



Please enjoy this excerpt from
Deciding on Trails: 7 Practices of Healthy Trail Towns.

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Chapter 1

You Lose the Magic When It's All About the Money

Nearly half a century ago, Steven Spielberg showed us how tourism can go bloody wrong. You may recall the 1975 summer blockbuster, *Jaws*, in which a coastal New England police chief sought to close the beaches following a deadly shark attack. With the busy Fourth of July weekend fast approaching, the timing couldn't have been worse for local businesses. Not surprisingly, the town mayor overruled the police chief, and we all know how that turned out.

While perhaps not Spielberg's intention, *Jaws* has since become a modern fable depicting what can happen when communities put tourism and profit ahead of residents' best interests. Profit and the common good too often remain at odds. For example, some 1,500 miles south of *Jaws*' fictional Amity Island, South Florida beaches remained open well into the 2020 coronavirus outbreak to accommodate spring break vacationers.

Although the stakes are typically not as high with trails as they are with beach communities encountering killer sharks and harmful viruses, trail communities do face their own challenges.

In fact, I couldn't believe it when a community leader in a small town along one of America's most noted trails announced: **"That trail costs us more than it brings in."** People who espouse such thinking contend that trails are more trouble than they're worth because they drain communities of their resources. I have to wonder how a trail that the *National Geographic* has called "An American Classic" fails to gain the appreciation of local leadership.

What's even more perplexing, though, is along this same trail—a mere 50 miles away—I've been told the opposite. Once, years ago, I was doing some work along the trail when a crotchety looking fellow shouted, "Are you with the trail?" I nodded yes and braced myself. Thankfully, I must have misread his tone or body language because when he got closer to me, he offered: "This trail is the best thing that's ever happened to this town."

This contrast between two opposing perspectives along the very same ribbon of trail raises an important question about the value of trails. What's the reality? Are trails just time sapping money drains, or are they the best thing since sliced bread?

What's Really Happening Here?

Just as asphalt can crack from the inside out, so can communities. The notion that a trail—any trail—is more trouble than it's worth says there are problems simmering beneath the surface in the adjoining community.

Of course, addressing community problems may be what attracted you to this book in the first place. It's certainly what led me to write it. So often, those who are looking to the "Trail Town" model are seeking to cure what ails their communities. And, indeed, trails *can* be an antidote to community-wide "pain points," like loss of industry, missed economic opportunities, and a fizzled sense of place.

I suspect any community that thinks a local trail will cost more than it brings in isn't taking a broad enough view of the benefits of trails. I've been to communities that are unable to see (or imagine) the value of trails, and I've witnessed just the opposite – communities that look at trails with dollar signs in their eyes. And who could fault a place that's down on its luck for hoping a nearby trail would generate income? After all, a strong outdoor economy contributes to community well-being. Trail construction often comes with the promise of new businesses, job opportunities, and an increase in tax dollars. These are the kinds of advantages that hook our decision makers into supporting trail projects.

However, those places that value trails only for the anticipated financial benefits miss out on what I think of as the “trail magic” that can touch communities. So much of the magic of trails has little to do with economic benefit and everything to do with human interactions and joy-inducing nature experiences. Kids learn to ride their bikes on trails. People check off bucket list items by taking backpacking and paddle trips. People even get married outside on trails!



Backpacking hilarity on the Laurel Highlands Hiking Trail

How, then, can we possibly measure a trail’s worth merely in economic terms? To place the focus primarily on business transactions is to miss the chance to foster a trail culture—the most important element of becoming a successful Trail Town. Throwing visitor dollars at a community’s issues without working to genuinely affect the essential cultural changes required to embrace trails, well . . . that’s kind of like patching a pothole. Yes, it will work for a while, but before too long, the asphalt will begin cracking again.

Who Is This Book For?

If you’re fed up with hearing that trails are insignificant, or if your community’s decision makers view trails through the narrow lens of economic impact, you’re going to want to keep reading. You’ll learn what it means to be a Trail Town, hear the history of the Trail Town model (from one of its first practitioners—me), and discover how this model has been applied along some of America’s most storied trails. More importantly, you’ll be introduced to seven key practices of vibrant trail communities, learn some of the most common mistakes to avoid, and see how becoming a Trail Town can lead to a brighter future for all.

If you want more for your community, if you refuse to accept “good enough” or “cha-ching!” as the success measure for the place you love, and if you know in your gut that trails are part of the solution (even if not the single solution), then this book is for you. This book is for every local champion, thought leader, and dreamer who knows deep inside that trails are good for our communities. If you’ve heard of “Trail Towns” but don’t know their history or what it really means to be a Trail Town, you’ve come to the right place. And, finally, if you need examples, inspiration, and insights, this book is for you.

Whether you live and work in an unincorporated village with 74 residents or a mid-sized city, you'll find guidance on how trails can make a positive difference for your community. Whether you live along a rail-trail, hiking trail, towpath, or water trail, you will find this book valuable.

Additionally, if you are reading this book, you may be a tourism, planning, or community development professional in your community. Or you may be an elected official, a trail volunteer, or simply someone who cares about their hometown.

My own history with Trail Towns began in 2007, when I was hired as a project manager for the Trail Town Program®. I'll cover this program more extensively in the next two chapters, but let me cut straight to the chase: this is where the Trail Town movement got started, and I was lucky enough to be part of the implementation team. I spent five years implementing the Trail Town Program® alongside some really talented and innovative people. During this time, I learned how to build a first-of-its-kind regional program and to share the model with trail advocates elsewhere. Just as important as the program itself, though, is what came before and after.

From the outset, I've committed my career to helping communities thrive. Before I ever worked along a trail, I worked in Pittsburgh's South Side neighborhood for a community development corporation (CDC). My role was to market the neighborhood in all the usual ways: events, websites, walking tours, and so forth. I also chose to reach out other neighborhoods to create a multi-neighborhood tourism initiative. This was my first foray into both tourism and encouraging multi-community collaborations. Involvement in Trail Towns was a natural next step for me.

In the years since, I have utilized the Trail Town model as I've consulted with communities throughout the U.S. and Canada. I think I understand both the depth and breadth of Trail Towns better than nearly any of my contemporaries, and I am eager to extend the conversation beyond economic advantages to include the social and ecosystem benefits of both claiming our trails and securing our place along them. In essence, when we think about and celebrate trails from these multiple perspectives, we are actively creating a culture that will uphold our cherished trails for the long haul.

Book Promise and Overview

You and your collaborators have the opportunity to live in a thriving community that deeply values its trails. Once you've read this book, you'll be able to aim for that ideal, avoid some of the common Trail Town pitfalls, or even revamp your existing program.

This book isn't a "how to" on the nuts and bolts of establishing a Trail Town initiative, however. Existing manuals already cover this topic (please see the "Suggested Resources" section). Instead, what I am offering here are insights around what it means to be a Trail Town and how to build and sustain a trail culture over time.

Here's how the book flows:

Part I examines the first 15 years of Trail Towns. We'll look at the history of the Trail Town Program®, how it was implemented, and how it has been adapted by others. This section ends with a chapter on the impacts of Trail Towns, and it is chock-full of stats and success stories.

Part II focuses on several actionable steps you can take to make the most of your trail by following 7 Practices of Healthy Trail Towns. These include:

- Practice #1: Adopt a Shared Vision
- Practice #2: Physically Connect Trail to Town
- Practice #3: Extend an Invitation
- Practice #4: Cultivate a Trail Culture
- Practice #5: Know Your Market
- Practice #6: Share Your Story
- Practice #7: Commit to Quality Trails

Part III brings the book to a close by looking at how we can do better in the realm of Trail Towns. Because this book was written at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, I have included a chapter on how trail communities can withstand challenging times. I also make the case for a more inclusive approach to improving our communities through trails. In fact, this call to action is really the beating heart of this book. If you were vigorously nodding your head a few pages ago when you read about trail culture and trail magic, you'll find more of what you're looking for in this final section.

In 1948, the American conservationist and environmentalist, Aldo Leopold, wrote, "A system of conservation based solely on economic self-interest is hopelessly lopsided." Of course, economic impact is important in the world of trails, and for good reason, but it's not the be-all and end-all. The imbalance starts to rear its head when we overemphasize economic gain, for it is then that the asphalt begins to crack and people say things like, "That trail costs us more than it brings in" instead of "That trail is the best thing that's ever happened to this town." If you want the latter perspective for your community, then come along with me. We'll begin with how Trail Towns got started in the first place.

Trail Town Terminology

Because we will be looking at what it means to be a Trail Town throughout this book, you may find it useful to develop a baseline understanding of some Trail Town terminology.

A **Trail Town** is a community through which a trail passes that supports trail users with services, promotes the trail to its residents, and embraces the trail as a resource to be protected and celebrated. Trail Towns are built on a relationship between a town, its trail, and those who use and care for it. A community may have been officially designated a “Trail Town,” or it may simply espouse the characteristics of a trail-serving community.¹

Note: I have elected to use the term “Trail Town” to refer to communities of various sizes. Here, in this book, “Trail Town” refers to trail communities as small as unincorporated villages and as large as mid-sized cities.

The **Trail Town Program**[®] was the first multi-community initiative to engage trail communities in both accommodating trail visitors and in accessing the trail economy more successfully. This program was launched along the **Great Allegheny Passage (GAP)** in 2007, and later expanded to other trails in Pennsylvania and West Virginia. In the years since 2007, similar programs have been initiated in other regions (see Chapter 4).

The Trail Town concept has been adapted to accommodate nearly every trail type. Throughout the U.S. (and now Canada) there are **Trail Communities, Canal Towns, River Towns, Creek Towns,** and more.

The term **gateway community** typically refers to a town or city that borders public lands, such as national and state parks, wildlife refuges, forests, historic sites, and wilderness areas.² In the context of Trail Towns, however, some programs along U.S. National Scenic Trails use the term “gateway community” rather than “Trail Town.”

Finally, creating Trail Towns is a form of **community development**, which is defined by the United Nations as “a process where community members come together to take collective action and generate solutions to common problems.” Pursuing Trail Towns is just one of many approaches to community development.

Notes:

¹Much of this description has been adapted from the definition written by the North Country Trail Association.

²Howe, Jim, Ed McMahon, and Luther Propst. *Balancing Nature and Commerce in Gateway Communities*. Island Press: 1997.