

2-1-2008

Building Community Support for a County-Wide Trail and Green Space Plan

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Recommended Citation

Zoller, C. (2008). Building Community Support for a County-Wide Trail and Green Space Plan. *The Journal of Extension*, 46(1), Article 21. <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol46/iss1/21>

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February 2008 // Volume 46 // Number 1 // Ideas at Work // 1IAW5



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Building Community Support for a County-Wide Trail and Green Space Plan

Abstract

The article describes how one rural community responded to citizen requests to develop a plan for the creation of a countywide parks department and additional recreational opportunities for hiking, bicycling, and equestrian use. Rails to Trails Conservancy data indicate the positive outcomes, related to both economic and community development, as a result of trails and green space. Throughout the planning process, this community has come together to discuss these issues, identified projects, and set in motion a group of volunteers to carry out the plan.

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Introduction

There has been a growing interest among Tuscarawas County, Ohio citizens to have more recreational areas for their use and enjoyment, especially trails for walking, bicycling, and equestrian use. One of the challenges of stimulating support for trails and green space in the county is the sense that there is already an abundance of open space. In many cases, residents can walk out their front door and see green space. However, many citizens have seen and experienced recreational opportunities in other communities and want those same opportunities in their own county.

In addition to the desire for additional recreational opportunities, many more people are realizing there is a relationship between trails and green space and community and economic development. Many companies seeking to relocate or establish a corporate headquarters have cited the availability of trails as a significant factor in their decision to choose one locale over another (Rails to Trails Conservancy, 2006). This has been true for a local high-tech industrial park planned for the county. Of the several hundred acres planned for development, more than 100 acres will be devoted to green space and trails.

Background

In 2004, the County Commissioners contracted with the Ohio and Erie Canal Coalition (OECC) to assist the county in the development of a Countywide Trail and Green Space Plan. At the same time, the commissioners appointed a 16-member Park Advisory Committee comprised of representatives to act in an advisory role to the OECC and the county commissioners. Representation on the Park Advisory Committee includes township, city, and county government; Farm Bureau; farmers; business owners; chamber of commerce; convention and visitor bureau; and Ohio State University Extension. The advisory committee reports directly to the commissioners. Sub-committees were also developed and include: planning, finance, and public relations.

With the guidance of the OECC, the advisory committee developed a mission statement that guides the efforts of the committee. The mission statement reads:

Working in partnership with representatives from the agricultural community, trail and green space advocates, businesses and local government, the Tuscarawas County Parks

department seeks to preserve and interpret the agricultural, natural, cultural and recreational resources of Tuscarawas County. The Tuscarawas County Parks Department seeks to partner with local communities and non-profit organizations to develop a county-wide network of trails and parks, promote agricultural lands and green spaces, stimulate community and economic development and enhance the quality of life for the citizens of Tuscarawas County.

Methods

To build community support for the development of a trail and green space plan, the advisory committee has involved greatly the public, including elected officials, business owners, and private citizens. This grassroots support began with members of the OECC and Parks Department Advisory Committee visiting the trustees in each of the 22 townships to explain the purpose of the plan and to ask for a resolution of support from each township, along with a financial commitment.

In addition to the township trustee meetings, every municipality in the county has been presented with a description of the goals of the plan and asked to provide a resolution of support along with a financial commitment to the project. During meetings with the elected officials, no specific level of financial commitment was requested. In some cases, some trustees and other elected officials chose to make no financial contribution, while others made a pledge of financial support.

Discussions have also been held with area businesses to describe the goals of the project and to seek financial commitments to assist with the cost of developing the plan. If people are willing to invest in the plan, they are more likely to be supportive and engaged in its implementation.

After completing meetings with elected officials, public meetings were scheduled. Three sets of public meetings have been completed in five strategic locations throughout the county. The purpose of these meetings has been to 1) describe the proposed plan for the development of a trail and green space plan, 2) to gauge public feedback about the process and goals, and 3) to build public support for the plan.

Results

A number of sources have provided funding, both cash and in-kind to support this project, as indicated in Table 1.

Table 1.
Sources of Funding

Funding Source	Amount
OECC (in-kind)	\$40,000
County Commissioners	\$25,000
Local Businesses	\$20,000
Appalachian Regional Commission	\$10,000
Timken Company	\$10,000
Twp. Trustees/Municipal Government	\$ 2,325
Total	\$107,325

From the public meetings, four to six "early action" projects have been identified. These projects were chosen based on 1) the proposed project sites are on privately owned property; 2) the projects are relatively easy to implement; and 3) the projects are strategically placed throughout the county. Because of these public meetings and as a result of achieving buy-in from the community, several sub-committees have been formed and are comprised of local citizens who wish to volunteer their time to help carry out the goals identified in the project.

In addition to the financial commitments, this process has brought together communities that, in the past, didn't work together to achieve common goals. Throughout this process citizens and elected officials have come together to talk about projects that can bring communities together for both economic and community development.

Summary

Developing a countywide trail and green space plan can be a difficult issue, especially in rural communities. However, the experience of this county has shown that using a process that is grassroots and involves people at all levels and at all stages of development can make the process and the outcome positive.

Reference

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