

COMMERCIAL DISTRICT DESIGN: COVID-19 RESPONSE AND MANAGEMENT

As [myriad studies](#) have shown, outdoor recreation in trails and parks offers positive economic, health, and quality of life benefits. Many communities across the country, however, have not been able to harness these benefits to have direct impact in their downtowns and neighborhood commercial districts. As [people increasingly use trails and parks](#) for socially-distanced recreation, local leaders have a unique opportunity to help funnel new economic benefits into these local commercial districts. This can either mean promoting new businesses or amenities that directly support people using trails and parks, or helping existing businesses offer new services or products that are targeted towards an influx of new customers. Increased trail and park use can also energize a community around their unique local assets, leading to general excitement and appreciation for the downtown or neighborhood commercial district. Furthermore, as low-income residents and communities of color have [historically lacked access](#) and experienced discriminatory barriers to using and enjoying greenspaces, local leaders have an opportunity to explore partnerships and engage the community to create more equitable trails, parks, and public spaces.



This brief focuses on the connections between trails, parks, and the local economy, and explores how local leaders can maximize the benefits of these connections in their COVID-19 response and management.

Benefits

At first glance, trails and parks can seem like amenities separate from commercial districts, and they are often planned and managed in different silos: greenspace has traditionally existed for outdoor recreation and nature conservation, while commercial districts have historically existed for retail.

But local leaders can leverage both types of amenities by focusing on a more integrated approach, making connections between the two so that the many community building, public health and safety, and economic impacts are realized in long-term, sustainable ways. Some of those benefits include:

Community Building Impacts

- Renewed interest and activity in public community gathering spaces
- Opportunities for social interaction through exercise and recreation (often low-cost or free!)
- Sense of community pride in and ownership of unique local assets >

Most communities have a diverse range of publicly available parks and trails. Those may include one or more of the following:

- National parks or protected areas
- Regional parks
- Neighborhood/pocket parks and playgrounds
- Beach, river, or lake access points
- Protected sites of historical/cultural importance
- Trails through or adjacent to parkways or greenways
- Riverwalks
- Waterways
- Rails-to-trails conversions

Benefits (continued)

Public Health and Safety

- Additional options for physical activity and exercise, which can also lead to lower health care costs
- Stress reduction and improvement of cognitive function and coping skills
- Increased opportunity for safer walking and biking, often at a greater distance from vehicle traffic

Considerations for Success

Integrating trails and parks with the commercial district economy requires community-wide collaboration and participation. Local leaders should therefore prioritize several overarching considerations for success:

- **Build a cross-sector team.** Connecting trails and parks with the local economy requires long-term planning and management partnerships from a variety of community agencies, departments, organizations, and businesses. As a first step, local leaders should understand past efforts, gauge community interest in participating in new activities, and identify roles and responsibilities for space management and consistent programming. It is critical to meet with community members, schools, trail users, business owners, parks and recreation departments, local healthcare providers, and any trail- or park-managing entities.
- **Strive for inclusive community engagement.** When connecting trails and parks to commercial districts, local leaders need to consider how residents and visitors access local greenspaces, how they use (or don't use) them, and what additional amenities they'd want in a commercial district. Listening sessions and surveys will help leaders to better understand barriers to access and participation, assess potential gaps in their commercial district offerings, and explore how to create better physical connections between businesses and outdoor amenities (see below). It's important to include community members, trail users, business owners, the parks and recreation department, and any greenspace-managing entities.
- **Consider the “Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper” Approach.** Understanding the physical realities of trails, parks, and commercial districts is key to

Economic Impacts

- More spending in commercial districts from increased foot traffic and spending by residents and regional tourists
- New opportunities for businesses to connect with potential customers
- Increased population density: current residents stay and new residents move in to enjoy outdoor amenities

successfully connecting them. If the identified trail, park, or greenspace does not already physically connect to the downtown with an obvious, accessible path and signage, creating that physical connection will be one of your cross-sector team's first goals—which can be tested with an [LQC Approach](#).

If the distance between the trail or park and the commercial district is short enough, consider starting with temporary wayfinding signage. This could be as simple as directional signs posted, painted, or chalked on a trail, pointing towards a commercial district. In the commercial district, it could be as easy as placing sandwich boards at street corners directing people toward park entrances and trailheads. If the distance is longer, consider printing simple, half-page directional maps that are distributed at the counters of local businesses, and are placed in stacks in a visible, well-marked mailbox at the entrance to the greenspace, and in the downtown.

Greenspace managers and local leaders should make sure that both greenspaces and connections to commercial districts comply with the [Americans with Disabilities Act \(ADA\) standards](#) and are physically accessible and safe for all. Consider paved ground material, graded elevations instead of stairs, and wide paths for people using wheelchairs, walkers, and strollers. If it is a shared use path (e.g. for walking, biking, and rolling), be sure to indicate the different uses with signage and tactile paving to accommodate those with visual impairments. >

Considerations for Success *(continued)*

- **Identify diverse, adequate funding.** Trail and park maintenance, and projects to connect trails and parks to commercial districts, can be funded through public or private sources. For some municipalities, funding for parks is reduced or endangered in times of economic crisis, as we see today with the effects of COVID-19. Local leaders should therefore consider multiple types funding and leverage a wide range of sources, such as community foundations, municipal dollars, and materials donations to better [invest in trail and park equity](#).

- **Assess business gaps and potential physical space adaptations.** To better service the increasing number of trail and park users, local leaders should conduct an assessment of existing businesses to determine what's missing and evaluate how to best adapt downtown spaces to accommodate those missing uses.

- » *Business gap assessment:* Are there services, retail, and dining amenities that would attract trail users downtown? Do the local businesses offer carry-out food and beverage options for people to bring into parks and greenspaces? What about an increase in trash and recycling containers, and city/town pick-up service to ensure the greenspaces stay clean? Does the community have [breweries](#), distilleries, and coffee houses, which can be tailored to both residents and outdoor recreation [tourists](#)? Does the commercial district have gear or bicycle shops? Stores that sell supplies like hand sanitizer, sunscreen, insect repellent, and masks? Hotels, B&Bs, or Airbnbs (if local zoning regulations allow them)?

- » *Physical space assessments:* Are there materials, signage, or new construction that could facilitate physical connections from parks and trails to the commercial district (and vice versa)? Is there signage throughout the commercial district and the greenspaces encouraging awareness of the pertinent health and safety guidelines—like face covering and social distancing requirements. Do community greenspaces offer enough distanced seating and shade for additional users? Is there adequate parking near outdoor amenities? Is there free public wi-fi available—both outside local businesses and in public greenspaces? Is there a vacant or underused lot that could help connect the commercial district to parks or trails, or be used for additional parking? Is there a vacant storefront downtown that could house a pop-up or more permanent business that services outdoor recreation? Do greenspaces and commercial districts accommodate walking and biking needs?

- **Evaluate the impact.** Local leaders should work with their cross-sector teams to continuously evaluate and assess the impacts of better connecting trails and parks to commercial districts. Are more people using the parks on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis? Is there increased pedestrian traffic downtown? Is economic activity improving? Are businesses seeing increases in sales? Do more people use trails and parks now that they are easier to access? Consistent evaluation will help define opportunities for improvement and sustain the effort over time.

Adaptations for COVID-19

Using [trail count data for 31 different trails](#) from across the country, the Rails to Trails Conservancy reported an average weekly increase of 91 percent in trail use during the weeks between mid-March and the beginning of June, 2020 (including an average weekly increase of 180 percent during each of the four weeks between mid-March and mid-April). Similarly, a March 2020 [Google report](#) on U.S. cell phone location data found a dramatic increase in state and local park activity in several states across the country, including North Dakota (+73 percent), South Dakota (+126 percent), and Ohio (+117 percent).

This brief explains that given the value people are finding in trails and parks, it is critical that local leaders also recognize their economic value. However, >



Trail signage helps to facilitate physical connections. (c) JDWphoto

Adaptations for COVID-19 *(continued)*

to ensure their community can benefit from these greenspaces and the economic opportunities they create, local decision makers must also prioritize accessibility and safety for all in their ongoing COVID-19 response and management plans. This means that any modifications to the commercial area or greenspace to maximize economic benefits must also take health and safety into account, as well. Local leaders and business owners can create design strategies to meet some of these needs by implementing physically distanced seating, curbside pickup for food, drink, and retail, and temporary sanitation or water stations.

As COVID-19 response and management continues, local leaders can harness outdoor recreation momentum. For example, if there are camping areas or lodging options near the commercial district, local leaders should market those to potential tourists, even if tourism was not a major economic driver in the past. Public space managers should also ensure that public programming is social distance-friendly—whether that means creating new programming or altering existing events—to further draw residents and visitors into the commercial area.

A component of a longer-term strategy, local leaders may also identify opportunities to redevelop amenities. Vacant land near local parks could be transformed into micro-campgrounds or RV parking. Local decision makers could also offer incentives or ease permitting restrictions to encourage the construction of [accessory dwelling units \(ADUs\)](#) for short-term or home-sharing rental use. Further, local decision makers can develop new or update any greenspace design standards to ensure their [compliance with ADA standards](#).

Examples

Frogtown Park and Farm, St. Paul, Minnesota (pop. 307,000)

Located in Frogtown, one of St. Paul, Minnesota's most diverse and historic neighborhoods, the [Frogtown Park and Farm](#) is one of the largest contiguous urban demonstration farms in the country, and a community hub for local food, health, greenspace, and recreation. The neighborhood is unique within St. Paul and contains the city's [highest percentage of young people](#) (41.6 percent of residents are under 18 years old) and one of its lowest percentages of greenspace per child. Prior to the development of the park and farm, the Frogtown community demonstrated significant agricultural knowledge and traditions by creating a half-dozen small-lot gardens and participating in local farmers' and makers' markets. Community leaders saw how these neighborhood assets could provide a much-needed opportunity to the high percentage of local young people without easy access to parks or recreation options.

In 2013, [local neighborhood leaders partnered](#) with the Trust for Public Land, the City of St. Paul, and the Amherst H. Wilder Foundation to secure nearly 13 acres in the heart of Frogtown, transforming it into Frogtown Park and Farm.

By 2015, the project had become St. Paul's first nature-based play area, demonstration farm, and public park space. In just their fourth farming season (2019), Frogtown Park and Farm (the 501c(3) managing organization) reported growing 16,000 pounds of produce, reaching 1500 community members, engaging 513 community volunteers, >



Fresh produce at Frogtown Farm (c) Frogtown Park and Farm

Examples (continued)

and hosting 19 community farming workshops. For their 2020 growing season, COVID-19 has forced the park and farm to change course. In order to ensure the safety of their staff, volunteers, and community members, Frogtown Park and Farm scaled back their planting areas and have focused on repairing the farm's physical infrastructure, updating signage, and building handwashing stations. Further, Frogtown Park and Farm have been working with the local community to [explore specific initiatives](#) that will raise awareness and help mitigate chronic hunger and malnutrition affecting the neighborhood, including coordinating pop-up produce distribution with other local farmers, establishing a [Fare for All](#) site in the neighborhood, creating a cooking and food education online curriculum, and offering intergenerational programming focused on food, art, health, and spirituality.

The Kentucky Trail Town Program

While COVID-19 has significantly affected many commercial districts, there are some models of connectivity between greenspace and local downtowns that decision makers can adopt to leverage their unique natural assets for economic impact, like the Trail Town model.

In 2007, the nonprofit community development financial institution [Progress Fund](#) created the [Trail Town Program®](#), specifically focused on revitalizing commercial districts along the [Great Allegheny Passage \(GAP\) Trail](#), which runs from Cumberland, Maryland, to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. In their model, every town along the trail utilizes partnerships, assessment and research, and physical connections between the trail and the adjacent town, which includes connecting the trail to local business, real estate development, and marketing opportunities. Since 2007, the Trail Town model has been adapted in rural and urban communities nationwide, demonstrating its versatility as a place-based tool.

Kentucky—full of natural beauty and outdoor recreation opportunities—has long seen the benefits of the trail town model in its rural communities. In 2012, the [Kentucky Department of Tourism](#) launched its own [statewide trail towns program](#), using the [Main Street Approach](#) as part of its guiding framework, much like [Appalachian Trail Alliance \(ATA\)](#) did with its first trail towns guide. To help communities harness the economic benefits that the trail town model can bring to commercial districts, the Department of Tourism also partners with the [Kentucky Main Street Program](#), housed in the Kentucky Heritage Council, and cross-promotes Main Street and Trail Town communities. *To see more, [click here](#) and scroll down for the interactive map.*

The Kentucky Trail Town Program developed [assessment processes](#), a [workbook](#), and [how-to-guides](#) for communities to shore up their amenities, enhance the physical connection between the trails and the downtowns, and promote themselves as trail towns. The state also offers a [comprehensive guide](#) through its statewide promotional campaign that highlights individual town's attractions, while also presenting the destinations as a cohesive group. The Kentucky Trail Town Program showcases trails by use—including biking, horseback riding, kayaking, and canoeing—and ties those various uses to related amenities offered in the different towns. This comprehensive, collaborative marketing supports a broader, more widespread economic connection between the trails and outdoor recreation tourism across the state.



London, Kentucky - a Trail Town community (c) KY Dept of Tourism

Further Reading

Benefits

- **Community Building Impacts:** [Headwaters Economics Trails Library: Quality of Life Overview](#), and [Evidence of Many Varieties of Economic Benefits Linked to Trails](#)
- **Economic Impact:** [Economic Benefits of Trails and Greenways](#), [Pennsylvania Land Trust Association: Economic Benefits of Trails](#), and [Trail User Survey and Business Survey Report Great Allegheny Passage](#)
- **Public Health and Safety:** [Creating Parks and Public Spaces for People of All Ages](#), and [Coronavirus latest: 60% of anxious adults say walking 'helped them cope' during lockdown](#)

General

- [10 Minute Walk](#), Trust for Public Land.
- [Conservation Buffers: Design Guidelines for Buffers, Corridors, and Greenways: Economic Impact of Trails](#), USDA National Agroforestry Center.
- [COVID-19 Resources](#), Rails to Trails Conservancy.
- [Creating Parks and Public Spaces for People of All Ages](#), AARP Livable Communities
- [Essential Role of Parks and Recreation](#), National Recreation and Park Association
- [The Design for Distancing Ideas Guidebook](#), the City of Baltimore, the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, the Baltimore Development Corporation, and the Neighborhood Design Center.
- [Investing in Equitable Urban Park Systems](#), Urban Institute.
- [Main Street Outdoor Recreation and the Local Economy](#), Main Street America (webinar).
- [Recreation and the Americans with Disabilities Act](#), National Recreation and Park Association.
- [Trail-Building Toolbox](#), Rails to Trails Conservancy.

Contact us

For more information or for more guidance on how to implement an open streets program, reach out to:

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About the Series: Produced in collaboration between Main Street America and AARP Livable Communities, *Commercial District Design: COVID-19 Response and Management* is a series of design-centered briefs developed to equip community leaders with safe, equitable, age-friendly strategies to support economic recovery from the impacts of COVID-19.

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