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Central Ohio Trail Town Framework Expansion: Considering the Needs of Urban and Suburban Communities



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Overview and Key Findings

Overview

In 2022, Central Ohio Greenways (COG), a committee of the Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission (MORPC) developed the Central Ohio Trail Town Framework. The framework document established existing conditions in several rural communities and how a regional Trail Town initiative might operate in Central Ohio. Acknowledging that a thriving Trail Town approach in Central Ohio should embrace the diversity of all its communities, MORPC recognized the significance of evaluating the unique needs of urban and suburban communities before launching a regional program. In 2023 MORPC re-engaged Cycle Forward, the consultant to the 2022 project, to assess the suitability of the Trail Town approach to supporting quality of life, fostering sense of place, and leveraging economic development opportunities in urbanized areas. For this effort, MORPC elected to assess the following communities and neighborhoods because they offer a diverse representation of the many unique communities that make up Central Ohio's urbanized areas:

- **The City of Bexley**
- **The Driving Park and Hanford Village neighborhoods of the City of Columbus**
- **Easton Town Center**
- **The City of Westerville**

In addition to exploring how the Trail Town approach might work in these places and communities like them, this project:

1. Establishes existing conditions for each locale,
2. Suggests corresponding adjustments to the program design, and
3. Makes recommendations for how MORPC can begin implementing the regional program while continuing to explore the resources necessary to operate a full-scale program.

What is a Trail Town?

“Trail towns” is both an investment and an attitude. To be a trail town is to pay attention to trails, to invest in them, and make a concerted community-wide effort to improve trail-to-town connections. This includes both physical connectivity and feelings of connection. Conceived 20 years ago in Pennsylvania, the trail town model for community development empowers communities to make critical infrastructure improvements, better serve trail users, and adopt a hospitable trail culture.

This document is intended to supplement and build upon the 2022 Central Ohio Trail Town Framework. The purpose of this work and the Trail Town effort is to leverage the strength of the COG network to encourage active transportation, quality of life improvements, tourism, and economic development in trail communities. A secondary purpose is establishing a model for other regional trail networks in Ohio that are considering the Trail Town approach.

As MORPC continues to develop a deeper understanding of the Trail Town approach and how it can be applied in Central Ohio, it recognizes that the term “Trail Town” may not resonate with all of the unique communities within the region. A branding effort will eventually determine how the program is named and presented; in the interim, the planned initiative will simply be referred to as the “Central Ohio Trail Communities” program. References to trail town programs generally, or to the Trail Town approach, will also appear in this document.

Key Findings

The following key findings emerged during the project and will help to guide the regional initiative:

1. It is Imperative to Address the Whole Community

A Trail Town initiative that is managed by MORPC, a regional planning organization, is uniquely positioned to approach trails and communities in a holistic manner. Trails do not exist in a vacuum. They pass through communities and are valued community spaces. Every community has its own opportunities and challenges. While a Trail Town initiative cannot address them all, it must adopt a “whole community” mindset in strengthening the relationship between trails and communities.

2. Diverse Community Types Need a Flexible Program

Expanding a Trail Town initiative to include a wider spectrum of community types will result in a program that would need to operate differently than existing efforts to successfully serve participating communities and trail users. Designing the program to intentionally meet the needs of all community types will position the Central Ohio Trail Communities Program to support a diverse cross section of communities and respond to the issues of our time (congestion mitigation, equity, public health, climate resilience, and economic opportunity). There is little precedent of operating a Trail Town initiative in densely populated areas. This program can provide the precedent and model new strategies in delivering a trail community initiative.

3. A Large Regional & Metropolitan Trail Town Program is a New Frontier

The City of Columbus is significantly larger than most recognized trail communities,

putting the Central Ohio Trail Communities Program in the position to demonstrate how a Trail Town initiative can be effective in a large, urbanized area, particularly when the program is intentional in addressing the unique conditions in an urban environment. Trail Town and gateway community programs around the U.S. are almost exclusively delivered in communities with populations less than 50,000 residents. Just three in 18 respondents to the 2023 National Trail Community Survey indicated that their programs serve populations of 50,000 or more. In fact, most recognized Trail Towns have populations of 10,000 or less. Nevertheless, a handful of midsize cities do participate in Trail Town initiatives. These include Chattanooga and Knoxville, Tennessee; Dayton, Ohio; Gainesville, Florida; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (although limited to a single neighborhood); and Tucson, Arizona. The effectiveness of the Trail Town approach in each of these places has not been studied. Nevertheless, MORPC is designing a program intended to serve a wide range of communities and recognizes that a regional program that benefits a diverse spectrum of communities and cultures in urban, suburban, and rural spaces will require a creative operational structure.

4. Urban and Suburban Communities Present Unique Opportunities and Challenges

Central Ohio’s urbanized communities present both unique opportunities and challenges concerning Trail Town implementation and the trail user experience. While MORPC set out to explore challenges that may arise in delivering a Trail Town initiative in urbanized communities, it quickly became apparent that the opportunities afforded in an urban environment are just as noteworthy. This project, therefore, has considered how both challenges and opportunities might impact program delivery and how the program design can be altered to accommodate both. More

than simply identifying issues, MORPC is poised to identify solutions and seize opportunities across communities of all types.

5. Participating Community Geographies May be Harder to Define

The boundaries of urban communities may be less defined in dense areas, so identifying where one trail community ends and another begins may require a unique combination of art and science. Similarly, the program must recognize that larger communities can have various neighborhoods and districts, some of which are more prepared to accommodate trail users than others. This will be taken into consideration in designating communities.

Central Ohio Trail Communities Implementation Strategies

In 2022, MORPC outlined six implementation strategies, or program areas, that would comprise the work of the regional program. These include Brand Identity, Business Collaborations, Economic Catalysts, Infrastructure, Wayfinding, and Art Installations. The current project identified the need to broaden some of the implementation strategies to better serve a wider audience. The updated implementation strategies include:

- 1. Marketing and Communication (includes brand identity)**
- 2. Community and Business Engagement (now includes community engagement)**
- 3. Economic Catalysts**
- 4. Infrastructure**
- 5. Wayfinding**
- 6. Art, Culture, and Placemaking (expanded to include placemaking)**

Implementation Considerations: Factors and Conditions

The Trail Town approach is a community development planning tool that grew out of rural America, with the first organized Trail Town initiative starting in western Pennsylvania in 2007. Many of the recognized Trail Towns around the U.S. are small or rural communities. As MORPC endeavors to launch a regional program that includes communities of all types, it is important to ensure that the program is designed to meet the needs of more populous areas and integrate trails with active transportation and other initiatives without limiting rural community benefits.

This section of the report considers issues, opportunities, factors, and conditions that affect urban and suburban communities and could impact program delivery as well as the trail user experience. These were developed through talking with a regional steering committee, community leaders in each location, and through the project team's own deliberations.

MORPC acknowledges that the factors noted are broad and generalized based on current understanding of issues and opportunities in Central Ohio's urbanized area. Local community involvement is critical to verifying and responding to local conditions. As MORPC launches the program, local engagement with residents and other community leaders within each participating community will be required and emphasized to ensure that factors and conditions reflect current community sentiments. The engagement will supplement the issues and opportunities raised in this report.

This section is organized by theme, as follows:

- Urban Character and Experiential Shifts
- Diversity and Inclusion on Trails
- Housing

A. URBAN CHARACTER AND EXPERIENTIAL SHIFTS

A.1 Urban trails tend to be busier than trails in other places.

Columbus has a strong cycling culture and a robust running, walking, and hiking community. Trails in and around the city are actively used. Busy trails can be alarming or uncomfortable to people who are used to riding rural segments of trails. They may become overwhelmed or feel less safe as a result. On the other hand, a busy urban area is the very thing that gives others comfort, hearkening back to the famous urbanist Jane Jacobs's theory that "eyes on the street" make neighborhoods safer. More people out on the trail also contributes to a sense of vibrancy, sense of place, and feelings of ownership. The experiential shift that occurs for trail users entering a more populous area – as well as for those leaving the city – is a matter of differences in landscape and the personality of place. The Central Ohio Trail Communities initiative can take this into account in managing trail user expectations and treat the unique personalities of each place as special features to be celebrated. The program can also play a role in addressing some of the impacts experienced with increased trail use. With more trail use, comes more need for maintenance such as trash clean up, graffiti control, and so forth. The program can draw attention to and advocate for the equitable funding of trail maintenance and operations.

A.2 Urban and suburban areas tend to offer a plethora of options in terms of services and experiences – and a plethora of people.

The shift in character and trail user experience is not limited to how a person experiences movement throughout the space. The communities themselves are different. Local and visiting trail users in urban and suburban trail

communities are afforded a wide range of options in terms of amenities, events, multicultural experiences, and the like. This frequently introduces more choice, expanded business hours, and the opportunity for COG to boast a variety of experiences. Whether it's a village of 200 or a city of 900,000 people, the COG network offers trail users a variety of unique community identities and visitor experiences.

Areas of denser population also provide a larger market to draw from. Central Ohio's urbanized areas are home to people who might be interested in day trips to get out of the city and experience a nearby small town. This presents a great opportunity to draw people to other communities along the COG trails. Thinking more broadly, a program and trail network that includes an array of communities can result in a mutually beneficial exchange between communities. Urbanites may want to take to the trails outside of the city in pursuit of small-town experiences, while those in rural areas can venture into the city for the urban experience. Above all, trails are assets to be enjoyed by local residents, whether they are being used to "get to" nearby communities or simply to walk or bike about their own.

A.3 Not all trail users feel comfortable leaving the trail in urbanized areas given the higher traffic volume and different patterns of traffic.

This may be especially true concerning those who are cycling. Roger Geller's "Four Types of Cyclists" suggests that cyclists can be categorized into four groups: 1. Strong and Fearless, 2. Enthused and Confident, 3. Interested but Concerned, and 4. "No Way, Now How." A study conducted by Jennifer Dill, Ph.D. in 50 metro regions indicates that 60 percent of survey respondents identify as "Interested but Concerned." Locally, this aligns with research that informed MORPC's 2020-2050 Active Transportation Plan, in which survey respondents expressed similar safety concerns related to

cycling on area roadways. Visiting trail users may feel uneasy on busy urban and suburban roadways, contributing to a hesitancy to venture off trails for services. More frequent road crossings may impact the user experience as well. While urban and suburban trails are similar to trails in other places – offering dedicated, car-free facilities – the frequency and types of crossings may impact the user experience.

A.4 Trail users may be more likely to encounter physical barriers in trying to get to and from the trail.

The built environment in the city may result in more physical barriers than in other parts of Central Ohio. The Driving Park and Hanford Village neighborhoods, for example, are near the Alum Creek Trail but are physically separated due to Interstate 70, Alum Creek Drive, and a rail line separating the communities from the trail. These barriers make it quite difficult to safely navigate between the trail and the neighborhoods and may create mental barriers as well, with residents likely not feeling connected to the trail. A related issue is that of development projects, which can cause temporary trail closures and detours.

Program Recommendations Related to Urban Character and Experiential Shifts:

1. Manage trail user expectations and communicate trail rules, regulations, closures, and detours before or upon arrival. (Program Area: Marketing & Communication)
2. Where possible, consider widening trails or creating pull-off areas to disperse use and provide rest areas. (Program Area: Infrastructure)
3. Identify placemaking and art opportunities to celebrate community differences and foster a sense of place. (Program Area: Art, Culture, and Placemaking)
4. Provide clear and cohesive trail wayfinding to ensure trail users can comfortably navigate that trail and nearby communities. (Program Area: Wayfinding)

5. Host group rides and other activities to demonstrate how to safely get to and from the trail. (Program Area: Community and Business Engagement)

Other MORPC Recommendations:

1. Advance trail connectivity by supporting equitably funded trail infrastructure and maintenance, especially within MORPC administered funding programs.
2. Promote connectivity of trails to transit opportunities by administering a Transit Supportive Infrastructure program.
3. Administer a Trail User Count program to assess the use of trails and proactively support trail expansion and development to prevent overcrowding.
4. Offer Technical Assistance to continue to work with local governments and partners to address physical, cultural, and mental barriers between the trails and urbanized neighborhoods.

B. Diversity and Inclusion on Trails

B.1 Perceptions of trails and the interest in connecting to them can vary in urban and suburban areas as compared to rural areas.

Drawing out-of-town tourists and other recreational trail users to segments of trails in historically underserved communities could be perceived by the community as a threat to local residents. The attention to the trail from those outside the community could perpetuate a narrative that local residents are not welcome or safe on the trail or lead to fears of community displacement and gentrification.

Additionally, with a multitude of competing needs and interests in urban areas, community leaders (and residents) in larger communities may find it challenging to prioritize trail investments. Even if interested in connecting to trails and a Trail Town initiative, some under-resourced communities may not have the financial or organizational

capacity to seek designation or may feel they cannot justify prioritizing trails.

B.2 Perceptions around safety and acceptance can impact the trail user experience.

Visitors whose trail experiences are commonly in less-populated areas may feel unsafe or uncomfortable in urbanized areas (both on the trail and in traveling to off-trail amenities). Members of marginalized communities, identities, and backgrounds may feel unwelcome, unsafe, or unaccepted on trail segments where diversity is not represented or embraced. Other concerns may include income or perceived status (who “gets to” use trails). Whatever reasons people may have for feeling unsafe or unwelcome on trails, these concerns should be validated and acknowledged. Trails are, however, generally safe, and an opportunity exists to make COG trails among the most welcoming

community spaces. People of all ages, races, ethnicities, abilities, genders, religions, culture, sexual orientations, housing situations, and income levels should feel welcome on the trails.

Improving perceptions of safety can involve maintenance, litter and trash control, public art, and welcoming messaging.

Program Recommendations Related to Diversity and Inclusion on Trails:

1. Embrace and adhere to equitable practices in trail use planning. Learn about equitable practices and collaborate with community partners, MORPC colleagues, and others to pursue trail-related work in an equitable manner. (Program Areas: Marketing and Communication, and Community and Business Engagement)
2. Engage and raise awareness among all communities, emphasizing the importance of providing equitable access to trails and walkable/bikeable connections for everyone. (Program Area: Community and Business Engagement)
3. Prioritize local quality of life. (Program Area: Community and Business Engagement)
4. Build equity and inclusion into the program/designation process. (Program Area: Community and Business Engagement)
5. Highlight local culture along the trail to foster positive community pride along the trail (Program Area: Art, Culture, and Placemaking)
6. Public art conveys a sense of investment, vibrancy, and activity. Use art in areas of the trail(s) that are perceived to be unsafe to convey these messages while also drawing more people to the trail (Program Area: Art, Culture, and Placemaking)

7. In suburban and rural areas along the trail, ensure that the community placemaking – including social cues and messaging – communicates a welcoming atmosphere to all potential trail users of varying races, ethnicities, sexual orientations, and economic classes. (Program Area: Community and Business Engagement)
8. Advocate for funding and partnerships to ensure the trail is well-maintained, trash and debris are not a problem, etc. Consider lighting as a means of addressing safety concerns as well as to improve the commuter experience. (Program Area: Infrastructure)

Other MORPC Recommendations:

1. Increased the promotion of MORPC's services and programs to diverse audiences, including the translation of marketing materials to reach those who speak English as a second language (ESL).
2. Strengthened the awareness of MORPC's Diversity & Inclusion efforts by revamping the internal DE&I Committee to highlight cultural observances and review MORPC's policies.
3. Improved diverse representation and voices in MORPC's work, committees and members in order to commit to a culturally competent workforce and Board.
4. Enhanced accessibility and ensured accommodations for people with disabilities.

C. HOUSING

C.1 Columbus is experiencing a burgeoning housing crisis.

Trails and improving environments along trails could either exacerbate this issue or, alternatively, be part of the solution. Development along trails promotes multi-modal transportation and improves connectivity. This also tends to result in increased housing values. MORPC as the regional MPO is in the position to encourage policy that results in thoughtful and equitable trail-adjacent developments. Such policy would encourage preservation of existing housing and construction of new housing of a variety of types and prices, creating opportunities for mixed-income neighborhoods along trails. One potentially helpful resource is the whitepaper “Strategies to Preserve and Build Affordable Housing Near Green Amenities and Urban Trails” (Johns Hopkins 21st Century Cities Initiative).

In the interim, the housing crisis is evident with unhoused populations sheltering along certain

COG trails. Homeless encampments along some trail segments do not appear to have the resources needed to maintain a clean and safe environment. Debris and trash accumulate, which impacts those who are living in the encampments as well as those who are passing through. Finding ways to resource the encampments (in addition to addressing the demand for affordable housing) will contribute to improved safety and feelings of safety for those living within the encampments as well as those traveling by trail.

C.2 Housing affordability and displacement concerns may impact communities’ interest in the Central Ohio Trail Communities initiative.

Residents’ concerns about displacement due to potential increases in property values where trail improvements occur are valid. The trail community program managers must be mindful of this and recognize that people may be wary of trail improvements and a Trail Town initiative that will leverage trails for economic development.

Program Recommendations Related to Housing

1. Encourage continued trail use. Busy trails and greenspaces discourage isolation and encourage upkeep more than those that are sparsely used. (Program Area: Marketing and Communication)
2. Respond with compassion to trail user reports that raise issues concerning homeless encampments. (Program Area: Marketing and Communication)
3. While not typically a function of Trail Town initiatives, the program can play a role in managing trail user expectations and raising awareness
4. around these issues. (Program Area: Marketing and Communication)
4. Ensure that staff, community partners, and others are aware of the relationship between new trail construction and indicators of neighborhood change (often a precursor to displacement), perhaps through an educational event. Use resources such as [this academic article](#) found on the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy website as a starting point. (Program Area: Community and Business Engagement)

Other MORPC Recommendations:

1. Coordinate with partner organizations that are working to address the housing crisis and other root causes of homelessness and displacement.
2. Educate communities and COG partners about the Regional Housing Strategy and encourage implementation of the action items of the Strategy's Implementer's Toolkit.
3. Promote MORPC's residential services program, which provides home repair and home weatherization services to eligible households.
4. Coordinate with partners, including COTA and communities, on LinkUS and other policies and programs with unified housing and multi-modal transportation goals.

Early Implementation

The 2022 Central Ohio Greenways Trail Town Framework document establishes clear criteria and resources needed to establish a robust, sustainable trail community initiative. MORPC and its partners are optimistic that the region will be able to identify necessary resources to support the initiative as designed with the recommended resources in the future. In the short-term MORPC plans to “soft launch” or “pilot” a trail community initiative using existing resources and staff time. This section of the document identifies priority, high impact, low-cost implementation strategies that can be taken prior to having a full-scale program.

Priority Implementation Strategies

The project team has identified the following priority implementation strategies that will enable MORPC to soft-launch the initiative. Most of these are low-cost and high impact actions.

- Host an annual trail forum focused on Trail Towns and the Central Ohio Trail Communities Program.
- Host workshops focused on a trail user centric sense of place, place identity, and placemaking.
- Offer localized Trail Community Placemaking projects through MORPC’s Technical Assistance Program, laying the foundation for a program that is grounded in place identity.
 - The project team determined that a regional program and brand identity should be reflective of Central Ohio and the diversity of communities within, therefore working with communities to articulate sense of place and unique features and characteristics in advance of designating communities.
- Secure funds to engage communities to develop a brand identity for the regional program. This approach may be informed by the Monongahela Forest Towns

initiative in West Virginia, which hired an artist to visit gateway communities and seek stakeholder input to inform the eventual brand.

- The decision to explore placemaking, sense of place, and brand development in advance of designating communities is intended to result in an intentional and thoughtful build up to hosting a full program as funding allows.
- Prior to fully launching the program, use what is learned through the placemaking efforts and what is known from other sources (community contacts, community profiles, etc.) to provide basic community information on the COG website. Communities would later be asked to apply for designation to experience the full benefits of a Trail Town initiative.
- Create a budget for a fully funded program and determine what staff support is necessary to operate the program as envisioned in the 2022 Framework. Since the time that report was produced, more is known about the relationship between program staffing and perceptions of program success. The 2023 National Trail Community Survey, which surveyed existing regional programs throughout the U.S. (and one in Canada), found a correlation between staff capacity and on-the-ground success. Those programs that had at least one dedicated staff position or a combination of full- and part-time staff or contractors were more likely to report an overall improvement in communities’ economic and community health.
 - Determine what funds and staffing are needed to operate a partial program in the interim.
- Form a COG Trail Communities Working Group to advance early implementation action items and questions for considerations (see appendix B).

Appendix A: Community Profiles

BEXLEY COMMUNITY PROFILE

“A Sea of Bikes” and Other Signs of Trail Culture

Overview

Bexley is an affluent city of nearly 14,000 residents. Positioned along the Alum Creek Trail, Bexley is located east of the City of Columbus, bordering the city’s Hanford Village and Driving Park neighborhoods. Bexley’s local government leaders embrace trails and cycling and have invested in related infrastructure. The Ohio to Erie Trail (OTET) splits from the Alum Creek Trail just north of the Bexley/Columbus border. The Alum Creek Trail continues south along the eastern border of Bexley, offering access to the community’s business district about two miles south of the OTET split. While Bexley is only six miles from downtown Columbus, it may face challenges in drawing visiting trail users from the Ohio to Erie Trail into the community because of its distance from the OTET. Certainly, this is an obstacle that can be overcome given Bexley’s plentiful business offerings and trail-friendly character.

Perceptions of Trails

Conclusions drawn here regarding local perceptions of the Alum Creek Trail are based on discussions with local leaders in June 2023.

Community Leader Interview: The project team interviewed Bexley community leaders on June 1, 2023. Longtime town mayor, Ben Kessler, the director of the chamber of commerce, and city staff participated. Their enthusiasm for trails and cycling was evident. They talked about their 2022 efforts to position Bexley as a trail town, engaging local residents and building out a framework. This is an effort they hope to incorporate into the MORPC-led Trail Communities Program. Their community-led planning and exploration is indicative of the community’s intent to embrace and invest in trails.

The group used the interview to share some of its bike-friendly initiatives outlined in Bexley’s bike plan, such as dedicating certain roads as bike boulevards and building bike networks within the city to improve conditions for cyclists. They report that while cycling conditions in their residential areas are pretty good, improvements are needed in terms of connections to and from the commercial areas and the Alum Creek Trail.

Other items noted were Bexley’s efforts to increase ridership for COGO’s bike share. Bexley currently offers COGO bike stations in multiple places within the community. They are promoting COGO to residents and Capital University students, but many already have bikes and storage locations.

Mayor Kessler, who is clearly involved and passionate about trails, seems especially interested in MORPC’s regional wayfinding plans and tying into a larger brand and signage effort. They are aware that while their commercial offerings are robust, the lack of signage limits the number of trail users who choose to visit. As with the trail town program, Bexley would benefit from being part of a larger initiative. As for regional cooperation, Bexley can play a leadership role in terms of embracing trails. Participants in the community leaders interview seemed willing to offer support and encouragement to other communities, including the City of Columbus neighborhoods that border Bexley.

When asked how a regional program can best meet Bexley’s needs, responses centered on establishing a flexible yet regionally cohesive wayfinding system that highlights Bexley’s “flavor.” They also indicated they would support infrastructure investments that result in safer and more pleasant connections between the trail and the commercial district.

Overall, those who participated seem to have positive perceptions of the Alum Creek Trail and appear to be actively invested in connecting to it.

Community Site Visit Observations

On June 29, 2023, members of the project team visited Bexley and were accompanied by Mayor Kessler and a local cycling advocate. The Mayor rode a city-branded bike that employees use to conduct city business. The tour included the commercial district, the Alum Creek Trail, and a residential area (including a “road diet” in progress, part of the city’s commitment to improving safe and comfortable cycling and walking infrastructure).

Other items of note from the site visit:

- Bexley is building a bridge across Alum Creek to connect with the City of Columbus’s Hanford Village neighborhood, which would improve connectivity between the two locales
- Bike repair stations at trailheads and local schools are indicative of a cycling-friendly culture. There is bike parking at the schools and a culture of students cycling to school (described as their being “a sea of bikes” at the middle and high schools some days).
- The city is working to create “calm corridors” between the school campuses, which would result in dedicated bike lanes, “tabletop” intersections, and other traffic calming improvements. The city is using local funds for these improvements.
- The commercial district is quite inviting (although Main Street/U.S. Route 40 appears to have a high traffic volume). The street has a number of shops and eateries, plenty of bike parking, and sidewalks are well maintained. The local cycling culture is exhibited through a full-service bike shop, the library loaning bike locks to its patrons, and the city’s “artist bike racks” (each one featuring a unique artwork by local artists).

Community Readiness

Bexley can easily meet the basic needs of most trail users: restaurants, lodging, and bike repair and parts. Bexley’s visitor experience could be improved with more access to overnight lodging

and improved wayfinding, including trail information kiosks. And as previously alluded to, Bexley faces the challenge of drawing visiting trail users into the community while being nearly two miles from the OTET mainline and being relatively close to the city center (long-distance trail users may be inclined to carry on to reach the heart of Columbus). Conversely, Bexley may be able to position itself as a unique overnight experience different from the downtown Columbus experience.

Readiness comprises more than the built environment and available services. Bexley’s eagerness to connect to the Alum Creek Trail and participate in regional efforts like the Trail Town initiative and the Wayfinding Strategy suggests that the city is both ready and willing.

DRIVING PARK & HANFORD VILLAGE COMMUNITY PROFILE

Rich Local Histories, Robust Civic Infrastructure, Challenging Trail Connections

Overview

Driving Park and Hanford Village, two distinct City of Columbus Neighborhoods that share a border with each other, were evaluated collectively for this project. They are considered together because the Alum Creek Trail skirts both neighborhoods but does not directly connect to residential or commercial areas.

The Hanford Village neighborhood was built for Tuskegee Airmen following World War II. The neighborhood was later severely impacted by the construction of Interstate 70, destroying a thriving Black community. The neighborhood is now comprised mainly of disjointed residential properties, a community park (Hanford Village Park), and highway infrastructure that divides the neighborhood from nearby amenities.

The Driving Park neighborhood is located south of Livingston Avenue and west of the Norfolk

Southern railroad tracks. Recent developments along Livingston Avenue may be contributing to increasing real estate values, gentrification, and displacement. Driving Park is primarily residential, although some businesses do exist.

Both historically under-resourced neighborhoods on Columbus's South Side, Driving Park and Hanford Village host the Alum Creek Trail, however a safe and inviting connection to the trail does not yet exist. As sometimes occurs in city neighborhoods, some residents have expressed concerns that trail and active transportation improvements could contribute to gentrification. In fact, data indicates both communities may already be experiencing gentrification. Any efforts to establish a trail community program presence and improve trail facilities in these locations should be approached with care and sensitivity to the desires of neighborhood residents, and a plan to mitigate the potential risk of resident displacement resulting from related investments.

Perceptions of Trails

Conclusions drawn here regarding local perceptions of the Alum Creek Trail are based on an interview with staff members from the City of Columbus's Department of Public Service and a subsequent site visit in June 2023.

Driving Park and Hanford Village are two of many neighborhoods within the City of Columbus. Some neighborhoods have strong identities, while others have not yet developed a strong sense of place or identity. The fragmentation and division of these two neighborhoods caused by highway, railroad, and roadway development throughout history has made it difficult for these communities to hold and develop a strong identity.

Nevertheless, each neighborhood possesses a robust civic infrastructure. Local organizations include the Livingston Avenue Area Commission (Driving Park) and Near East Area Commission (Hanford Village), both groups that should be engaged as the regional program begins to unfold. In the interim, city staff shared some of the perceptions and concerns that have been

conveyed to them in their work. In these and other city neighborhoods, creative public involvement strategies will ensure that communities' participation in the future regional trail community effort are community centered and supported. Involvement strategies that draw on support and facilitate dialogue from people beyond the city staff interviewed may be led by "Neighborhood Liaisons," residents, or business owners. Before these communities can fully participate in a trail town effort, visioning work to understand the communities' goals for cultural and physical alignment to the trail is critical.

In terms of connectivity, both communities have limited comfortable walking and biking access to the Alum Creek Trail currently. Wide roads, railroads, highways, and the river present significant hindrances. The routes to the trail seem intimidating and unsafe, but the city is working to improve connectivity. The participating staff expressed awareness of gentrification concerns and appeared to be mindful of the importance of this concern.

Discussions around residents' perceptions of trail-driven tourism focused on the lack of many business services as well as the possibility that residents may not want increased visitor traffic. It is likely that the most convincing cases for improved trail connectivity would be improved quality of life for established neighborhood residents. Better connections to the trail would allow for another transportation option, access to nature, recreation, and improved health. The group discussed the possibility of planning local events to draw interest in trails.

Business Survey Results: Neither neighborhood has a traditional commercial corridor with many trail-serving businesses. A limited number of eateries and other businesses are in and near Driving Park. Hanford Village is just a few blocks from a Kroger grocery store. MORPC and City of Columbus staff determined that a survey and business input would be best collected in a later phase of the Trail Town effort as part of a community-based visioning exercise.

Community Readiness

The June community site visit gave the project team a sense of each neighborhood's readiness concerning the trail. The visit started at the Driving Park Community Recreation Center, an attractive facility with indoor and outdoor amenities, and with great bike parking at the front of the building. The project team was joined by Department of Public Service staff members. The group walked through Driving Park (a linear park sharing the same name as the neighborhood) over to Livingston Avenue. The group was able to visualize how the neighborhood is separated from the trail by railroad tracks, Alum Creek Drive, I-70, and the river – a number of barriers despite the short distance. The group noticed the number of mature trees both in the park and along adjacent residential streets. The Driving Park tour did not include a large geography, but rather provided the opportunity to observe a defined area and consider how improved trail connections could positively impact the neighborhood.

Although the distance separating the Driving Park Community Recreation Center from the Hanford Village Park is less than 1 mile, the level of stress for bicyclists and pedestrians along these sections of Livingston Avenue and Alum Creek Drive is very high; all but the most expert cyclists would feel uncomfortable navigating this trip on foot or by bicycle. Among members of the project team, two participants biked between the communities, while everyone else agreed that they would not feel comfortable biking on these parts of Livingston Avenue and Alum Creek Drive. (Note: while cycling on Livingston Avenue today has its challenges, the City of Columbus has recently been awarded federal funding to improve cycling and walking facilities on Livingston Avenue. The planned improvements will dramatically improve comfort and safety for pedestrians and cyclists in the area, but they will not provide a direct connection to the trail. The City of Columbus does remain committed to continuing to work toward funding a more complete improvement.)

The Hanford Village site visit included Hanford Village Park, a community park located off of Alum Creek Drive and across the road from the Alum Creek Trail. The park includes a field, a wooded area, a small pavilion, and parking that can be used to access the trail. A button-activated crossing signal eases road crossings between the park and trail. The road is four lanes. The Kroger is visible from the trail, and Bexley is quite close as well. The proximity to Bexley, which is well connected to the trail, provided an eye-opening moment. While the trail is a shared resource, not all three communities enjoy the same ease of access.

The community center in Driving Park and the park in Hanford Village are possible geographic anchor points located near the trail, both facilities providing opportunities for community gatherings near the trail.

Community readiness is typically considered in terms of available business services, other services (like trail parking, connectivity between the trail and community, ATMs, WiFi access, etc.), and community attractiveness. In other words, does the community present as the kind of place a trail user can safely and enjoyably find services and interact with the place itself? In Central Ohio, equal emphasis has been placed on how the trail can benefit local residents and businesses while mitigating any potential unwanted outcomes. These communities can serve as a model for how participation in the Central Ohio Trail Communities Program can contribute to a heightened sense of place and community pride.

Finally, "readiness" considerations across the entire program should include supporting the civic infrastructure that will aid the neighborhoods in seeking overall community health, trails and active transportation being just two components of a larger ecosystem. While the project team did not directly connect with any civic community leaders, area commissions, civic associations, or other organizations in the area, they recognize engagement with these groups is necessary to launch the program in this area.

In Driving Park, the Gertrude Wood Community Foundation received a “614 Beautiful” grant earlier this year to create a mural on the Fairwood Avenue underpass (north of Livingston) beneath Interstate 70. The mural will depict the contributions of “local heroes,” according to the foundation. This emphasis on local heritage and changemakers reminds us that there is a rich history in Driving Park and Hanford Village which is already embraced by local residents and can be celebrated and appreciated in a trail town program. Of note: under consideration for inclusion in the mural is James Johnson, who created Driving Park’s civic association and the city’s first block watch, and Eddie Rickenbacker, a World War I flying ace; both deceased. Rickenbacker’s childhood home on Livingston Avenue has been restored and is maintained by a separate foundation, the Rickenbacker Woods Foundation. The historic site is a reminder that communities can attract trail users to interact with more than just commercial sites. Visitor interactions, if desired by the communities, can highlight local culture and heritage.

EASTON TOWN CENTER COMMUNITY PROFILE

A Regional Draw with an Intent to Connect to the Trail

Overview

Easton Town Center is a shopping center and mall surrounded by growing mixed-use and residential neighborhoods in northeastern Columbus. Offering shopping, dining, and entertainment, Easton comprises more than 200 retailers arranged within a pedestrian-friendly development that includes open-air “town squares.” Situated less than a half mile from the Alum Creek Trail, between Westerville and Bexley, Easton is an anchor and significant draw to Northeast Columbus. Easton’s built environment includes greenspaces, art, and

attractive landscaping providing an enjoyable walkable setting for visitors, however there are few safe and comfortable pedestrian or cycling connections into Easton from the surrounding neighborhoods and trails.

Easton Town Center’s interest in participating in the Central Ohio Trail Communities initiative presents a unique opportunity to involve a private development in the Trail Town model.

Perceptions of Trails

Conclusions drawn here regarding Easton’s perceptions of the Alum Creek Trail are based on discussions with executive staff members of Steiner + Associates (Easton’s developer) in June 2023. The project team met virtually with Easton representatives, learning of their interest in connecting with the trail. They noted the trail’s proximity to Easton as being a quarter mile from the development but without a convenient way to exit the trail at that location. Beau Arnason, Executive Vice President of Asset Management for Steiner + Associates, referred to the trail at this location as being “like a highway with no off-ramp.” He expressed the company’s interest in finding ways to improve ease of access between the trail and Easton.

The conversation with the Easton team included an exploration around marketing possibilities as well as how improved connectivity to the trail can contribute to the “customer journey” (visitor experience).

The company’s support of the regional RAPID 5 initiative, a vision for a single regional park network, as well as the Easton Community Foundation’s fellowship program that focuses partly on trails, further indicate Easton’s largely positive perception of trails.

While the leadership at Easton seek to better connect to the trail and are interested in participating in the regional program, the extent to which retailers see value in improving this connection has not been studied.

Community Readiness

Easton offers a pedestrian-friendly, attractive shopping and dining experience that can accommodate visiting trail users as well as residents who would like to reach the site by trail. Voted the “#1 Retail Experience in America” three years in a row, the Easton experience is not limited to shopping and dining options. The landscaping and art are delightful. The “Bike Arch” installation appeals to cyclists as well as the general population. The site also includes greenspaces and plentiful seating.

In addition to the atmosphere, Easton offers dozens of dining options and retailers to accommodate trail users. Businesses such as Celebrate Local, Dick’s Sporting Goods, Field & Stream, Nike Well Collective, The North Face, REI, and Whole Foods are likely to carry goods needed by most trail users and may be able to meet their in-the-moment needs while out on the trail.

Opportunity likely exists to inform frontline staff at the Easton Guest Services and the Experience Columbus Visitor Center of relevant trail information including on-site amenities such as bike share stations and bike racks. Mobility infrastructure improvements along the roads between the trail and the town center are necessary to make the site more accessible by foot or by bike.

Easton’s interest in the trail community program may introduce a new kind of “trail community” to the Trail Town approach. Certainly, Easton offers a unique experience with plentiful shopping and dining options – and a movie theater – that could introduce both options and novelty to Alum Creek and Ohio-to-Erie Trail users.

The neighborhoods surrounding the shopping center could also benefit from better trail connectivity. More walkable and bikeable connections from the surrounding Easton area neighborhoods could improve local workforce recruitment and ensure nearby residents can fully experience the benefits of the Easton Town Center.

WESTERVILLE COMMUNITY PROFILE

Where You Might Bump into an OTET Cyclist “Any Given Day”

Overview

A suburb of Columbus, Westerville is a community of 40,000 residents that has embraced its location along the Alum Creek Trail, the Ohio-to-Erie Trail and other COG trails and long-distance routes. Besides the trail, Westerville borders the Hoover Reservoir, manages a number of city parks, is home to Otterbein University, and has a vibrant business district.

Westerville’s built environment features a diverse range of environments, transitioning from dense and walkable in Uptown Westerville, to automobile- focused and expansive in the Maxtown Road area. The community also features many primarily residential neighborhoods.

Perceptions of Trails

Conclusions drawn here regarding local perceptions of trails are based on discussions with community leaders as well as responses to a business survey conducted in July and August 2023.

Community Leader Interviews: The project team met with Westerville leaders in person during a community site visit. At least a dozen local leaders took part in the conversation. Engagement from tourism, economic development, engineering, parks, and others are indicative of the community’s position on trails.

Participants shared sentiments such as:

- There are 50 miles of trails within the municipal limits (12 square miles of jurisdictional boundaries).
- “Any given day in Westerville you will bump into an OTET cyclist”.

- There are 80 bike racks in Westerville.
- The community is an overnight stop on an annual three-day OTET ride that hosts a large number of cyclists.
- Residents are already well aware of the trails.
- People choose to live in Westerville because of the trails.

Participants shared that Westerville has a long-range vision for expanding and completing trails and a dedicated trail maintenance plan. This includes plans to connect Hanby Park, which contains a Hub/Bike Depot to meet the needs of cyclists, to the Uptown Westerville business district near the public library. Trails are clearly valued and prioritized, and local leaders hope to draw more people to use Westerville’s trails and choose the community as a place to stay and access goods and services.

When asked whether Westerville would be interested in applying to become a designated trail community, local leaders seemed receptive to the idea but had questions pertaining to the particulars of the program. One participant noted the Trail Town initiative as an opportunity to leverage the investment Westerville has made in trail development over the last two decades. The group acknowledged that better trail connectivity contributes to improved quality of life and that opportunities exist to encourage trail-oriented development as well as to draw people into the existing business districts. Participants were also receptive to and aware of opportunities to connect and collaborate with other communities via trails and a Trail Town effort.

Business Survey Results: MORPC conducted a survey in July-August 2023. Intended for businesses in Westerville and nearby communities, it was distributed by the municipalities and other community contacts. The survey received little traction overall. In fact, the only responses came from businesses and organizations in Westerville, indicating that the municipality actively encouraged business participation. Perhaps as important as the survey

results, in the case of Westerville, was the survey dissemination. The municipality appears to embrace trails to the point of prioritizing the distribution of a trail-related survey.

Concerning the results, the sample size is too small to draw any statistically valid conclusions. Three small businesses and three nonprofit organizations participated. Among them, every respondent reported noticing that people use trails to access and spend time in their business. When asked to rank the ways their business benefits from trails, the top response was “the trail makes Westerville a more desirable community and business location,” followed by “customers use trails as a way of getting to my business” and “employees use the trails for mental and physical wellness.”

Community Readiness

The trail passes through Hanby Park, where trail users can take advantage of secure bike storage (lockers), a bicycle pump, decorative bike racks, and an information kiosk at The Hub/Bike Depot. From there, the Uptown business district is a short walk or ride using a connector trail that passes by the Westerville Public Library (again, with bike racks).

Branded Ohio-to-Erie Trail (OTET) signage boasts the community’s location along U.S. Bike Route 50 and the Great American Rail-Trail, both of which share an alignment with the OTET through Westerville.

The Westerville Parks and Recreation department is recognized on signs. At a road crossing, directional signs point to two different districts that offer dining, restrooms, lodging, and services: Uptown Westerville and Maxtown Road. We did not observe Maxtown Road during our site visit but understand that Uptown is the more “visitor ready” among them.

Uptown is a quaint multi-block business district with newer sidewalks, light poles, and lush seasonal plantings. The area also has outdoor seating at Rotary Park, bike racks, public

art, a fountain/water filling station, and historical markers. Some businesses incorporate bicycles in their décor.

Westerville's Uptown district is ready to welcome trails users and serve as a model for other suburban communities in the region who wish to offer high quality trail user experiences. There is a tourism and economic development appetite to capitalize on the benefits of the OTET to encourage more business investment in the trails and trail users. Hotels are eager to learn how to be even more welcoming to trail users, and the community is eager to share its unique history and plethora of free public events with visitors. To further enhance readiness and trail friendly cultures, the community could focus on offering more active transportation options throughout other parts of the suburb such as the Maxtown Road and Schrock Road areas to connect all parts of the suburb to the trails.

Appendix B: COG Trail Communities Working Group Early-Implementations Action Items and Questions for Consideration

Early-implementation action items.

1. Develop a StoryMap about the Trail Town approach and Central Ohio program plans. When able, create StoryMaps about the communities.
2. Consider opportunities to promote trail communities through the Outdoor Trails Pass program.
3. Communicate trail-related and program opportunities to Convention and Visitor Bureaus and groups such as the Capital Area Tourism Alliance
4. Develop a community assessment checklist to support communities in evaluating their existing conditions and improvement opportunities. Models exist and are easily accessible. This would be combined with the Available Services Matrix included in the 2022 Framework.
5. Identify other ways of demonstrating value/progress in the short-term (an event or summit that introduces trail businesses and communities to regional funders and grant opportunities, for example) Perhaps use a 2024 COG forum to do this.

Questions for consideration

1. How will individual neighborhoods within the City of Columbus or in larger suburban communities be designated?
2. How can a trail community designation offer value to urban and suburban communities with competing priorities, programs, and opportunities? Whether well-resourced or under-resourced, urbanized areas tend to have a number of different programs, resources, issues, and opportunities for community leaders to consider.
3. Specifically, how can under-resourced communities pursue and actively participate in the program? While not unique to urban communities (rural and suburban communities can be under-resourced as well), concerns do arise in terms of urban and suburban neighborhoods having the civic infrastructure and capacity to take on a Trail Town designation.
4. How can the Trail Town effort leverage the fact some urban and suburban communities already embrace trail-related tourism?
5. How can the trails community and Trail Town advocates contribute to conservation efforts?
6. How can communities beyond the Ohio to Erie Trail participate in the effort?
7. How will recommendations from the 2023 COG Wayfinding Strategy be integrated into the Central Ohio Trail Communities Program?