

MICHIGAN PLANNER 'E-dition'



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Michigan Chapter
Making Great Communities Happen

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Exploring Alternative Transportation Options

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The Path to “Trail Town” Nirvana

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The third in a series of stories on unconventional and innovative transportation topics planned for 2014, this series will look into some underexplored facets of transportation in Michigan that may present planners throughout the state with some exciting and unique opportunities to tackle ongoing issues within their local community.

The state of Michigan boasts one of the longest and most comprehensive systems of trails in the United States. Whether it be foot trails, like our segment of the [North Country National Scenic Trail](#), snowmobile trails, horseback riding trails, water trails or popular non-motorized trails like the [Dequindre Cut Greenway](#), [Lansing River Trail](#), [I-275 Metro Trail](#), [White Pine State Trail](#), or the [Great Lake-to-Lake Trail with Route 1 linking Port Huron to South Haven](#), there are a plethora of trail options available throughout Michigan for commuting and recreational uses.

Michigan is also home to the active individuals and supportive trail organizations like the [Michigan Trails & Greenways Alliance \(MTGA\)](#) in Lansing, [North Country Trail Association \(NCTA\)](#) in Lowell, [West Michigan Trails & Greenways Coalition](#), [Michigan Snowmobile Association](#) in Wyoming, [Downriver Linked Greenways Initiative](#), [Michigan Trail Riders Association](#) in Hale, and numerous other local and trail-specific organizations.



www.northcountrytrail.org/trail/trail-towns/lowell/

As the state's network has expanded, some communities are learning to take advantage of their location astride a trail (or two) by branding themselves in such a manner where their name becomes synonymous with the trail. Likewise, trail organizations have successfully developed “Trail Town”

programs to assist the local effort. For example, the [North Country Trail Association](#) has designed the following communities as official “[Trail Towns](#):”

Kalkaska
Lowell
Mackinaw City
Middleville (Michigan’s first designated Trail Town)
Petoskey
St. Ignace

But, what exactly is a Trail Town? As defined in the groundbreaking manual entitled [Trail Town: Capturing Trail-Based Tourism](#) ([Allegheny Trail Alliance](#) of Pennsylvania, 2005), “trail town” is defined as a destination along a long-distance trail. Whether on a rail trail, towpath, water trail, or hiking trail—trail users can venture off the trail to enjoy the scenery, services, and heritage of the nearby community with its own character and charm. It is a safe place where both town residents and trail users can walk, find the goods and services they need, and easily access both trail and town by foot or vehicle. In such a town, the trail is an integral and important part of the community.

A trail town is a vibrant place where function meets the needs of both the trail users and the town residents. Trail towns are not stand-alone communities; instead they are linked by the trail corridor. (www.atatrail.org/pv/docs/1TTManual.pdf)

In the [North Country Trail Association’s Trail Town program](#) is more directly geared towards that specific hiking trail, but it also includes a handy definition and a useful template for getting started:

A Trail Town is a community through which the North Country Trail passes that supports hikers with services, promotes the Trail to its citizens and embraces the Trail as a resource to be protected and celebrated. Trail Towns are built on a relationship between a town, the Trail and its volunteers. (www.northcountrytrail.org/trail/trail-towns/)

A great resource for communities considering trail town designation and benefits is the [Allegheny Trail Alliance community guide for capturing trail-based tourism](#). From the guide, the following excerpt outlines questions to ask yourself to see if your community has characteristics to support the designation as a trail town.

Organizing to Create a Trail Town

Some fundamental information should be gathered as you start organizing your Trail Town effort. To be successful, it’s important to have the right team assembled from your community to plan and implement this initiative. As you go through this section, you may feel that you need more help or technical assistance than is available within your community. You may want to seek help from your county or regional planning agency. A good place to start is contacting your county’s planning department.

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Now, take a few moments to consider these questions and answers,

A. Define the Trail Corridor

1. Is there a long-distance recreational corridor in close proximity (within two miles) to your town?

Yes No

2. What kind of trail is it? _____

3. What is its name? _____

4. How long is it? _____

5. Who manages the trail? _____

6. Who is the key contact or liaison for the trail?

Trail Liaison: _____

Trail Liaison Phone No.: _____

Trail Liaison E-mail: _____

B. Assess Local Capacity | A vibrant Trail Town program could be part of your business district revitalization plan. You need to understand your local community's ability to plan and implement any new programs or ideas.

1. Does a downtown or business revitalization organization currently exist in your town? (If you are uncertain about this question, contact your local municipal office. They should be able to provide you with this information.) Yes No

If Yes, list the name of the organization, the downtown contact person and his or her phone number.

Organization: _____

Downtown Contact: _____

Downtown Contact Phone No.: _____

Downtown Contact Email: _____

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2. What kind of organization is doing downtown revitalization?

"Main Street" organization

Chamber of Commerce

Merchants Association

Other: Specify _____

3. Is the organization regional (operates within the whole municipality or a larger area) or local (operates only in your downtown)? Local Regional

4. Does the organization implement its activities using the National Main Street Center's "Four Point" or "Main Street Approach"? Yes No

5. Is the organization an IRS recognized 501(c) 3 non-profit corporation? Yes No

The **catalyst** is a community member who organizes the Trail Town program. If a downtown organization/recreation authority or community organization (charitable or otherwise) already exists in your town, the catalyst could be someone that is currently affiliated with it.

6. Are you willing to serve as the catalyst to start a Trail Town effort in your community?
 Yes No

7. If you are not, do you know someone that may be willing to serve as the catalyst?

Potential Catalyst A: _____

Phone No.: _____

Potential Catalyst B: _____

Phone No.: _____

Once you have answered these questions, you are positioned to start the process of creating a Trail Town in your community.

1. If a downtown/business revitalization organization already exists, the catalyst should call the downtown contact person to discuss the Trail Town concept and how it can be integrated into the on-going efforts. The trail liaison also should be at this meeting.

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- OR -

2. If a downtown/business revitalization organization does not exist, then the catalyst should work with the local business community and the local municipal government to help organize an introductory meeting to explore the possibility of creating one. Appendix B has references to groups you can contact about getting started. The discussion at the meeting will help determine the level of local interest in moving forward with the idea of becoming a Trail Town and putting together a steering committee to begin working on the idea locally.

This finely crafted guide also clearly illustrates the step-by-step process for making your community a successful Trail Town and provides sample criteria and the necessary forms for getting started. Below is a slightly modified version of the [manual's table of contents](#) identifying the key steps necessary to establish a successful Trail Town.

Getting Organized to Create Your Trail Town

- Define the Trail Corridor
- Assess Local Capacity
- Create or Enhance Your Local Organization
- Develop the Local Volunteer Base
- Get the Message Out
- Build Partnerships
- Find the Resources to Implement Your Trail Town Concept
- Link Trail Town Goals & Objectives to the Community Master Plan
- Make Necessary Adjustments to the Local Zoning Code

Trail Town Design Issues

- Assess the Physical Character of Your Trail
- Evaluate Public Amenities & Business Amenities
- Build Nonprofit Partnerships – churches, clubs, social groups, scouts, etc.

Economic Restructuring for a Trail Town

- Understand Your Trail User (Customer)
- Assess Basic Trail User Needs
- Assess Longer-Term Needs
- Encourage Related Business (and Trail) Opportunities
- Assist the Local Business and Nonprofit Community

Promoting Your Trail Town

- Promote a Trail Town Image
- Hold Trail Town Events
- Conduct Trail Town Retail Promotions

Pulling it All Together—The Trail Town Master Plan

- Provide a Gateway Moment
- Create a Sense of Place
- Develop a Welcoming Atmosphere
- Establish the Right Mix of Services
- Promote Trail-Oriented Events
- Incorporate the Trail Town Master Plan into Your Community's Overall Master Plan, Future Land Use Map, and Zoning Map

(SOURCE: www.atatrail.org/pv/docs/1TTManual.pdf)

Although some communities may have qualities that can support the industry, it is important to not focus solely on tourism. As desirable as it is, every community cannot or will not become a tourist oasis. But that does not mean the same principals listed above cannot be applied to those trails which serve local residents and commuters. It is just a matter of adapting them to specific needs of the trail(s) serving your community.

For example, while the hugely successful [Monon Trail](#) linking downtown Indianapolis with its northern suburbs does draw out-of-town visitors, most days of the year it primarily caters to local residents and non-motorized commuters. As a result, the businesses and services situated along or near the Monon Trail must be positioned in a manner where they are not over-reliant on tourist dollars.

Here in Michigan, [Reed City](#) does an excellent job of promoting itself as the crossroads of not only US 131 and US 10, but as the crossroads of the [White Pine State Trail](#) and the [Pere Marquette State Trail](#), utilizing its historic depot as a trailhead. Other communities throughout the state can learn from Reed City's effort to brand itself, as there are many potential candidates.

One of the best examples of a potential trail town is historic Augusta, Michigan, as it is blessed to be situated where the North Country Scenic Trail and the Great Lake-to-Lake Trail intersect. Combine that prime location with pristine scenery, the Fort Custer State Recreation Area, and ready access to Amtrak service in Battle Creek or Kalamazoo, and lovely little Augusta has tremendous potential just waiting to be tapped.

For communities large and small across Michigan's two peninsulas, being designated as a "Trail Town" is an excellent opportunity to enhance economic development initiatives, expand active transportation options, encourage environmental stewardship, advocate for sustainable choices, and foster a healthier populace all at the same time. Sounds like a win-win-win-win-win situation for all. Congratulations to those Michigan communities that have already achieved "Trail Town" nirvana, as you have blazed a clear path for other cities, towns, villages and townships to follow. Well done!

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RESOURCES:

Partial List of Upcoming Events:

[2014 Michigander Bicycle Tour](#) - July 12th to July 18th, including 2, 6, and 7 day ride options.

[League of Michigan Bicyclist's index of rides](#)

Smart Commute 2014:

- **Greater Lansing** - June 8th to 22nd;
- **Emmet County** - June 2nd to 6th; Traverse City - May 31st - June 7th; and
- **Jackson County** - May 16th.

List of Trail Town Resources

North Country Trail Association: <http://northcountrytrail.org/trail/trail-towns/>

Trail Towns: Capturing Trail-based Tourism, a Guide: www.atatrail.org/pv/docs/1TTManual.pdf

Kentucky Trail Towns: A How-to-Guide for Communities: <http://tinyurl.com/kfql9f>

Author Richard F. Brown, Jr., AICP, CBSP is a community planner and economic development specialist who has been serving a township in Greater Lansing for more than 18 years. Prior to his current position he was a planning consultant in Michigan and in the Mid-Atlantic region. He received his Master's of Urban & Regional Planning from Virginia Tech in 1989 and has been an AICP certified planner since 1994. Mr. Brown became a Certified Business Solutions Professional in 2011 through Michigan State University.