



DATE: June 28, 2019
TO: Plan for Ashuelot Rail Trail Project Advisory Committee
FROM: SWRPC Staff
RE: Outreach - Open House

In order to inform the general public about the Plan for Ashuelot Rail Trail initiative, SWRPC staff held an open house at Whitcomb Hall in Swanzey on November 17, 2018 from 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. The purpose of the open house was to:

- Share information about project goals, existing trail conditions, and input received to date;
- Gather perspectives from trail stakeholders and the general public about perceived trail assets and opportunities;
- Prompt trail stakeholders to envision and identify ideal trail qualities; and
- Create an opportunity for interested members of the public to discuss with each other issues related to the Ashuelot Rail Trail.

The open house included a variety of displays and activities that attendees were invited to explore. Displays and activities were distributed around the periphery of the room (see Figure 1) and included:

- Historical materials about the railway corridor, such as maps, photos, and interpretive text.
- An exercise that invited attendees to identify trail assets and opportunities on a large strip map (about 20 feet long). Participants used green arrow stickers to identify trail opportunities and orange arrow stickers to identify challenges.
- A slideshow of rails trails in other communities, including examples of how trails have benefited public health, transportation, tourism, and economic development.
- A station with laptops where attendees could take the online survey.
- A station with a camera and chalkboard speech bubble that attendees could use to photograph themselves or friends/family posing with a written message regarding trail priorities.
- A paper “mural” that prompted attendees to imagine and describe their “dream trail.”

Attendance at the open house was strong, with 53 individuals signing in over the course of the two-hour event (more may have attended without signing in). The good turnout suggests a substantial amount of interest in the Ashuelot Rail Trail and the region’s rail trails in general. Although staff issued a press release, the event was not covered by traditional media. Most outreach occurred through mass e-mail distributions, efforts of the project advisory committee, and SWRPC newsletters. Attendees included residents from towns along the trail’s route as well as some individuals who live outside the region.

Although a wide variety of trail users were present at the open house, some groups may have been better represented than others. Many equestrian users, for example appear on the sign-in sheet, while few attendees identified themselves as snowmobilers or representatives of

snowmobile clubs. From conversation with attendees, however, all user groups (walkers/runners, bicyclists, snowmobilers, skiers, etc.) were present to a certain extent.

Figure 1 – Open house displays and activities set up the night before the event

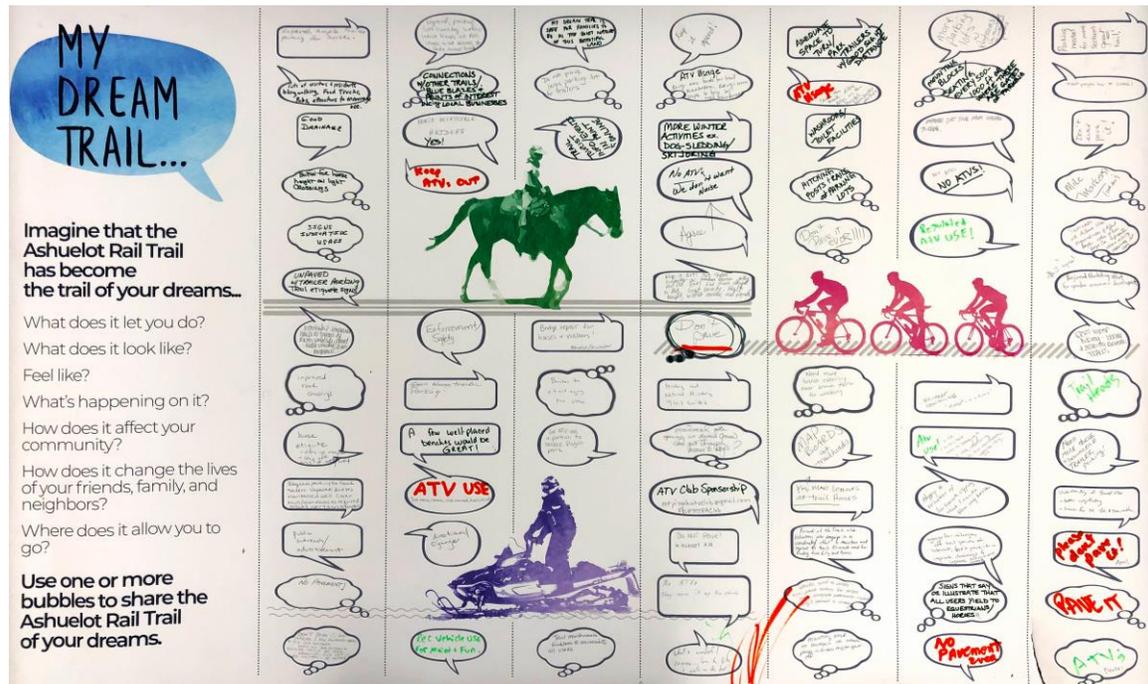


Figure 2 – Attendees mingling at the open house



Attendees readily engaged with the displays and activities, with many providing trail-related input via the paper mural, mapping exercise, or online survey. Attendees covered almost the entirety of the paper mural with comments regarding trail priorities (Figure 3). While the mural prompted attendees to describe their “dream trail” and its qualities, attendees also used the exercise as an opportunity to express current trail-related concerns, strategies for making improvements, and general opinions about the trail. Attendee comments are documented in List 1.

Figure 3 – Paper mural with comments from open house attendees



List 1 – Attendee comments on paper mural

- Unpaved, ample trailer parking for horses
- Lots of visitors and residents biking, walking. Food Trucks, pubs, attractions to encourage use.
- Good drainage
- Button for horse height on light crossings
- Signs indicating usage
- Unpaved w/trailer parking. Trail etiquette signs.
- Wonderful unpaved trails with views of river, wildlife, eagle viewing, bird migration
- Improved road crossing
- Horse etiquette: clean up manure and stay off trail if wet/soft
- Adequate parking for horse trailers. Unpaved! Bridge maintained well. Clear brush/blow downs as required. Network user groups to maintain.
- Public outreach/advertisement
- No pavement!
- Don't pave it, just improve a few flooded areas and fix the bridges. Info on the history, wildlife would be nice. Otherwise, just let it be natural. No motors!
- Rec vehicle use for maintenance and fun
- Directional signage
- ATV USE: trail maintenance/patrol, club managed, rules outlined.
- A few well-placed benches would be GREAT!

- *Good horse trailer parking*
- *Enforcement/safety*
- *Keep ATVs out*
- *Horse accessible bridges: YES!*
- *Connections w/other trails/'Blue blazes' and points of interest including local businesses*
- *Unpaved, packed, self-correcting surface which keeps all rec. users with access to State owned land*
- *My dream trail is safe for families to be in the quiet nature of this beautiful land*
- *Do not pave. Large parking lot for trailers.*
- *Trail tourist info/events in print and online*
- *Bridge repair for horses and walkers! (Ashuelot/Winchester)*
- *Benches to sit on and enjoy the view*
- *Let ATV use a portion to access Pisgah Park.*
- *Trail maintenance guidelines to accommodate all users*
- *What a wonderful resource...love to bike and walk on the trail!*
- *No ATVs. They mess it up for skiing.*
- *Do not pave! I Agree!*
- *ATV Club Sponsorship*
- *Occasional gate opening so drivers (horse) can get through. Access to keys?*
- *History and natural history trail guides*
- *Don't pave*
- *Keep it dirt! But stable.*
- *No ATV's. We don't want noise!*
- *ATV usage. Brings more funds for trail maintenance. Brings more people to help with trail maintenance.*
- *Keep it unpaved!*
- *Adequate space to turn/park trailers with good sight distance*
- *ATV usage. Share the trails. ATVs on the Hinsdale, Winchester portion.*
- *Washrooms/Toilet Facilities*
- *Hitching posts and rails at parking lots*
- *Don't pave it ever!*
- *Need more brush clearing near brown farm for walking*
- *MAP BOARDS at trailheads*
- *Yes, map boards at trailheads*
- *Friends of the Trails club. Volunteers who engage in a coordinated effort to maintain and improve the trails. Eliminate need for funding from city and towns.*
- *Vehicles yield to horses. Non-paved sections for horses can be alongside pavement sections only if pavement is necessary*
- *Mounting block at bridges or other places a rider might get off*
- *More parking lots with restrooms like they have in national parks*
- *Mounting blocks/seating every 500-1000 ft or where there are gates or parking*
- *Improved dirt trail from Hinsdale to Keene*
- *No ATVS. NO ATVS!*
- *Regulated ATV use!*
- *Volunteer opportunities: "Adopt-a-trail."*
- *ATV use! With restrictions such as belonging to a club, volunteering for trail maintenance, responsible riding, etc.*
- *Happy to volunteer w/low branch clipping which I can do from my horse.*
- *Signage for mileage, off trail points of interest, don't pave it—improve drainage and improve overgrown areas*

- Signs that say or illustrate that all users yield to equestrians/horses
- NO PAVEMENT EVER
- ATV's please!
- Pavement!
- Please don't pave it!
- Understanding of shared use, better wayfinding, from for XC ski and snowmobile
- Need more horse and snowmobile trailer parking
- Trail heads
- Greater winter hiking – looking and reading animal tracks
- Regional marketing effort for greater economic development
- Signs and maps with distances clear. Organized rides of different lengths. Notes of how groups can help maintain.
- Mile markers!
- Don't ever pave it!
- Teach people how to share!
- Parking needed for more sections. Great trail!

Those participating in the mapping exercise registered a wide variety of location-specific comments (Figure 4). Participants were prompted to use orange arrows to identify trail challenges and green arrows to identify trail opportunities (Figure 5). Identified challenges included, among other items, drainage issues, needed bridge repairs, unstable trail conditions, dangerous road crossings, parking difficulties. Identified opportunities included potential connections with other trails, opportunities to highlight notable natural, historic and cultural features, and leveraging economic opportunities such as potential locations for food or retail businesses. SWRPC staff digitized input received during the exercise and published it as webmap, available for review at <https://arcg.is/0uDG5W>.

Figure 4 – Detail from participatory mapping exercise

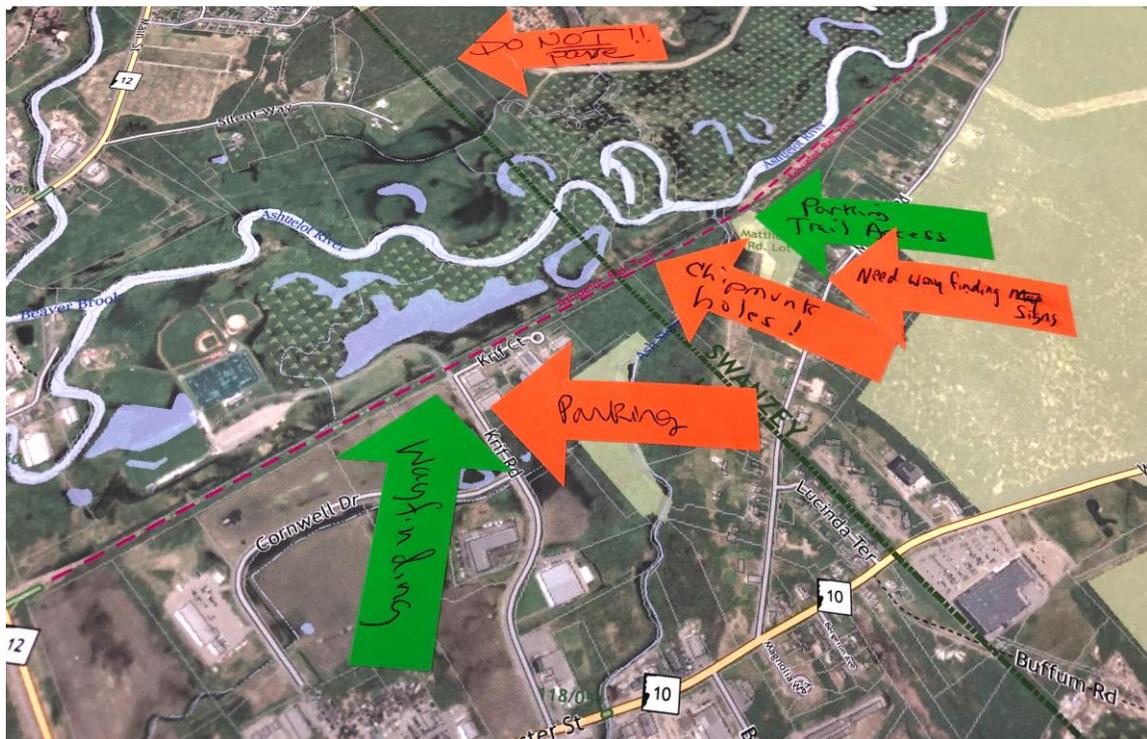
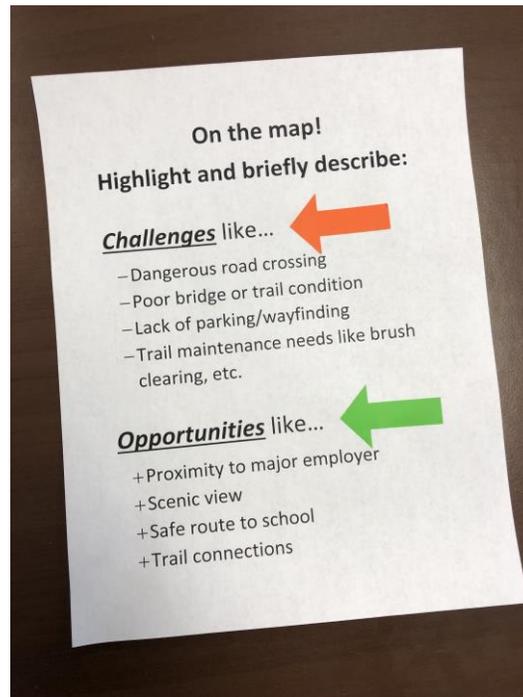


Figure 5 – Instructions for participatory mapping exercise



Findings

- Individuals from across the Monadnock Region and beyond attended the open house, indicating widespread interest in the Ashuelot Rail Trail and the Region's rail trails in general.
- As evidenced by input on the paper mural, attendees were more inclined to focus on specific challenges or concerns rather than a broad vision of the rail trail's future.
- Few open house attendees expressed interest in paving the trail. Equestrian users adamantly opposed trail paving while other users present seemed amenable to a packed gravel/stone dust surface. This finding aligns with online survey results, where respondents expressed little interest in trail paving.
- On the paper mural, some attendees indicated interest in opening the trail to ATV use, while others strongly opposed permitting ATVs. Some attendees who advocated for permitting ATV use qualified statements, stating that ATV use should be well regulated. Several attendees remarked that permitting ATVs on the trail could provide a source of maintenance funding and volunteer labor. It should be noted that ATVs are prohibited on the Ashuelot Rail Trail, per stipulations of the federal funding used by the state to acquire the railroad right-of-way.
- Most attendees were familiar with particular segments of the trail, but many communicated that they had not traveled the trail's entire corridor. The mapping exercise was an effective method in helping attendees visualize the trail's entire route.
- Comments from the mapping exercise tended to cluster around village centers and were less common along unimproved sections of trail. Comments were especially sparse along the trail segment from NH 10 to downtown Winchester. The lack of comments may

indicate the absence of challenge/opportunities or a general unfamiliarity with the trail segment.

Recommendations

- Explore the creation of a “Friends of the Trail” group that includes representation from different trail constituencies, e.g. bicyclists, equestrians, snowmobilers. Such a group could prove instrumental for developing understanding and trust among different trail user groups, building a foundation for joint fundraising, trail development, and maintenance efforts. Several open house attendees independently suggested that such a group is needed in order for trail user groups to identify and work towards realizing shared priorities. An e-mail distribution list created from the open house sign-in sheet and online survey responses could be a useful resource in beginning outreach regarding the creation of Friends of the Trail group.
- Consider whether particular tools, such as an online mapping application, may help different user groups coordinate trail maintenance and planning. Given the trail’s considerable length, various communication tools may help different groups coordinate efforts along the trail’s entire corridor.
- Since the open house conflicted with a statewide summit of snowmobile club trail masters, conduct additional outreach targeting members and leaders of snowmobile organizations. Snowmobilers constitute a significant segment of trail users and snowmobile clubs play a critical role maintaining the trails. Their participation in plan development will be important for producing a document that reflects the true diversity of trail interests and priorities.