



DATE: May 28, 2021
TO: Cheshire Rail Trail South Planning Project Working Group
FROM: SWRPC Staff
RE: Online Survey Results

In order to learn about trail issues, trip types, destinations, and other information about the Cheshire Rail Trail, SWRPC launched an online survey made available via the project webpage on November 9, 2020. The survey was open through February 7, 2021 and was advertised via SWRPC newsletters, Facebook and through e-mail lists used for the current as well as a previous Ashuelot Rail Trail planning project. This memo summarizes key survey results, including who responded, how respondents use the Trail and which issues were identified as priorities, opportunities and concerns. In total, 737 individuals responded to the survey. The number of respondents to each question is indicated by the letter *n*.

Background Information

Question 1: How close is Cheshire Rail Trail South to your home? (n = 737)

Most respondents lived within either walking or biking distance of Cheshire Rail Trail South, with 252 (34%) indicating that they live within walking distance, 218 (30%) indicating that they live within biking distance, while 267 (36%) indicated that they don't live within either walking or biking distance of the trail. It should be noted that the survey left the terms "walking distance" and "biking distance" up to the interpretation of each respondent.

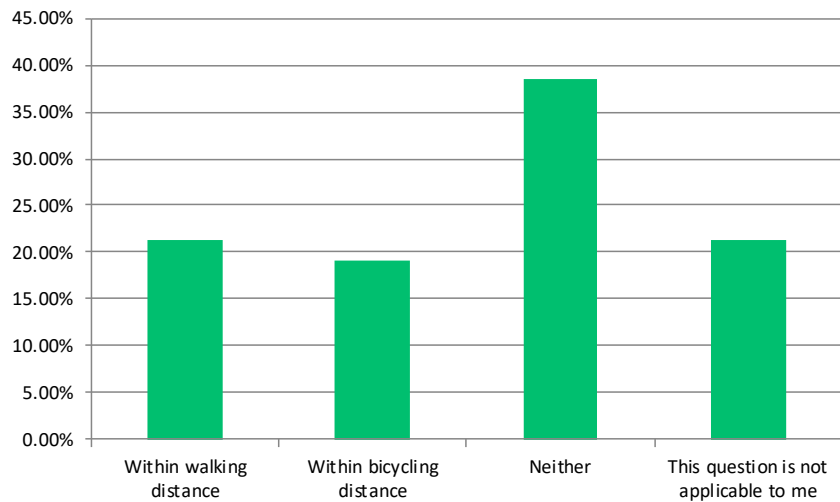
Question 2: In what ZIP code is your home located? (n = 737)

Residents in most communities located along Cheshire Rail Trail South were well represented in the survey results, with the exception of Marlborough, where only eight residents supplied responses.

Zip Code	Community	Respondents	
03447	Fitzwilliam, NH	141	(19.1%)
03431	Keene, NH	124	(16.8%)
03461	Rindge, NH	68	(9.2%)
03446	Swanzey, NH	55	(7.5%)
03465	Troy, NH	50	(6.8%)
01475	Winchendon, MA	29	(3.9%)
03452	Jaffrey, NH	23	(3.1%)
03470	Winchester/Richmond NH	21	(2.8%)
03071	New Ipswich, NH	17	(2.3%)
01430	Ashburnham, MA	12	(1.6%)
03467	Westmoreland, NH	10	(1.4%)
03608	Walpole, NH	8	(1.1%)
03455	Marlborough, NH	8	(1.1%)
	Other	171	(25.4%)

Question 3: How close is Cheshire Rail Trail South to your work? (n = 734)

A plurality of respondents - 282 (38%) - did not work within walking or biking distance of the trail, while 156 (21%) worked within walking distance and 140 (19%) within bicycling distance.



Question 4: In what ZIP code is your work located? (n = 660)

A plurality of respondents worked in the City of Keene, reflecting its role as a central employment hub within the region. Workers in Fitzwilliam were also well represented within survey results.

Zip	Community	Respondents	Percentage
03431	Keene, NH	178	(27.0%)
03447	Fitzwilliam, NH	73	(11.1%)
03446	Swanzey, NH	36	(5.5%)
03461	Rindge, NH	36	(5.5%)
03452	Jaffrey, NH	20	(3.0%)
03465	Troy, NH	19	(2.9%)
01475	Winchendon, MA	18	(2.7%)
03458	Peterborough, NH	14	(2.1%)
03470	Winchester/Richmond, NH	14	(2.1%)
01440	Gardner, MA	13	(2.0%)
01420	Fitchburg, MA	11	(1.7%)
	Other	228	(34.5%)

Question 5: Have you used Cheshire Rail Trail South? (n = 737)

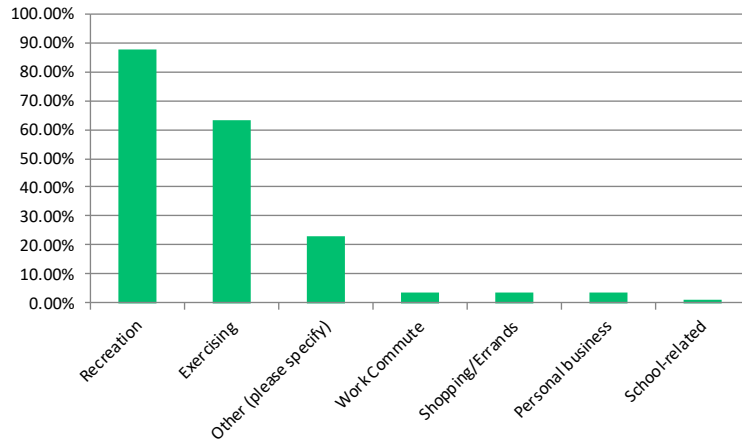
Most respondents - 536 (73%) - had used the trail within the last 12 months, while 128 (17%) had used the trail more than 12 months ago. A smaller number of respondents, 73 (10%), had never used the trail.

Recent Visitors Questions

Only respondents who had used the trail within the last 12 months (according to their answer to question 5) were prompted to answer questions 6-8. Respondents were instructed to think about their “use of the trail in the last 12 months when responding to the following questions.”

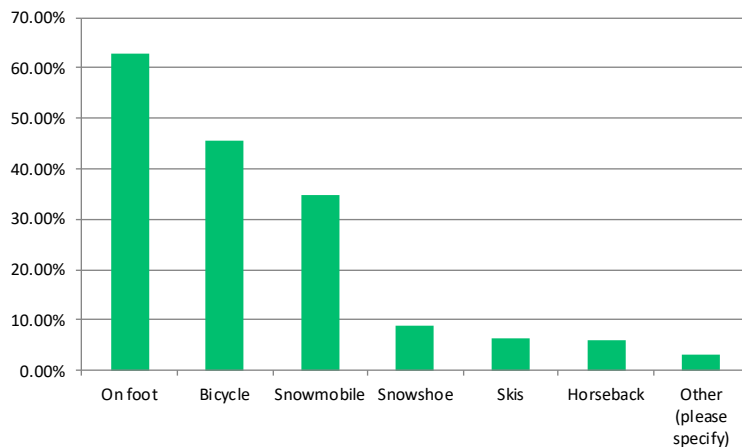
Question 6: What was the purpose of your trip(s)? Select all that apply. (n = 522)

The most common trip purpose among respondents was recreation related, with exercise following as the second-most common trip purpose. A fairly small number of respondents use the trail for commuting, personal business, shopping, or school. Most of the respondents who selected “other” indicated a particular mode of travel along the trail (e.g. snowmobile, horseback riding). Other trip purposes also included trail maintenance, dog walking, historical study, bird watching, and time with family.



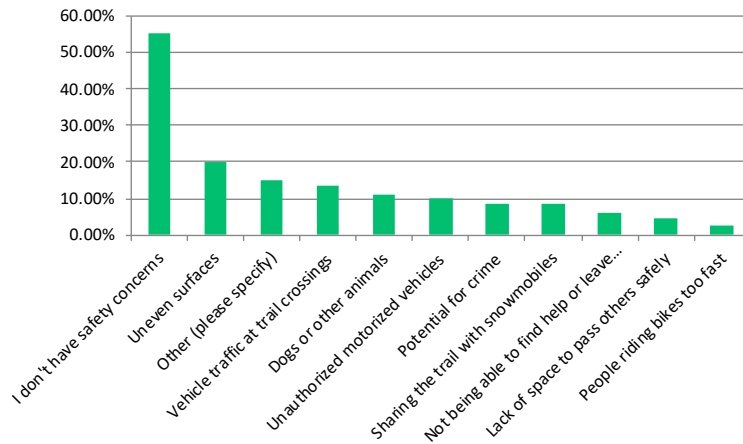
Question 7: How did you travel along the trail? Select all that apply. (n = 522)

The most common mode of travel among respondents was on foot, followed by bicycle and snowmobile. Some respondents who selected “other” indicated that they had used ATVs on the trail or wish they could use ATVs on the trail.



Question 8: Do you have concerns about your safety when using the trail? Select all that apply. (n = 522)

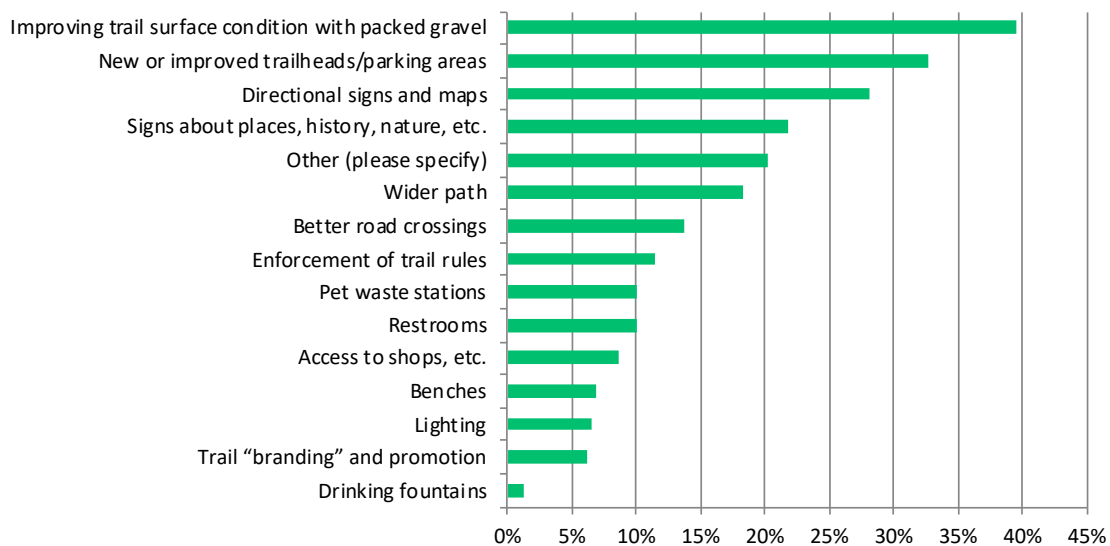
Most respondents, 522 (55%), didn't have safety concerns related to the trail. Among respondents who did have safety concerns, "uneven surfaces" ranked as the most common source of concern. Respondents who marked "other" cited a variety of concerns, including off-leash dogs, bridge deck conditions (especially for equestrian use), lack of trail signage (and inability to indicate location to emergency services), trash/litter/broken glass, bicyclists failing to announce themselves from behind, and people wearing headphones.



Trail Priorities, Challenges, and Opportunities

Question 9: Which of the following trail improvements would you describe as a "top priority?" Select up to 3 options. (n = 679)

The most frequently cited priority among respondents was improving the trail surface with packed gravel, followed by improved trailheads/parking areas and directional signs and maps. Many Respondents who marked "other" cited ATV/OHRV access as a priority. (ATV use is restricted by the funding source that originally supported acquisition of the railroad corridor). Other priorities included trash collection/litter prevention and bridges over major roadways (e.g. NH 101). Several respondents expressed a desire to preserve the "natural setting" of the trail by avoiding the installation of unnecessary amenities, which could pose maintenance challenges over the long term.



Question 10: Please mention any additional assets or opportunities along the trail. (n = 288)

Respondents supplied a variety of answers to this open-ended question, including the following assets and opportunities:

- Permitting ATV/OHRV use on the trail. Several respondents noted how opening the trail up to these motorized uses could potentially generate revenue for trail maintenance.
- Promoting and marketing the trail as a recreational asset.
- Improving wayfinding signage and installing mileage makers.
- Enhancing connections between the trail and town/village centers. Improving the connection to the Cheshire County Fairgrounds was also identified as a need.
- Mowing the trail during the summer to prevent exposure to ticks.
- Enhancing and promoting connections with other trails, including the North Central Pathway in Winchendon, MA.
- Overnight camping.
- Access for equestrians, including trailer parking.
- Preserving snowmobile access to the trail.

Several respondents indicated that they thought there was no need for change on the trail.

Question 11: Please describe any additional problem areas or concerns that you have relative to the Trail. (n = 284)

Respondents supplied a variety of answers to this open-ended question, including the following problem areas and concerns:

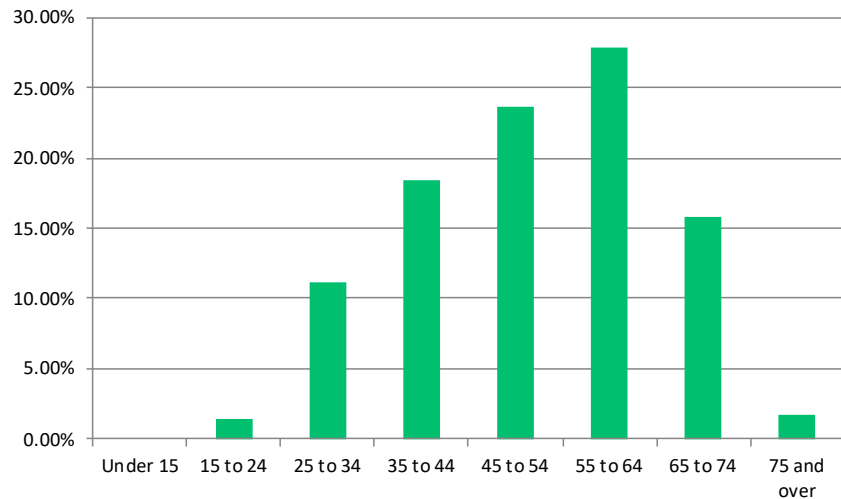
- Restriction of ATV/OHRV access and, conversely, unauthorized ATV use on the trail.
- Safety at road crossings.
- Dumping on the trail.
- A lack of maintenance by user groups other than snowmobilers.
- Crime and personal security. Unauthorized camping on abutting properties, including illegal harvesting of firewood.
- Lack of connecting snowmobile trails in Keene.

Many respondents indicated that they had no additional trail-related concerns.

Respondent Information

Question 12: How old are you? (n = 679)

Compared with the overall population of Cheshire County, older middle-aged individuals were overrepresented among survey respondents. About half (51.4%) of survey respondents fell between 45 and 64 years old, whereas the same age group constitutes only 28.5% of the total population of Cheshire County.



Question 13: What is your gender? (n = 675)

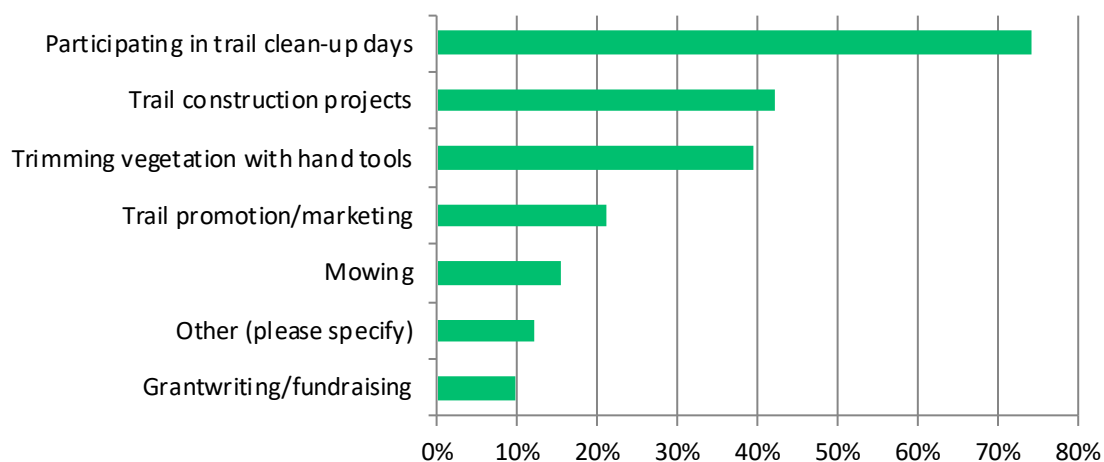
Respondents skewed somewhat male, with 58% of respondents identifying as male and 41% as female.

Question 14: Would you like to stay connected to hear about trail-related updates or opportunities to volunteer on trail-related projects? (n = 679)

A majority of respondents (66%) indicated that they were interested in receiving updates on trail-related volunteer opportunities.

Question 15: Numerous volunteer and public participation activities are available. Please indicate your willingness to participate in any of the following activities below. (n = 355)

Many respondents - 263 (74%) - indicated that they'd be willing to participate in trail clean-up days. Some respondents indicated that they'd be more willing to volunteer their time if summertime motorized access were allowed.



Findings

- While some respondents indicated that they use the trail for transportation purposes, the vast majority use it for exercise and recreation.
- The survey saw relatively little engagement from Marlborough residents, perhaps reflecting the fact that the trail hugs the town's southwestern boundary and does not pass near any population or commercial centers. Additional outreach may be necessary to cultivate support for trail improvement among community members.
- There seems to be little awareness among some survey respondents about *why* ATV/OHRV use is prohibited on the trail. Communicating with stakeholders about the origin of the restriction may help mitigate perceptions that motorized users are somehow being excluded by state agencies or other user groups. (The restriction was put in place due to the provision of the federal funding source used to purchase the railroad corridor).
- Many respondents expressed general willingness to volunteer for trail-related activities. At the same time, some respondents recognized that most or all of trail maintenance responsibilities falls on snowmobile club members. There seems to be potential for other groups to provide support on trail maintenance tasks.
- Upgrading the trail surface to packed gravel was by far the most frequently cited priority among respondents. Trail amenities such as restrooms, lighting, and benches was typically seen as much lower priorities or even undesirable, since those amenities would create a need for ongoing maintenance.