



# THE Trail Town guide

Revitalizing rural communities with bike trail tourism

Tips from the oldest, most  
successful program.





created by

 **The Progress Fund**

We're the oldest,  
most successful  
Trail Town program.

# Follow our lead.

Breathe more life (and funds) into your rural trailside town. Not every community revival looks the same, but this step-by-step guide shares all the secrets we've learned in our 10+ years of successful Trail Town development.

We've built the framework. You just need to pedal it forward.





## We know this works... because we've done it.

Tourism potential was rich, but untapped on the Great Allegheny Passage (GAP). The 150-mile trail meets the already-popular 185-mile C&O Canal Towpath, which continues to Washington, D.C.






In 2007, **The Progress Fund** started working to plug the GAP's rural communities into the economic opportunity the trail created.

In its pioneering 10 years, The Trail Town Program® has become a model for trail community revitalization.

Building on the same model, we've grown economies on other trails, too. Every trail and every town needs a personal touch, but with these ideals as a backbone, we've set towns all across our region on the path to prosperity.

**65** new businesses  
**270+** jobs created  
**10x** more visitors  
**\$50M** economic impact

## The 5 keys to Trail Town success:

-  Partnerships
-  Assessment & research
-  Connecting town to trail
-  Development
-  Marketing

You don't have to work on these in order. In fact, you should be working on them all together, because they will support and strengthen each other.

## This guide links

to additional resources and examples to help you with your Trail Town.

**Just click or tap!**



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Hostel guide

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Farmer's market brochure  
GAP Historic Preservation Plan  
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# 1 trail can revitalize a region.

... if you do it right. It takes more than a trail to turn a town around.

But if you transform that simple path into a place people want to stay, explore and spend, you will pedal every community on your trail forward.

The success is all connected: As your trail's communities strengthen, you'll attract even more tourism. And when your economy is thriving, your communities will keep investing in your growth, so the success lasts long-term.





# Partnerships

Link up with resources to power your Trail Town.

This guide is useful for any town to start building, but you can't succeed alone.

To net the longer-term overnight trips that power a trail economy, you need to form a network of dining, lodging, repair stations and more, so riders have access to amenities during their entire trip.

But it only takes 1 town, 1 plan and 1 dedicated person to get things kicked off, and keep momentum moving.

Let's build a thriving trail economy, community by community.

## THIS SECTION

### BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS:

1. In your community
2. Along your trail
3. And beyond

### TOOLS & REFERENCES:

- Historic preservation plan



## In your community

To kick things off and keep them moving, you need your community behind you.

Recruit a core team of dedicated volunteers to help you with the legwork. Make the group an official committee so members understand their role and importance in your Trail Town movement.

With a solid team, you can bring your whole town on board. Start with groups that have similar goals, or who will benefit directly from the program:

- Trail or recreation groups
- Business owners
- Chambers of commerce
- Merchant associations
- Community organizations
- Main Street organizations
- Town council and officials
- County government

Your community assessment will be your first chance to rally public support, so come knowledgeable and ready to make a good impression. Understand your goals and plan thoroughly.

As your movement grows, your **successes can leverage more support**. Keep making progress, even small steps, so that you stay in the public eye and don't lose momentum.

“ When they first talked about the bike trail, no one here ever imagined the volume of travelers. Ohiopyle has always been a boating town, but the bicyclists have now become a larger percent of visitors than our boaters.”

—Vicki Marietta, owner,  
Backyard Gardens, Ohiopyle PA

**TIP |** Show the value of your project by sharing other Trail Town Program success stories and statistics.

## Along your trail

If you want your trail to become a destination, give cyclists and visitors enough reason to stay and explore.

Activate organizers in other towns along the trail. Connect a chain of partner towns, with each stop within riding distance of the next. If you don't have staff dedicated to your trail program, create a council with 1-2 representatives from each town to keep communication flowing along the whole route.

Have each town's representatives work through this program guide in their towns, too.

### Is your trail in PA, WV or MD?

Connect with The Progress Fund to link up with our local trail networks.

## And beyond

Partnerships give you access to information and resources, plus they lend more legitimacy to your program (which gives you more credibility when you approach larger partners, and when you apply for funding.)

Identify partners, starting local then moving up:

### Regional

- Trail coalitions
- Tourism agencies
- Small Business Development Centers
- Commercial banks or CDFIs
- Foundations
- Conservancies and conservation groups
- Civic organizations

### State

- Departments of Natural Resources
- Community and Economic Development officials
- Designated heritage areas
- Environmental council
- Parks services

### National

- Trail and biking organizations
- National Parks Service
- Student Conservation Association
- Rural community development programs and commissions

Before you reach out, tailor your partnership proposal to your prospective partner's goals and needs, rather than your own. Be able to justify why your program fits each organization's mission.

If they don't partner right away, keep communication open. **Ask for advice, or even referrals** to resources that may be a better fit. As your trail program grows and gains reputability, more organizations might be willing to join you.

No matter who you bring on board, pick 1 organization to take the lead on building and maintaining partnerships, and keeping everyone accountable.

**TIP |** Look at other trails to see who their partners are. If an organization has worked with a similar project, there's a good chance they will already understand the potential benefits of yours.

Strong programs grow from stronger partnerships.

Trail Town revitalization on the GAP began right when the Allegheny Trail Alliance started building the trail. They realized that the trail alone wouldn't sustain tourism. They had to give travelers the services they wanted and needed, too.

As the ATA built the trail, The Progress Fund took the lead building up the communities with the Trail Town Program. Not only did the program tap towns into the tourism potential of the trail, it also made trail travel more robust and attractive to even more riders— so the opportunity kept growing.

The program helps preserve the trail in the long-term, too: A community that benefits from the trail will invest back into it.

Discover how The Progress Fund supported our partner Allegheny Trail Association's mission by using economic growth to protect natural, historic and cultural resources. [Read our Preservation Plan](#)







# Assessment & Research

Delve into your community through a visitor's eyes.

To fully capitalize on trail tourism, you need to know the ins and outs of 2 prime assets: your community, and your visitors.

Bring everyone together to think through your town's strengths and weaknesses with a **community assessment**.

Then, gather deeper, impartial insights— including capturing the feedback your local businesses are already hearing— with **visitor research**.

Once you have the data, create a plan and get rolling.

## THIS SECTION

1. **Community assessment**
2. **Visitor research**
  - Trail counts
  - Trail user surveys
  - Business surveys
3. **Action Plan**

### TOOLS & REFERENCES:

- Assessment workbook
- Research & data bank

# STEP 1: Community assessment

## Planning the assessment

Assessments take about half a day. Start planning the event at least 1 month in advance so you have enough time to promote it.

### Identify your audience.

Invite public officials, businesspeople who might want to tap the trail economy, tourism bureaus, trail groups, Chambers of Commerce and community organizations. Make it open to the public, too. The local residents may bring ideas to the table you didn't expect.

### Pick a meeting site.

It might be a public space, municipal office, visitor's center or business. It should be close to both a trailhead and a business district. Choose a spot that's convenient for your invitees.

### Plan some refreshments.

Everyone loves (and appreciates) snacks. Check with local restaurants to see if they'll donate some bites and beverages.

### Pick a date and time.

Start at least a month out during the good-weather season, and choose a time that will work for most of your attendees. Pick a rain date, just in case. We found weekday afternoons were best.

### Reach out.

Share about the event with fliers, write-ups in community newsletters, email lists, social media and, for key figures, phone calls. Don't just invite people; tell them how they can benefit from getting involved. Keep at it, and send reminders.

### Pick an experienced facilitator.

Choose someone who can keep the meeting on-task. If you can, hire a 3rd party who isn't invested in the project, so they can guide the discussion impartially.

### Prep your team.

Give them an overview of how assessment day will go, and assign tasks. Have a plan to guide the discussion— and be prepared to handle critiques, too. Any input is valuable, but make sure your team is prepared to keep the discussion moving.

**TIP |** If any key players are reluctant to get on board, choose a strategic location to encourage them to join you. For example, are municipal officials on the fence? Ask to use the council chamber. Is the business community out of touch with the trail economy? Reserve a local restaurant for lunch.

## ASSESSMENT

Download our Trail Town assessment workbook at [TrailTowns.org/Assessment](https://TrailTowns.org/Assessment)





### Running the assessment

Set up a table with a sign-in sheet where you can welcome everyone, and hand out pens and assessment booklets.

Have the facilitator review the agenda, and give an overview of what you'll be doing.

Break everyone into small groups, each with a leader from your team, and walk (or bike) different routes through town and to the trail. Take assessment booklets so you can address questions along the way. This might take 2 hours.

Regroup, finish answering questions and discuss. Have a member of your team take detailed notes.

Finally, collect the booklets to review and analyze.

Don't lose that sign-in sheet. Once you compile your reports, volley it back to your attendees, and **invite them to a feedback session**. Tweak the assessment, and start rallying the group toward next steps.



In Homestead, PA, the community assessment revealed that it was actually pretty hard to find the business district from the trail. The community built a trail spur to lead riders right into town.

### ASSESSMENT WORKBOOK

Get the Trail Town Program's assessment at [TrailTowns.org](https://TrailTowns.org)

## STEP 2: Visitor research

After the assessment, you may think you know a lot. But do you really have a handle on the people, and the dollars? To make an impact (and impress funders), you need in-depth insights.

Answer 3 critical questions, in 3 phases:

1. **Trail counts** to discover who is using the trail, and when.
2. **User surveys** to dig into what they're doing (and spending.)
3. **Business surveys** to learn what your town already offers.

It takes people power to make this happen, so rally your core team, and anyone else you brought on board during the assessment. For larger in-depth surveys, consider hiring a consultant. Universities are a budget-friendly resource for high-quality survey help.

### 1. Trail counts

Trail counts help you track the average number of cyclists on the trail (so, your potential visitors) at different times, and also set a baseline to compare the trail's growth to later. If you're more tech-savvy, an electronic count can do some of the work for you. But a manual count will do just fine, too.

#### Electronic counts

Our favorite counter was **TrafX**. You'll also need hardware and reliable batteries (Trust us—good batteries are critical.) Ask around! A local trail group may have counters you can borrow.

Pick spots on the trail where riders will be passing through, and fix the counters discreetly to posts or trees. Check them regularly for vandalism, damage, movement or anything that could make them less effective.

Some products give you an instant summary online, complete with trends and charts.

#### Manual counts

Manual counts take more people and planning. Pick 2-hour windows on high-traffic days at trailheads where you can easily see riders coming from either direction.

You will need several counts. You may want to track how trail use changes during different seasons, times of the week or even times of day. **The more data you have, the better**, but anything you can start with is helpful.

Create sheets (Save paper! Print double-sided!) for volunteers to track the place, time and tally of riders going each direction.

Decide: Are you just counting, or do you want cyclists to shout out their zip codes, so you can tell if traffic is local or from out-of-town? If so, post some temporary signs. If riders know why you're asking, they will be more likely to share.

Train your volunteers, and send them all out at the same time.

**TIP |** Your initial research is a benchmark. To prove positive growth and trends, you'll need to conduct research at least annually, but capturing details twice a year or seasonally will give you even richer information.

## 2. Trail user surveys

Now that we know how many people are using the trail, we need a deeper understanding of how they're using it, and why.

What do you want to know? Initially, a lot— maybe a dozen or even 2 dozen data points per survey, although too many questions can backfire, because people may not want to spend the time on it. Later on, when you update your survey, you may want to pare the list of questions to a half-dozen. Or, you might alternate between short surveys and longer interviews.

**Ask a mix of multiple choice and open-ended questions**, so you get qualitative and quantitative details. Leave room for people to explain "other" answers on multiple choice questions.

Demographics:

- Group size
- Ages
- Gender
- Income ranges
- Home zip codes

Market information:

- Primary reason for using the trail
- Spending habits
- Lodging habits
- What other amenities they want

**Create your survey template.** If you can take surveys digitally, it will save you input time, but written surveys will be faster for your respondents.

**Choose strategic locations**, including trailheads and visitor centers, and set up survey areas on peak-trail-season days, including weekdays, weekends and holidays.

**Decide the number of surveys** (overall and per location) ahead of time. Don't take more than 10 surveys per location per day, so that you can capture diverse responses. If cyclists are traveling together, only survey the group once.

**Recruit and train** your volunteers, and if you can, give them signage to set up.

**Input your data** into a spreadsheet or an online survey tool like **Google Forms**, which will automatically generate percentages. Put it all into a report for the public.

# 90%

of people on the Trail Town Program's trails use them for biking.

# 23.7 miles

is the average length people travel on our trails per visit.

# 46%

of trail users said they would take longer trips if there were more local shops to visit. Another 40% said they'd stay longer for more recreation.

# 42 states

plus DC were represented in the latest Trail Survey— meaning the trails are bringing in visitors from all over the country.

Review the full reports from our research bank at **[TrailTowns.org/Research](https://TrailTowns.org/Research)**

**TIP |** Pay close attention to open-ended questions, and "other" responses. You might find surprises or hidden gems of insight.





### 3. Business surveys

Now you know what trail users are after. Can they get it in your town?

Because business people are, by nature, busy, business surveys might take a few months of follow-up. Send them out during the off-season (usually October-February.)

Try to keep it to 6-15 questions. You might ask:

- An overview of their business and its services
- How many people work there (This will help you track whether your Trail Town project creates new jobs.)
- Days/months of operation
- Peak days/months
- Estimated percentage of customers from the trail
- Whether they've noticed any changes in the number of customers from the trail versus last year or previous years
- What trail customers are typically doing or buying

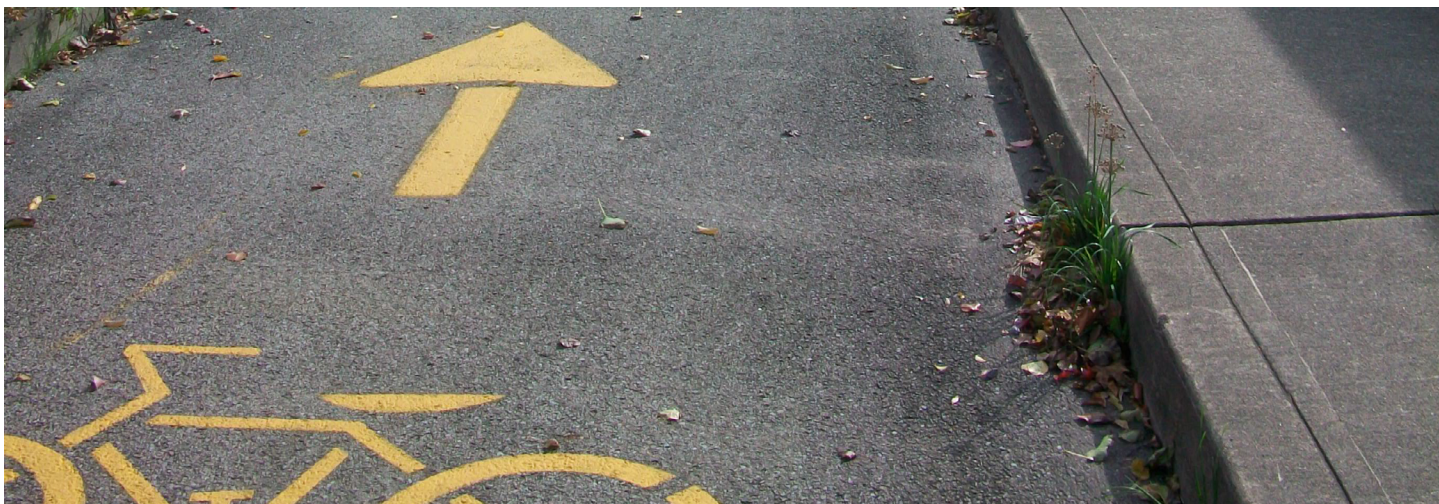
Different businesses will respond to different survey methods:

- Online. Use a web form, **Google Form** or email.
- By mail. Include an explanatory letter and a return envelope.
- Door-to-door. Try to stop in during slower hours.
- By phone. It may help to set up a call time in advance.

Keep following up until you have enough responses. Compile your data into a spreadsheet, analyze it and create a report to share with the public.

“ The GAP has become a tremendous economic opportunity for us. It's one of the activities that gets us through some of those cold shoulder months, like March, April and May, when nothing else is happening up here. It also fills in the end of the fall. Before we hit ski season, we still have a lot of people wanting to bike when it's a lot cooler.”

—Mike Dreisbach, Savage River Lodge, Frostburg, MD



## Action plan

Now that you know where to start, turn those insights into action.

### Building a plan

Bring the insights from your community assessment and research together to guide your plan:

- **Outline strengths** you can play on, as well as weaknesses you can work on.
- **List short-term goals** to reach within 2 years: Maybe you can easily improve communication with trail users, shore up parking or create an event that would appeal to cyclists.
- **Set some long-term targets**— think 5 years or longer. Would your trail benefit from uniform signage, or traffic-calming measures where the path meets town?
- **Address the business opportunities** along the trail. What might the trail users need or want that they can't already get? Are there already businesses that can satisfy cyclists' needs? How can you better connect them to the trail economy?

**TIP |** To get the momentum really moving, you need to score some easy wins early on. Start with simple updates that the community will be able to see. Design your entire plan to keep the project top-of-mind: continue advancing small but visible updates, even while you work on your longer-term goals behind-the-scenes.

### Building your trail and town identity

Establish branding guidelines early. Get basic branding squared away before you start posting new signage and infrastructure, so that you can design every piece to support your town and trail identity cohesively. Take a close look at the "character" section of your assessment for insights about how people already see your town and area. Get more specific branding tips in the [Marketing section \(pg 32.\)](#)





# Connecting town to trail

Add inviting touches that draw riders to town.

Do you want visitors to be interested in your business district? How about be able to find you?

The Trailhead is where your opportunities begin: It's where some trail-goers will start their journey, then return hungry, thirsty and tired. It's also where passers-by will decide whether to pedal past or roll on in. If they do head your way, where will they go?

Turn your trailhead into an invitation to explore your town. Then, add the welcoming touches that will guide visitors deeper into your community.

## THIS SECTION

1. **Basic amenities**
2. **Key improvements**
  - Repair stations
  - Bike racks
  - Signage
  - Welcome center
  - Public art

## TOOLS & REFERENCES:

- GAP signage guidelines

## Basic amenities

How useful and attractive is your trailhead? It should have:

- Parking that's well-marked, with curb stops
- Trash cans and recycling bins
- Bathrooms (permanent or portable)
- Water fountains
- Signage that names your town, outlines trail rules, and maps both the trail and the route into town
- Town and trail details on a bulletin board or at a kiosk
- Benches and picnic tables.
- Bonus: pavilions or a gazebo

**Start with easy, relatively cheap fixes.** Marshal your volunteers, and maybe your municipal government or community groups to:

- Pick up any trash.
- Freshen up and update the bulletin board.
- Plant flowers and native plants (low-maintenance varieties.)
- Paint or repaint structures and parking lines.
- Clear obstructions, like trees

## Key improvements

Armed with your research data, you may be able to get funding to take on bigger trailhead improvements.

### Repair stations

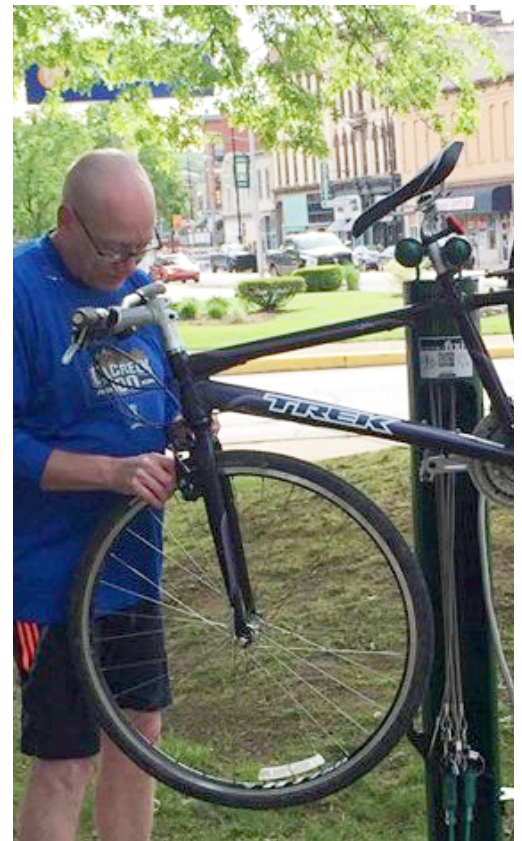
Some riders might only stop into town if there's a place to make adjustments or minor fixes to their bicycles.

A simple repair station with hanger arms, an air pump and set of wrenches gives cyclists a convenient place to tune up. It's also a **welcoming sign of good will**. Companies like **Dero Bike** offer attractive, easy-to-install fix-its.

- Find a spot convenient and visible to trail users, ideally within sight of the business district.
- If your town has a bike shop, ask the owner to sponsor the station in return for a small sign and map directing cyclists back to the bike shop if they need larger repairs or parts.
- Once the repair station is installed, have a "how-to" workshop to show locals how to use it, and how to direct visiting cyclists to it.



Meyersdale had a popular trailhead with a visitor's center in a restored train station, but the southern entry was lackluster. To add some local flavor, we added interpretive panels about the "Maple City" and its annual Maple Festival, plus a row of its famous sap-producing trees. Throw in more bike racks, a fix-it station and signage about the nearby downtown, and Meyersdale had a complete trail-to-town gateway.





### Racks

Bike racks are simple and relatively inexpensive, but they address cyclists' immediate needs. Riders who want to explore your town will need a place to secure their bikes.

Inventory your town's bike racks, and what condition they're in. Answer key questions:

- Are there key public locations without racks, too few racks or unattractive racks?
- Would a few racks do the trick, or do you need a larger bike rack corral?
- Should you install permanent fixtures, or movable models that can be stored indoors during the winter?
- Do you want off-the-shelf racks, or something that plays on the town or trail logo to reinforce branding?
- Is there interest in new racks? Ask businesses, maybe as part of your survey, if they want to add their own racks.

Once you know where you want racks to go, make it happen:

- Is the community working on a streetscape or park redesign? If so, try to merge the bike rack effort into that process.
- Try to find funding for a mini-grant program, so businesses, non-profits or municipalities can apply for help installing their own bike racks.
- Always confirm who owns the property, and get approval for every rack. Review the ordinances and permitting processes, especially for sidewalk locations.

As cycling tourism grows, you may need even more racks, so revisit the question periodically.

# 76.6%

of riders said they were more likely to visit a business that has bike racks or storage.



Ohiopyle State Park is popular for long stretches of unspoiled trail along the wild Youghiogheny River. The rides are jaw-dropping, and, for a lot of cyclists, worth taking the extra time to trek. But if you ran into bike trouble out in that stunning, secluded forest, you'd be far from help.

We added repair stations. That small safety net enticed cyclists to stay longer. If riders don't have to worry about venturing too far from town, they can explore more of Ohiopyle's remote, scenic beauty.

Every repair station also had a sign directing cyclists to the town's bike shop. Not only did that let riders in need know about the shop, it also gave them a convenient way to get their bikes patched up enough to get there for a bigger tune-up.

### RACK TIPS



< Because tires can be removed, the most secure way to lock a bike is to loop the frame and the wheels. Give riders in your town peace of mind to keep shopping with racks that have 2 points of contact (like U racks.) Avoid grid racks that only let cyclists lock 1 part of their bike.

- Place racks where riders can easily spot them
- Make sure they're well-lit at night
- Make them a bright, visible color
- Don't put them close to objects that could get in the way of locking the bike (for example, too close to a wall.)

### Signage

Can people find their way to and around your town?

Is the trailhead within sight of the business district? Or does a bridge or hill separate the trailhead from the town? Either way, **wayfinding signs can help draw trail-goers in.** They can also convey your town's unique charm, or provide a sense of safety.

Inventory your signage. Identify common types, themes and content, then assess their conditions, sizes and usefulness.

Signs at the trailhead should cover some standard details:

- The name of your town
- The direction and distance to town, and to the next 3-4 destinations either way along the trail.
- Identify any waterway or other major natural feature.
- Directions to dining, drinks, lodging or camping
- Trail rules
- If possible, a kiosk or display with a town map, regional map, business directory and area information
- Parking details (Could be shared with a park, sport venue or other amenity)

**Create a plan** to fill in signage gaps. Separate it into phases if you need to. Choose locations and types, and get any approvals and permits you need. Establish a policy for adding, removing or improving signage.

**Create design guides.** Consistency is key, so stick to your branding. Hire a professional designer if you can.

**Find contractors.** Create a Request for Proposals for fabricators and contractors. Specify your sign guidelines, and ask for information about each bidder's experience, capacity and price. Consider whether you need to hire a consultant to help with design, engineering or installation.



Along the Great Allegheny Passage, signs create a sense of high standards, and reinforce the appealing features of the trail's brand. Trail surveys showed that kiosks and signage helped nearly half of all trail users decide where to stop along the trail.

### SIGNAGE TIPS

#### Lettering and Content

- Regional trail organizations may already have guidelines you can build from.
- Use simple, legible fonts, like block letters. Elaborate lettering may be difficult to read.
- Don't use more than 2 letter styles on 1 sign.
- Space letters/words so it isn't too crowded.
- Recognizable logos and symbols can make your sign's purpose clearer at-a-glance.
- Avoid soft colors like pastels and corals, or bright fluorescents.
- Contrast the color of your words with your background so the messaging stands out.

#### Materials

- Use natural materials like wood, stone or rock.
- Or modern materials, like high-density foam.
- Make sure metals are treated or sealed.
- Avoid water-damageable fabric and paper
- Reflect your community's character. Avoid neon tubing or artificial lighting. If you have to light signs, do it softly from the top.
- Stay away from light-reflecting materials like plastic or reflective coatings.

**EXAMPLE:** For ideas, check out the Great Allegheny Passage's in-depth signage and style guide. ▶



## Welcome centers

A welcome center can be a helpful, inviting centerpiece to your Trail Town, and **steer visitors to your attractions**, amenities and businesses.

It's also a big investment, so consider the costs and benefits. Can you repurpose a structure, or will you need to build a new one? Do you have the staff, volunteers and resources to pay contractors? And to keep up with the center long-term? A feasibility study can help you determine whether this move is right for your town.

**TIP |** Train center staff to answer visitor FAQs, like when and where to eat (especially for particular diets.) You can even sell merchandise to help generate some minor income for upkeep on the center.

The rusty old boxcar that was once a blight on the Connellsville trailhead is now a beacon urging passersby to stop in and stay a while.

The Trail Town Program realized the old caboose was a long-overlooked connection to the town's heritage: a relic of its rich coal history. We buffed off the rust, fixed it up and gave it a bold coat of red paint before setting it back up on the tracks.

With its former glory restored, the bright B&O boxcar captured the whole town's interest. They helped compile local history, added artistic panels to the walls and even volunteered to staff the caboose during peak trail hours.

The railcar adds an authentic, charming touch to the trailhead that draws visitors in. And as it's luring in more guests, it's also giving volunteers a convenient place to count and track that tourism boost.





### Public art

Intrigue trail travelers with a peek into your local flavor. Even if your town is too far from the trailhead to make an impression, you can entice passersby with a creative touch.

Creating art can also deepen your community's relationship to the trail. Get public input early and often to build support for creative projects.

Empower an art committee to spearhead the legwork:

- **Find funding and space** for new art projects.
- **Gauge interest** and get approval from property owners.
- **Decide materials**, styles, themes, and, of course, local artists.
- **Outline potential costs**, including materials, artists' fees and insurance. Each piece can cost \$1,000 to \$10,000 or more.
- **Plan a dedication ceremony**, or have an official unveiling during a larger community event.

A public art guide (printed and online) will entice travelers to explore these creative pieces more deeply:

- Design the guide to lead visitors logically through the landscape of art.
- Include a map and description of each art piece.
- Sprinkle in the history of bridges, railroad remnants and other attractions along the way.
- Keep the details updated.

Connellsville, Confluence and Frostburg have extended public art from their trailheads deep into their communities, fostering a sense of a unified artistic or cultural district.

**TIP |** Include details and a photo of the artists themselves, as well as their take on the piece. People enjoy artistic objects, but they identify most meaningfully with other people.

**TIP |** Photograph the art in its natural surroundings to convey a sense of place. Big bonus if your shots include people (especially cyclists) reacting to each piece.





# Development

Create an experience to explore and share about.

A wave of new visitors can also bring a new vibrance to your business district.

To bring trail travelers into town — and keep them exploring and spending — you need a range of basic services. And it can open a world of possibilities for your community.

“ To see development downtown, to drive by at night and see lights on, is huge. I’d been waiting my whole life to hear someone to say ‘I’ll put it [the town] back.’ ”

—Ben Markle, Downtown West Newton, Inc.

## THIS SECTION

1. What a Trail Town needs
2. Growing your business district
3. Bringing businesses together
4. Real estate development
5. Financing

## TOOLS & REFERENCES:

- Farmer’s market brochure
- Sustainable Trail Guide
- Sustainable Supplier Guide
- Hostel guide



## What a Trail Town needs

### Food & drinks

Cycling can work up an appetite. Maybe that's why riders on the GAP trail said they were most interested in restaurants, and **most likely to buy drinks and meals.**

To appeal to more riders, add variety: breakfast, lunch and dinner. Ice cream to cool off. Coffee shops to sip and chat a while. You don't have to cover every craving, but try to make sure your town has at least a few options for riders with special diets, like vegetarian or vegan.

### Lodging

When people stay overnight, that usually means they'll do some extra exploring (and spending!) Provide options from rustic to luxury:

- Budget-friendly options like camping or hostels
- Standard hotels or B&Bs
- Stand-alone units, like cottages or cabins

**Get an edge:** Can you cater to typically underserved travelers, like groups or cyclists with pets? Take inspiration from trends, like offbeat refurbished structures (think fire towers or rail cars), tree houses, yurts or glamping. Small touches like wild local jelly at breakfast or canoe rentals can make a big impression.

Use resources like [AirBnB](#) or [VRBO](#). They're a go-to for some travelers.

**\$124**  
is the avg amount  
GAP riders spend  
just on lodging per  
night (and they  
stay 4-6 days.)

### GO GREEN & GET LOCAL



The most-requested dining option on the GAP is simple: **local food.**

Are there non-chain restaurants in your town? Do they offer (or make) local beers? Source local ingredients? Serve a local specialty? These are all A+ selling points.

**EXAMPLE:** Explore our Farms and Farmer's Market brochure ▶

GAP riders also said they would travel further and **pay more for sustainable** services.

The Trail Town Program made sustainability a standard for its Trail Town Certified Network.

Get green trail tips in our Sustainable Trail Guide ▶

**EXAMPLE:** Check out our Sustainable Supplier Guide for local businesses ▶

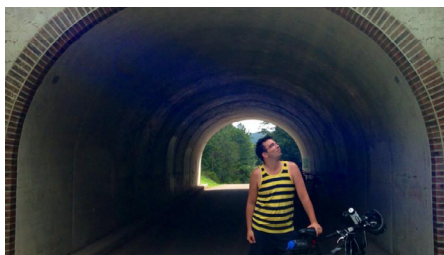


## Things to do



### Shopping

Give riders a reason to browse. Offer the basics: bike parts, gear, supplies. Then souvenirs! What little pieces of your town would travelers want to take home? Artisan crafts, old-time antiques, quirky trinkets, foods, gifts?



### History and heritage

Give travelers a taste of something new by sharing what's uniquely yours. Lead visitors through colorful moments from your town's past, and its present. Bring them into your lifestyle for a while.



### Outdoors

Trail visitors have given you a hint: they like recreation. What adventures can they dive into? Is there climbing, boating or fishing nearby? Can they get the tools to camp and explore? What about parks and greenspaces?

## Services

Meet as many travelers' needs as you can. If you have cash-only shops, make sure there are ATMs. (Better yet, accept cards with [Square](#).) Are there attractions close by, but not quite bikeable? Offer transportation to and from. In case of emergencies, have a plan to give or get someone to medical services.

## Grow your business district

So— what if something is missing?

The first thing to remember is that not every town needs to have the same amenities, so refer to your trail user surveys or research to understand what you need in your market.

If you do have a gap, though, look within your network to fill it first. Can the businesses you have take on a new role? Are they interested in expanding?

If no one in your commerce network is taking up the task, **recruit entrepreneurs in your community, nearby towns or even outside your area.** If your research is showing a need for a service, it will be a more attractive venture to take a chance on.

Make the offer even more enticing by illustrating its potential: scout affordable locations and offer your survey research as a guide to project the possible profits.



When riders asked shop owner Judy if there were a place to stay in Rockwood, PA, she had to say no. When they asked if there was a hostel, she had to ask, "A what?"

Judy didn't know what a hostel was — but people sure wanted one. So she reached out to The Progress Fund to help fill the obvious need. She opened The Hostel on Main in 2009, and it was an immediate (and ongoing) success.

**Get tips in our Hostel Guide** ►

# Bringing businesses together

The trail town economy grows fastest and strongest if your businesses and organizations work together. A unified town with a cohesive vision evolves from a stop into a destination – which means more visitors, who stay longer.

We unify businesses with the **"Trail Town Certified Network."** It creates a cohesive experience along the whole trail, and builds stronger connections between the trail businesses, so we can all work together on planning, events, marketing and more.

## Network standards

Create a common set of standards for your network members, so the designation is an honor for businesses who earn it.

When a business applies to join the network, do a quick evaluation – no more than 10-15 minutes or so. Choose benchmarks that make sense for your area, and that **create a sense of pride and investment**, but not exclusivity.

Some fitting standards might be:

- Basic amenities for trail users
- Trail friendliness
- Knowledge of the trail and area
- Sustainability: Energy efficiency, water conservation, etc

Just talking through these ideas can help businesses improve.

## Building your network

This should be a trail-wide designation. Coordinate with neighboring towns to start recruiting businesses. Call, email and go door to door. Reach out through business organizations, tourism bureaus and commerce chambers.

Give Network members extra benefits:

- **Window decals** or other badges to show off the distinction
- **Spotlights** in trail newsletters, guides, social media and other promotions
- **Networking and training** opportunities.

During the off-season, give members the chance to meet and share ideas. Have summits or happy hours in different towns. Bring in speakers for fresh perspectives on topics like marketing, bike infrastructure, energy efficiency and finance.



**TIP |** Did you know more than a quarter of riders on the GAP trails asked the local bike shop for advice about where to stop on the trail? Businesses in your town should be able to answer general questions about town, and encourage travelers to explore even more.



When welcome center staffers along the Great Allegheny Passage got together, they shared lighthearted stories from their centers, as well as thoughtful tips to elevate customer service trail-wide, like giving branded train whistles as a token to small children.



## Real estate development

Unattractive spaces and run-down structures? You may overlook them, but they turn cyclists away.

Turn those eyesores into assets.

If you can't fix it with a neighborhood clean-up or organic business development, try to take ownership of the property. Now, that's a huge undertaking, and there's risk involved. So consider the property carefully:

- **Location:** Is it close to both the trail and the business district?
- **Availability:** Is the owner likely to cede control?
- **Future:** Is there a clear vision for the site?
- **Feasibility:** Does the property's economic potential outweigh the likely renovation costs?
- **Marketability:** Will you be able to find a buyer or lessor?
- **Financing:** If you don't have internal financial capacity, is there a public agency, municipal entity, foundation or bank that might help?

If it's worth pursuing, you are probably going to need appraisers, lawyers and mortgage brokers. See what talents your volunteer corps and their networks can offer. If you have to, hire professionals to help. (And ask about community or nonprofit discounts.)

There's no detailed punch list for tackling blight, but basically, once you identify a property that gives trail users a negative impression of the town:

- Find out who owns it.
- Negotiate to purchase or lease it.
- Convert it into a more attractive and economically vibrant space (respecting local ordinances, styles and sensibilities, of course.)

After the papers are signed, you'll need at least a broom and painting supplies – and probably much, much more.



A convenient 35 mile ride from Downtown Pittsburgh, West Newton was reinventing itself around the Great Allegheny Passage. But the first thing trail-goers saw as they approached town was the Riverside Lounge, a rarely-open watering hole decades past its prime.

The owner, proud of his former business, didn't want to sell it. He worried the next owner would just tear it down.

The Trail Town Program's parent organization, The Progress Fund, and West Newton's mayor were on his side: they saw the place's potential, too. In fact, they thought it could become a cornerstone for the community. After 2 years, the owner finally agreed to sell— as long as we turned it back into a thriving business again.

Once The Progress Fund completely renovated the building, 30-some inquiries flooded in. Cyclists can now stop in for a warm sandwich and an icy drink before they venture on down Main Street.



**The Progress Fund, a PA nonprofit,** can help towns in PA, WV and MD fund real estate improvements for community development.

[ProgressFund.org](http://ProgressFund.org)

# Financing

Let's face it: The conventional banking system isn't built for the trail. Banks are hesitant to lend to small businesses with seasonal cash flows.

So it's time to get innovative.

## Have your research ready.

You've done an assessment, trail research and a business survey. And you've put all of that together into documents that businesses are already using to drive the trail economy. So keep an eye on your growth. **Document other accomplishments, too.**

Keep track of your town's untapped opportunities, and what they could mean for business. Refer to similar projects' successes as proof, but stay aware of your unique challenges, be ready to show funders how you will overcome them.

## Start with your partners

What organizations have you connected with? They already know your goals are in line with their mission, so you've got a foot in the door if they can offer financial support. If you can't find their grant or financing services listed publicly, don't be afraid to ask.

## Your businesses network, and beyond

Ask your local businesses to invest in the program; it will pay off for them later, after all. Start with the steps that directly benefit them, like wayfinding signage to their business and bike-friendly infrastructure near their storefront.

**Approach non-tourism entities, too.** If there are other major companies with locations along or near your trail, like grocery chains or factories, they may be interested in investing in the local community, too. Giving builds good will for them, and a more vibrant town could also help them attract more talented workers.

## Go for grants

Grants for construction and improvement are some of the hardest to find. Instead, roll those changes into your larger-scale goals. By bringing the ask back to the bigger picture, you're making the investment part of something more meaningful and long-term. A foundation may not want to give you money for "just" a building facelift, but they might want to invest in your mission to build a whole-new trail town economy.

**TIP |** Some funders also ask for letters of support, so have your advocates write a few to have on hand. And since they've already written the endorsement, get some publicity out of it: have them send it to the local newspaper's Letters to the Editor section, too.

**TIP |** Get creative to make your project more appealing to funders. Want to spruce up a vacant space? Turn it into a rain garden. Need to renovate? See if the building has historic value worth preserving.



## Nonprofit lenders

When banks aren't biting, where do you find flexible financing?

Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFIs) are nonprofit lenders who support economic growth, especially in areas that are disadvantaged... like rural trailside towns. While you'll still need to prove yourself, a CDFI can take more risks to help communities, and they will give you **more guidance, leeway and support** than a bank.

The Trail Town Program's parent organization, The Progress Fund, is an established CDFI, which gave their trail towns a reliable source of funding and support. Try to forge a deeper partnership than just piecemeal loans. By focusing your efforts trail-wide rather than just on one town or business, you'll have the power to make the broader economic impact a CDFI will find attractive.

With a reputable CDFI on your side, you might also look more attractive to banks and other traditional funding sources.



### Fund your Trail Town

If your trail project is in PA, MD or WV, our parent organization, nonprofit The Progress Fund can help.

[ProgressFund.org](https://ProgressFund.org) (724) 216-9160.

## \$10 million

in loans from The Progress Fund have helped 39 new or expanded businesses along the Great Allegheny Passage (plus more in towns along other trails.) That lending leveraged an additional \$6 million in private investment.



Mary Lou had a quaint B&B, but the place next door was a wreck. She'd wanted to fix it up for years, but when she went to the bank, she said she felt like "just a little lady" to them.

The Progress Fund helped Mary Lou buy and remodel that home, then another... and they fill up so often, she even leases a 4th house from The Progress Fund.





# Marketing

Bring riders to your trail from far and wide.

How will travelers know you're there if you don't tell them? Get the message out as often as you can.

Marketing is an art and an industry, and this isn't a textbook. But we're going to explore some key tools to fine-tune your trail economy.

These tactics are a critical piece of your town's success, so don't hesitate to hire a professional.

## THIS SECTION

1. Branding
2. Print materials
3. Digital Promotion
4. Outreach

# Branding

You don't have to transform your town or trail to be memorable. What do you already love about it? Build around that.

**Your trail branding** will set your overarching visual and content guidelines. Set cohesive standards for everything from the feel and tone of the trail down to the colors, fonts and logo.

Start by narrowing in on 1 key characteristic to align your 'trail persona' around. Maybe your trail is rustic, charming, wild or refined. Your visual guidelines, town brands and regional culture should all reinforce that 1 persona.

**Your town branding** will distinguish your stop among the other communities on the trail— but it also needs to fit well into the overall trail branding. Keep in mind: some towns on your trail may already have their own branding, so make sure your trail persona makes sense with the town personalities that have already been established.

Choose carefully and thoughtfully— once they're set, these elements should never change. Branding is most effective when it reinforces a concept consistently over time.

## Print materials

### Trail rack cards

A rack card doesn't need to be elaborate, but it does need:

- Trail details and fun facts about points of interest
- A regional map of the completed trail sections (clearly show any gaps)
- A mileage chart to show distances between each town along the trail.
- Photos from the path and your community (include people, ideally cyclists, in every shot.)
- Contact Information like your network's website and phone number
- Where to find real-time trail conditions

A longstanding trail town network might need a detailed, double-sided card. But if your trail is still under development and a map would become outdated quickly, stick to more general information and links to up-to-date details online.

**TIP |** Town nicknames usually highlight a standout local characteristic. If your town has any nicknames, that's a good hint at how you might brand it. If not, think about giving it one that aligns with the brand you create, to help reinforce it.



Trail riders love ice cream! To help create some buzz about the sweet treats on the trail, plus reinforce town branding, we created a wacky signature flavor for each community. The flavor was only available in that town, so you had to visit a few stops to try them all.

The idea was a hit, but it wasn't sustainable. The ice cream was difficult to make and store, and some of the shop owners kept odd hours.

Restaurants have tweaked the idea to make it work more long-term: they name signature dishes after other stops on the GAP.



## Town brochures

Trail Town brochures should promote your town's experience. Every town should have its own, but keep consistent design and content:

- Vibrant photos and the town name on the cover
- A town map and business directory
- Callouts about top attractions and interesting history
- An annual events calendar
- Contact information to learn more

Rally your network to assemble, review and periodically update the information. Set deadlines for input, initial edits and final edits.

## Distribution

Even as you are designing the cards and brochures, start crafting a distribution plan. This will help you know how many you need to print. You may want to place materials at:

- Trailheads
- Trail association locations
- Tourism agency offices, visitor centers, and Chambers of Commerce
- Trail-oriented businesses, especially lodging and recreation
- Bike shops throughout the region and in neighboring states
- Nearby attractions like museums or historic sites

You'll want some extra cards to replenish your stacks, and for events.

**Update your print materials regularly.** Before you order more, though, collect the leftovers, count them, and adjust your distribution based on which pieces and places were most popular.

# 120,000

brochures are distributed every year. More than half of GAP riders use the local trail guides to decide where to stop.

**TIP |** Unconventional distribution partnerships can help you reach new audiences. Bill inserts to Columbia Gas customers earned one of the GAP's highest response rates.



# Digital promotion

## Site

Your site is going to be a key source of information for people who are planning their trips, so it needs to be well-organized so **basic details are easy and intuitive to find**. Interactive tools like **Google Maps** are easy to add to your site, and make it much easier for visitors to plan their journey.

Update your site regularly. Travelers will be more confident in the information if it's visibly up-to-date, and it will boost your rankings in search engines, too.

## Social media

Which social media you use will depend on your goals, but do keep up with it. An updated page tells trip planners you are there if they need you, and that your information is current.

Social media conversation isn't 1-way. **Answer questions, respond to reviews and encourage visitors** to share their own experiences—then re-share their posts. User-generated content is more authentic, plus low-effort for you. Use a monitoring tool like **Hootsuite** so you can manage your platforms from 1 dashboard.

Share your partners' posts, and ask them to do the same.

During the peak season, consider targeted posts. It doesn't cost much, and you can narrow in on very specific audiences, like cyclists and travelers within 100 miles of your trail.

## Listings

Make sure your business is searchable on leading travel sites:

- Restaurants- Urbanspoon, OpenTable
- Lodging: VRBO, Flipkey, HomeAway, HostelWorld, hotels.com
- All businesses- Yelp, TripAdvisor, Google reviews, local tourism sites, WikiTravel

If you get reviews, some sites allow you to **thank guests or resolve complaints**. You can share your best reviews on social media, too.

Some travelers want to deepen their local experience by meeting, eating with or staying with people in your community. Let willing hosts know they can connect with visitors directly through sharing-economy sites like AirBnB, couchsurfing or VizEat.

# 84.2%

of Great Allegheny Passage riders found out about business or attractions on social media or online. The trail's site has more than 1.5 million views a year.

**TIP |** A blog is the easiest way to keep fresh content on your site. If you don't have time to post regularly, ask for representatives from various towns on your trail to contribute.



Trail Town Program  
June 2 at 11:30am · 🌐

Happy #TrailTownCertified Tuesday!! This week we are featuring Nova Café Roastery!! This is a great stop along the Erie to Pittsb Alliance!! They use biodegradable cups and allow patrons to use coffee cups. They also have a bike rack inside!! Congratulations #sustainable and #trailfriendly success!! #getontrails #HeartTrail #SmallBusiness #Coffee



We highlighted sustainable, trail-friendly practices of a different Certified Network member every Tuesday with #TrailTownCertified posts on Facebook and Twitter. It gave our followers compelling insights into our local businesses, added extra value for our network members, and created an incentive for businesses to add even more green and welcoming touches to our trails.

# Outreach

## Events & packages

If you really want to draw a crowd, create hype with an event.

Show off what makes your town special with an offbeat festival. Bring businesses, or even several towns together to celebrate 1 theme. Start monthly food or art crawls through downtown.

Center events around your trail, like group rides or guided nature tours. Reach a wider audience by partnering with outdoor clubs a short drive away that already have their own following.

Or, just make it stress-free to plan a trip by bundling **stay-and-play packages**. Partner with other businesses (and maybe other towns) to create options for different types of travelers: relaxation, adventure, romance, families, gal groups and more.

## Media

1 press release to the right outlets can earn you free coverage that would cost thousands in advertising. Keep a media contact list with local, regional and national outlets.

**Don't forget non-traditional contacts.** Tap local celebrities, bloggers, popular figures and brands in travel, biking and business.

Not every pitch should go to your whole list. Consider whether the content is relevant to their audience first, then tailor your release to target them. Use creative angles to appeal to niche publications.

## Word of mouth

People trust other people more than they trust your ads. Incentivize customers to recommend your business by sharing it on social media, leaving an online review or telling friends to come by.

A sign asking customers to share their experience is ok, but training your staff to mention it personally will be much more compelling. Especially if your staff is giving great service. When you go above and beyond, people remember. When you don't? Well, they remember that, too. Nothing will hurt your business faster than a mass of negative reviews.

At the end of the day, the best marketing can be as simple as **creating an experience people want to share about.**



Some of the 1958 sci-fi film *The Blob* was filmed in small-town Phoenixville, so the theatre commemorates it every July with **BlobFest**.

No business is too sophisticated to play along. Some of their collective offerings: Limited-edition ice cream in Blob bowls by a local potter, Blob martinis and craft beer at the local microbrewery, and a make-your-own Tinfoil Hat Contest at the art gallery.

Phoenixville's got *The Blob*. What does your town have?

**TIP |** Don't lose the human touch. 500 people still call the GAP trail hotline a year to ask questions in person.

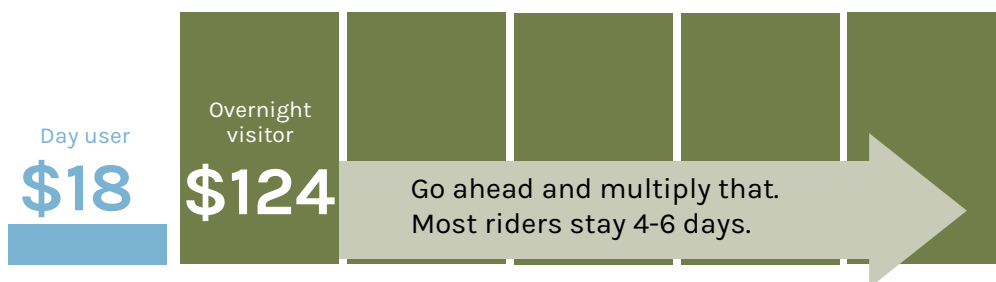
## How trails can impact your economy:

# \$50,000,000

overall economic impact from the Great Allegheny Passage trail.

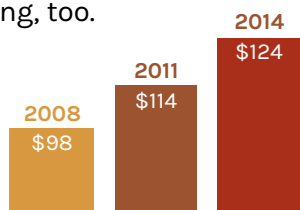
### Stay = spend

Overnight trips drive spending on the trail. When a traveler stays in town, they are more likely to dine, shop and explore there, too.

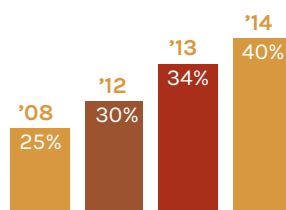


### Growth over time

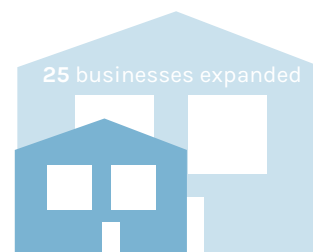
Of course, to make a 4-6 day trip of it, riders need plenty to do. As you connect and grow your trail into a trip-worthy destination, overnight visitors will increase spending, too.



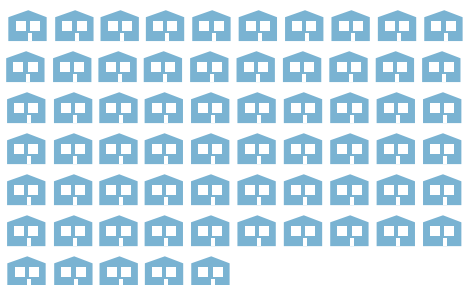
And as more riders come in, the amount of sales from trail-goers will increase, too.



Until eventually, businesses can grow.



### 65 new businesses + 270 new jobs in just 8 years





## 9+ ways your businesses can go the extra mile for cyclists



- 1. Be knowledgeable** about the trail, your community, and the region. Get out and explore it! You can best serve your customers by knowing the trail system and the towns along the way.
- 2. Offer bike parking.** Bike racks say cyclists and their bikes are welcome at your business.
- 3. Keep basic tools on-hand**, like pumps, multi-tools and tire tubes. Riders may not need them often, but they will really, really appreciate them when they do.
- 4. Set your hours for riders.** Know when cyclists come into town, and try to be open during peak traffic. Plenty of cyclists will come off the trail later than they planned, but they still need basic services. Post your hours in plain sight and extend them when you need to.
- 5. Sell small items** that bikers can carry, and stock easy-to-carry snacks like trail mix, apples and protein bars.
- 6. Keep a guestbook and send out special promos.** Attracting repeat customers is a big part of your tourism business. Imagine sending a personalized appeal that reminds past guests that it's time to start planning their annual bike trip.
- 7. Seek honest customer feedback** from surveys, customer polls, online reviews, and giveaways.
- 8. Offer delivery** to nearby campsites and other lodging properties.
- 9. Ship goods.** It might not be convenient to take your products on a bike trip— but don't let that keep cyclists from making a purchase. Ship it! Better yet, persuade them with free shipping.

### INDUSTRY TIPS:

#### Lodging:

- Allow bikers to book 1-night stays. 2-night minimums can really hamper trip planning along long-distance trails.
- Overnight bike storage is a must!

#### Bike shops:

- Offer locks with your rental bikes so your customers can relax and visit other businesses, worry-free.

#### Restaurants:

- Post your menu so that cyclists can easily see it from the sidewalk.
- Serve takeout orders in sealed containers that will travel easily by bike. Bonus: make them eco-friendly.

# Trail Town Program® partnership resources



## LOCAL SUPPORT & FUNDING

Get local (and funding) support from our nonprofit parent organization, The Progress Fund, which can help you get started.

**[ProgressFund.org](https://ProgressFund.org)**



## NATIONAL NETWORK

Join with other thriving and budding trails across the nation to share ideas, tips and support. (All trail town projects welcome!)

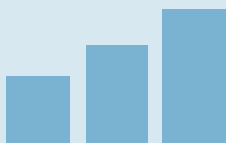
**[TrailTowns.org/Network](https://TrailTowns.org/Network)**



## NEWS & UPDATES

Keep up with what we're learning on our trails, and from other programs we work with around the country.

**[TrailTowns.org/Newsletter](https://TrailTowns.org/Newsletter)**



## DATA

Every economy is different, but our surveys and studies can give you some insights to start with.

**[TrailTowns.org/Research](https://TrailTowns.org/Research)**



## ASSESSMENT

We have a formula for evaluating Trail Towns to see what they have, and what they need. Download our assessment workbook.

**[TrailTowns.org/Assessment](https://TrailTowns.org/Assessment)**



created by

 **The Progress Fund**

The Trail Town Guide is intellectual property of The Progress Fund and the Trail Town Program®.

Guide stats are from our latest surveys (2015.)

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