

# NJ Trails Plan

## 4.

## Key Issues and Findings

Many issues and concerns affecting trails in New Jersey were identified during the research and outreach activities undertaken as part of this planning effort. A number of issues were raised as being of significant concern during Plan Advisory Committee (PAC) discussions, stakeholder interviews and the results of the surveys of trails providers and trail users. Understanding the meaning and impact of these issues and the problems they present is essential for crafting a Vision and Goals for trails in New Jersey and for defining strategies to achieve them.

### Funding

Funding and staff resources for the state's Trails Program within NJDEP's Office of Natural Lands Management have not been maintained at a level adequate to meet the demands of advancing the State Trails System as laid out in the authorizing legislation. With only one staff person currently assigned to the Trails Program, relatively few trails have received designation and few outside of NJDEP are aware of the State Trails System or its importance. At current staffing levels, the primary activity of the Trails Program is management of the Recreational Trails Program annual grant funding and staff support for the Trails Council. Consequently, activities such as updating trail inventories, establishing and maintaining an information clearinghouse or Web site, developing, publishing and distributing trail maps and brochures, advancing the State Trails System and other programming, coordination and leadership functions that logically should be assigned to the Trails Program, remain beyond the capacity of the Program.

Funding programs are available for various phases of trails development including NJDEP's Recreational Trails Program (RTP), NJDOT's Transportation Enhancements (TE) program and several state-funded programs that can be used to develop pedestrian and bicycle facilities. Also, recently enacted legislation provides that a portion of the corporate business tax is available for the development of recreation facilities. In general, however, as brought up again and again in trail provider surveys and in Advisory Committee and Focus Group discussions, insufficient levels of funding are available for (or are being applied to) all phases of trails

*Can anybody  
remember when  
the times were  
not hard and  
money was not  
scarce?*

– RALPH WALDO  
EMERSON  
US essayist, 1803–82

development, from planning, design, right-of-way acquisition and construction to maintenance, operations, enforcement and interpretation.

Although funding for the RTP is provided by the federal gas tax on motorized recreational vehicle use, ironically, there are only two specially designated locations on public land in the state where it is legal to operate a Class II ORV without a special permit. Given the costs associated with OHV use, the lack of use opportunities in the state are all the more frustrating for New Jersey OHV users.



Of particular concern is that adequate funding is not available for maintenance and operation of existing trails (see below). The funding sources that are available have tended to be skewed toward the development of new trails. In State Parks and Forests, funding limitations for new trail development, staffing and operations are especially problematic. Inadequate funding for new trail development hampers efforts by land managers to

respond to increasing public need, while placing greater pressure on existing facilities. As a result, opportunities to capitalize on resources of land and people are being lost.

With development trends pointing to “build out” in New Jersey in the foreseeable future, the time available to take the steps necessary to fulfill the vision of this Plan lessens, and the unit cost for doing so increases. In the matter of trails development, what must be done from here on out is likely to become increasingly expensive, in particular, the acquisition of land for key connecting trails and the development of trails in urban areas. Reliance on governmental funding alone is unlikely to meet New Jersey’s trail needs. Strategies for private sector participation should also be explored and developed.

Green Acres funds can be used for acquisition of land for trails and trails development. In the past, this source of funds has been used primarily to acquire parcels for preservation and recreation. In the future, the development of trails facilities that provide public access to these lands, which were acquired for the public good, should be emphasized. Trail stewardship could also be included as an eligible expense. In the past, this source of funds has been used primarily to acquire parcels for preservation and recreation. The requirement to provide public access on all Green Acres funded land preservation projects is a driving force for trail development.

**Finding:** There is an urgent need to expand the sources of funding, both public and private, to put in place and maintain trail facilities as New Jersey continues to develop and approaches “build out” in the foreseeable future.

## A Collection Of State Park Service Superintendent Survey Quotes Gathered During The Public Outreach Effort Of This Plan

There is a marked shortage of personnel, equipment, and funding to adequately maintain trails on a daily basis. There is a serious lack of law enforcement patrol due to a shortage of personnel, inadequate numbers of personnel assigned for patrol purposes, and shifting priorities in the law enforcement arm of the Division.

Ideally trails should offer the visitor a look at scenic areas and examples of various natural resources without compromising on sensitive habitat and endangered species.

A great trail is useless without a good map!

I'd like to see other organized user groups assume ownership and help maintain and improve trails for all to enjoy. The success of the Appalachian Trail Conference and New York New Jersey Trail Conference are model that other groups should emulate.

...Handbooks on proper trail maintenance and construction. Information on standard trail guides and maps for public distribution. Almost every park has a different map design.

**LACK OF SUFFICIENT PARKING IS THE MOST SERIOUS PROBLEM IN THE PARK.**

Considering the high use, there are very few conflicts.

## Maintenance and Operation of Trails

The most frequently mentioned issue in the user survey is the condition of trails or level of trails maintenance. This includes the condition of trails surfaces, trail head facilities, litter removal, maintenance of blazes and signage. County trail providers and State Park and Forest or Park/Forest Superintendents indicate that providing adequate trail maintenance is a burden. Inadequate maintenance leads to a degradation of facilities and, subsequently, increased costs associated with rebuilding. Operational considerations including security and enforcement are also problematic. Inadequate security and enforcement lead to increased vandalism, illicit or inappropriate use and increasing and unresolved user conflicts. These difficulties relate directly to lack of resources (funding, staff and volunteers) and the need for management plans and guidance on best practices and trails maintenance.

There was an expressed desire on the part of trail providers that organized trails user groups and other volunteers assume “ownership” and assist in maintenance. The success of the Appalachian Trails Conservancy and the New York New Jersey Trails Conference were mentioned as models for user groups assisting in trails maintenance activities that other groups might emulate.

*Finding: Additional resources including funding, staff, and volunteers are needed to provide a desirable level of maintenance for trails and trailhead facilities.*

## Facility Needs

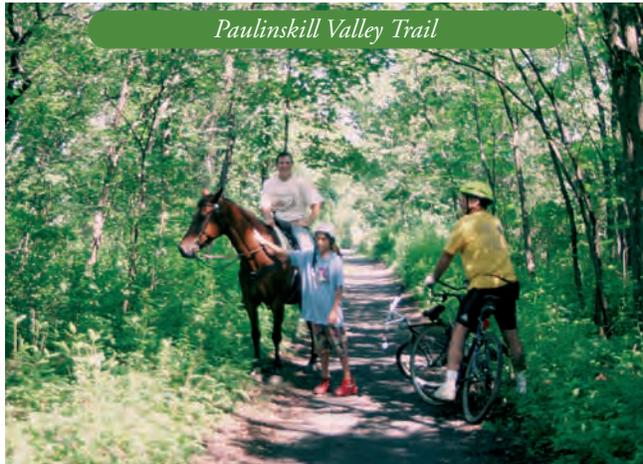
There are a wide variety of trails in New Jersey maintained by state, county and local agencies. However a consistent theme that arose from the surveys of trail users and trail providers (Counties, State Park and Forest or Park/Forest Superintendents) is that there is an inadequate supply of trails and ancillary facilities, especially in peak use time, for trails in general and for specific user groups. Trail providers expressed a belief that continued development of new trails is a necessity in anticipation of increasing trails use (more users) in the future. Of particular concern is a lack of trails for motorized trails use and insufficient access points (put in/take out sites) for “blue trails.” Equestrians cited a loss of trails opportunities in recent years resulting from suburbanization and development. Equestrian trail use has often occurred on privately owned, undeveloped lands through informal arrangements with landowners.

*Finding: There is an insufficient supply and variety of trails for the various trail user groups and for users of varying skill levels.*

## Sharing Trails

The sharing of trails, whether or not they are designed for multiple use, can lead to user conflicts that diminish the trails experience for those involved. Survey results of both trail users and trail providers suggested that such conflicts overall occur infrequently; however, user conflicts were a much discussed and sometimes heatedly debated issue at outreach meetings. When they do occur, conflicts do not ordinarily involve outright hostility or confrontations with other trail users. More often the conflict is passive in nature, a function of the mere presence of or impacts caused by other types of trail users that result in a sense of infringement, annoyance, inconvenience or the diminishment of the trail experience.

Conflicts also occur between trail users and adjacent property owners, and between land owners and illicit trail users trespassing upon and possibly impacting their property.



*Paulinskill Valley Trail*

Photo: NJDEP

Conflicts arise in part from an inadequate supply of trails for the various trail user groups. As a result, different trail users are forced to share, and thereby encounter other trail users who may have widely differing needs and expectations regarding the trails experience. A frequent cause of conflicts can be attributed to multi-use trails that are not in conformance with state of the practice design guidelines in

terms of width or sight distance, thus forcing users into cramped operating conditions.

Conflicts also arise when trail users are inconsiderate of the needs of others on the trail, usually out of thoughtlessness or ignorance of basic trails etiquette. Both user and trail provider survey responses strongly suggest that users need to be better educated about trails etiquette to reduce conflicts and other problems, such as illicit use. This education can be in the form of better trails signing, trail provider information resources, user groups educating their own members or seminars, conferences and publicity campaigns.

*Finding: Trail user conflicts result from an inadequate supply of single use trails and multi-use trails that are not designed or maintained to accommodate shared use. Enforcement to control illicit/ illegal use and vandalism and user education on trail etiquette is essential but currently insufficient as a consequence of inadequate funding and coordination.*

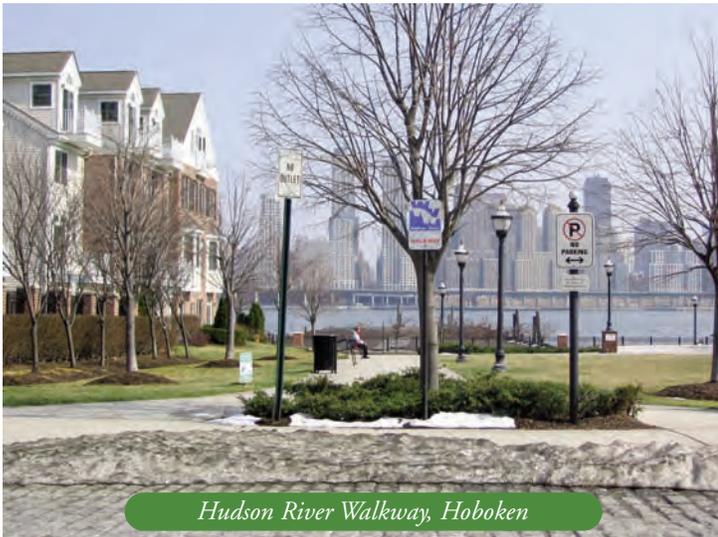
## Motorized Trail Uses

There is a dearth of facilities available for this user group. In fact, there are only two publicly available locations where unlicensed off-road vehicles can be operated without a special events use permit. There is a consensus among both trail users and providers that more motorized trail facilities are essential. Most think that motorized trail use facilities should be made available to some extent, if for no other reason than one of equity, since funding for the Recreational Trails Program (RTP) is derived from federal taxes on the sale of fuel used by recreational motorized trail users. In addition, RTP rules require states to use a portion of RTP funds for motorized trail facilities. Many trail users and other outdoor enthusiasts have vigorously expressed negative attitudes and opinions regarding motorized trail use both in terms of perceived negative impacts on their trails experience and environmental impacts associated with motorized trail use, especially illicit use.

*Finding: Motorized trail facilities are grossly inadequate relative to demand. Demand is increasing without relationship to the availability of legal riding venues, public or private.*

## Urban Trails

For trails to be accessible for all, trails need to be located in proximity to where people live. In the most densely populated and urbanized state, this means trails need to be located in urban areas. The general consensus from Advisory Committee discussions, surveys and the Urban Trails Focus Group is that there are not enough trails facilities in urban areas, both in absolute terms, and especially in terms of the number of potential trail users available to enjoy them. This includes trails that are within urban areas and reflect the urban experience, and trails or non-motorized accommodations that link urban areas to suburban or rural trails.



Deficits in the supply of urban trails may be influenced by several factors. Trails in urban areas are generally more expensive to build. Urban trails must compete with many other land uses. For example, abandoned railroad corridors that could be used for trails may also be desired by developers. Many political leaders have perceived that ratables obtained through development are a better use of urban land than trails or other open space for quality of life purposes. With a lack of planning

and forethought, opportunities to include trails as part of commercial or residential development may be lost.

On the other hand, urban trails provide significant benefits to urban communities. Urban trails can help protect the environment and positively impact the quality of air and water. Trails originating in urban areas connecting with suburban and rural areas provide access to recreational opportunities. Trails provide an economic stimulus to urban areas. Urban trails typically accommodate walking and bicycling for individuals of all ages and fitness levels and provide the opportunity for family recreation. Pedestrian and bicycle travel are inexpensive, egalitarian and energy efficient modes of transportation, providing access to schools and other community destinations and contributing to healthy active life styles. Urban trails especially provide opportunities for people of different neighborhoods, communities, backgrounds and ethnicities to have a shared social experience. Successful well-utilized trails solve their own security concerns.

Many urban areas are located adjacent to or encompass bodies of water. Locating trails next to the waterfront also provides opportunities to capitalize on the aesthetic and recreational opportunities provided by the juxtaposition of land and water. Waterfront trails provide access for canoeing, kayaking and boating in general, enabling urban waterways to become “blueways” or water trails. A number of successful urban waterfront trails in New Jersey include the Hudson River Walkway, Perth Amboy Waterfront, Atlantic City boardwalk and the Rahway River Greenway.

**Finding:** Urban trails, including the strategic location of trails that provide connections to neighborhoods, community destinations and natural areas provide significant quality of life benefits to New Jersey's urban dwellers and visitors. More of them are needed.

## Trail Access for People with Sensory and Mobility Impairments

Advisory Committee discussions, survey responses and interviews indicate that there are an insufficient number of trails, including trail head facilities and signage, to serve the needs of people with sensory and mobility impairments. In addition, information on what trails facilities do or do not meet the needs of this group is not conveniently available. Previous New Jersey Trails Plans have also raised this concern and encouraged the use of barrier free design concepts for trails where practicable.

It must be understood that this group is not confined to blind or wheelchair bound persons. In addition to these, barrier free trail head facilities and trails provide improved/increased opportunities for a variety of would be trails users, including: those unable to hear, those using crutches, those using a powered scooter for mobility, the elderly, the very young, those not physically fit and those lacking energy due to health conditions.

While not all trails are suitable for persons with disabilities, just as all trails and difficulty levels are not suitable for all user groups, it is very important that New Jersey does its best to provide its citizens with barrier free access to trail head facilities and trails so that persons with sensory and mobility impairments can take part in trail activities.

**Finding:** Barrier free design of trails facilities, including trail head area and trail signage, provides trail opportunities to people with sensory and mobility impairments. More of them are needed.

## Planning, Guidelines, Standards, Coordination

As noted in the Urban Trail Focus Group, Advisory Committee discussions and in County and Park Superintendent Surveys, a lack of planning, coordination, guidelines and standards inhibits trails development.

Trails providers have indicated that they require resources and support in the form of facilities development plans and management plans, and of standards and guidelines for trails maintenance, design and signage. It is desirable that the development and operation of parks and trail facilities proceed in accordance with park facilities development plans and trail management plans, and include, where appropriate, coordination with neighboring jurisdictions and other levels of government. Oftentimes, however, the development and operations of park facilities and trails is carried out on an ad hoc basis. The single most significant barrier to the addition of more trails to the State Trails System is the lack of management plans for the trails that have been otherwise determined to be eligible for inclusion to the system.

Municipal, county and state planning processes, in general, do not frequently consider trails. Multi-jurisdictional trails do not always have the participation of all municipalities that a trail could traverse, creating missing links in trail routes or long detours that can only increase the cost

of their development. Most municipalities do not have a plan for trails in their communities. There is often a disconnect within and among agencies involved in planning trails and in planning roads. This is of particular concern where bridge construction and reconstruction is at issue.

**Finding:** More comprehensive planning for trails needs to take place at all levels. Trails providers need appropriate support for the planning and operation of trails facilities in the form of training and guidelines, and more thorough inter- and intra-agency coordination. Trails should be considered in all county and municipal master plans.

## Rights of Way for Trails

More trails and trail connections require more rights of way for trails. Therefore, it is crucial that ALL potential opportunities for trails rights-of-way be explored and utilized to the fullest extent possible. The surveys and Advisory Committee discussions and interviews identified several potential types of opportunities that might serve as rights of ways for trails. Rail rights of way are well known as a desirable location for multi-use trails and New Jersey has some notable examples. Unfortunately, the full potential of rail rights of way for trails has not been reached. Freight rail providers who own these rights of way have shown a reluctance to make them available for trail uses. Sometimes they have tentative or active plans to reestablish rail service, but often they want to hold onto them “just in case....” Rail rights of way, even when in use, can be more thoroughly considered for “rails with trails.” The reluctance to do so seems to be, at the core, a concern over liability and yet federal studies indicate that there are many successful examples of such facilities, including one in Morris County (Traction Line trail).

Utility rights of way present another set of opportunities for trails. The response of utility providers to requests for approval to use their rights of way for trails is mixed. In some cases they have agreed with seeming enthusiasm. In other cases the reaction is an abrupt negative. The question is: why can it be done in one place with apparent ease, but in others, not at all? It seems that who asks and how they ask is more of a deciding factor than the actual issues involved, which again seem to devolve to concerns over liability.

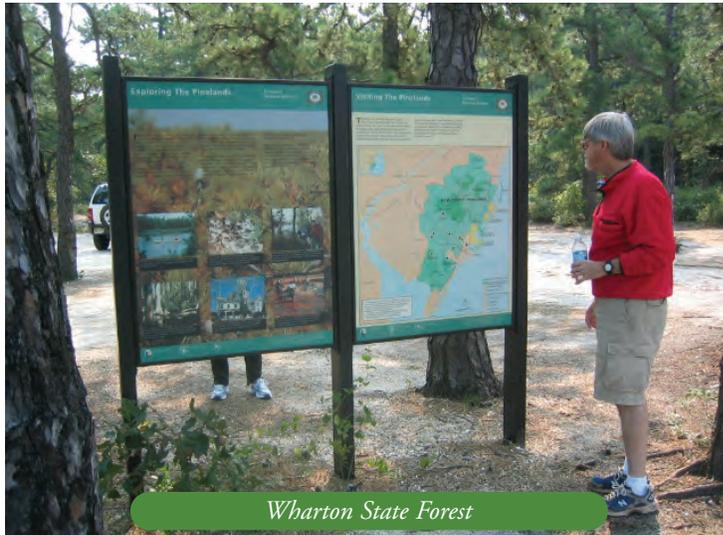
Public access to private land could also play a more significant role for trails, perhaps most notably for equestrians, for access (put-in/take-out spots) to “blue trails” and for hiking trails. In the past, equestrians have taken advantage of this option by making arrangements with private landowners for equestrian use. Unfortunately, these opportunities are jeopardized when other uninvited users trespass, which occurs more frequently with increased development in formerly rural areas. Aside from the issue of intrusion, liability concerns again are thought to play a role in the reluctance of private landowners to allow access for trails purposes; despite the protections afforded them by the Landowners Liability Act. Private land may also provide at least a partial answer to the question: where can motorized trail users go?

Finally, public land acquired for other purposes could be used for trails. Land purchased for open space preservation can be used for appropriately designed trails, if only to provide a means of public access to the property acquired. Easements for trails in appropriate situations could be included as part of farmland preservation or other development rights purchases by public agencies.

Tapping these resources is essential to increase the supply of trails in New Jersey and to interconnect the trails we have now or create in the future.

**Finding:** There are right of way opportunities available for trails in New Jersey. Ways must be found to preserve these rights of way before these opportunities are lost.

## Information Needs/Promotion of Trails



A very significant outcome of Advisory Committee discussions and a frequent comment in the surveys is that there is insufficient information available on the location and types of trails that exist around the state. In fact, there is much information available, although it is often inconsistently formatted or incomplete, out of date and not easily or conveniently accessible. As a result, there is an unmet demand for trails, since many who would like to enjoy trails and trail users who would like

to use them or seek out new trails experiences are not aware of existing trails. Furthermore, Advisory Committee members have indicated that, despite the existing and increasing popularity of trails, trails development and operation often receive short shrift in public resources since the public and decision makers do not fully understand the pivotal role that trails play (or could play) in terms of recreation, transportation, economic development and other quality of life concerns.

When good trails are provided and adequately publicized, people will use them and in so doing, they will become advocates for protecting the integrity of those trails and for providing more trails.

**Finding:** Complete and conveniently accessible information about trails, and a public and decision makers that understand the many benefits of trails are essential if the quantity and quality of trails in New Jersey are to increase.



*Lumberville - Raven Rock Pedestrian Bridge, Bull's Island State Park*