility in the community and among potential supporters. "Their technical support showed us the way forward and gave us the confidence to proceed," she added.

Robert Moody Trail

High above Canandaigua Lake in the western Finger Lakes, residents of the rural town of Gorham envisioned using an abandoned rail bed to create an easily accessible trail for walking and biking. Thanks to a generous donation, the town

New York State Conservationist, June 2009



Help Build the Network

Get out. Visit trails and see how they connect and benefit communities.

Get smart. Learn about the benefits of trails. Some good references can be found on Parks & Trails New York's website (www.ptny.org).

Get together. Find others in your community with similar interests and form an advocacy group.

Think big. Create a vision that will spark people's imaginations.

Look around. Build on what is special about or already exists in your community.

Reach out. Hold an event to engage people and promote your vision.

Branch out. Identify others who may support your goal (e.g., health groups) and work together.

Speak out. Express your support for trails to public officials; write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper.

Broaden horizons. Join a state-wide, regional or national organization that supports trails; learn from counterparts in other communities.

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already owned the 1.1-mile corridor along the West River in the heart of the village of Rushville, but the corridor was heavily overgrown and three critical bridges were deteriorated or missing.

Undaunted, community leaders like Town Supervisor Richard Calabrese found ways to jumpstart the project. Community college students prepared a comprehensive plan for the trail, an engineering firm donated its services to assess the condition and needs of the three bridges, school groups and community members cleared vegetation from the corridor, and the town government and local watershed organization pledged financial support. Three new bridges were built of steel beams donated by Ontario County, with financial support from New York's Environmental Protection Fund and the Coca-Cola Corporation. A mini-grant from Parks & Trails New York and the service of an Eagle Scout made trail kiosks possible. Today, the Robert Moody Trail is open and residents of the community are now enjoying the newest recreational resource in town.

Similar success stories can be found in many other communities across New York. When these accomplishments and dreams are plotted on a map, the shape of a future trail network tying together regions and municipalities across the state comes into focus. There will be primary corridors, similar to major highways, along the New York State Canal System, the Hudson and Susquehanna rivers, and elsewhere. Branching from those will be secondary and local routes like the old Chenango Canal corridor and the Wallkill Valley Rail Trail. On a local scale, this network will enable New Yorkers to travel within and between adjacent communities without reliance on motor vehicles. At a regional scale, it will become an international bicycle tourism attraction, pumping new dollars into the economies of communities along its length. The possibilities are amazing. If everyone works together, perhaps we can bring this vision to fruition.

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Communities across the state are developing trails to connect towns and villages, to revitalize their localities and foster healthy lifestyle choices.

Parks & Trails New York, Boyd A. Loring