

The Art of Managing Long and Skinny Places: A Case for Regional Collaboration

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Introduction

Dollars are disappearing and staff time is diminishing. How can the public landscape thrive in today's economic climate? It is challenging to cobble together the funding and management support to plan for, build and maintain any kind of "long and skinny place" – whether it be for greenways, blueways, multi-use pathways, community walking paths or heritage touring routes. One way to meet these challenges is to make more efficient use of available resources and strengthen the quality of the user experience by managing linear corridors on a regional basis as a system of greenways, blueways and regional touring routes. Regionalism is not a new concept, but reenergizing and leveraging regionalism as a necessary framework for vision, support and funding is imperative in today's political and financial environment.

Background

Long and skinny places such as greenways, whether at the local, regional or statewide level, have lost their stable funding source. Projects relied on an array of publicly funded programs, most originating at the federal level and passed to the locality through state transportation and recreation programs. Acts of Congress authorizing transportation funding in the past twenty years included programs that had dedicated funding streams for trails. The Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21) and its successor SAFETEA-LU included programs such as the Recreational Trails Program, the Scenic Byway Program, the Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Management Program and the Safe Routes to Schools Program that distributed funding to states. Greenway and trail organizations tapped into this dedicated funding stream to plan, design and implement projects associated with greenways, blueways, multi-use pathway, community walking paths and heritage touring routes.

The 2007 Great Recession and subsequent federal budgets have diminished the dedicated funding streams used by many greenway organizations and, as of July 2012, for the most part removed the dedications as many states can now opt out of these funding programs. In July 2012, President Obama signed into law "Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century" (MAP-21). Only the Recreational Trails program – typically offering 5,000 to 50,000 dollars in grants with eighty to twenty percent federal to local matching requirements – retained its dedicated funding source (at 2009 levels) within what is now called the "Transportation Alternatives" program of MAP-21 (replacing what was formerly called the Transportation Enhancements Program). The so-called "Transportation Alternatives" program now includes all of the programs that had previously been used in support of trails. However, funding for the consolidated group of programs that support bicycle and pedestrian related projects as part of MAP 21 was reduced from approximately 1.2 billion to 800 million dollars nationwide (Rails-to-Trails, 2013). Eligibility for funding from the former Transportation Enhancement program categories under SAFETEA-LU were reduced from twelve categories to six under MAP-21, with half of each

state's funding share susceptible to an individual state reallocating those funds to other than "transportation alternatives" program uses, including reallocation to highway construction.

Within MAP-21 bicycle transportation, pedestrian walkways, recreational trails and other "Transportation Alternatives" eligible projects can be funded through the Surface Transportation Program (STP). If your local regional planning organization identifies a greenway or trail project as a regional priority, the STP could fund the project, but in competition with other regional transportation demands such as bridge repair or routine roadway maintenance.

Other federal agency programs such as Community Development Block Grants (HUD), Land and Water Conservation Fund (DOI), Conservation Reserve Program and Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (USDA), Wetlands Reserve Program (USDA), Small Watershed Grants (USEPA), Urban and Community Forestry Assistance (USDA), National Endowment for the Arts, and National Endowment for the Humanities have provided funding in the past for various components of greenways and trails projects. Gaining access to those funds is more competitive than ever, with restrictions on eligibility and fewer funds available. In some cases, the NEA Design Arts program for example, programs have changed from a direct grant program to a technical assistance program – where teams of experts descend upon a willing partner community and offer advice but provide no firm plans or designs that can lead directly to funded implementation projects.

An alternative, nonfederal, funding source is through local, regional and state tools. Communities have used innovative bonding or financing programs that set aside a dedicated amount of a sales or property tax, established a tax benefit district or relied upon tax increment financing. Those that successfully made use of these tools for greenway and trail development are most often regional in nature and have invested years of involvement at the local level to muster the necessary political support. Other communities, such as the City of Raleigh, folded greenway and trail development into larger parks bonds (16 million out of 88.6 million for greenway development in 2007) or transportation bonds (a combined 40 million for transportation projects that, for the first time in the City's history included greenways, trails, sidewalk repair, streetscape projects, along with general resurfacing projects in 2012) (City of Raleigh, 2013).

Volunteers provide another source of funds and labor for implementing trail and greenway projects. These programs have been most successful when they were defined by a clear vision and included a strong recruitment and supply of healthy and happy trail builders. Walking path construction and maintenance, even in extensive systems as found in Charlottesville VA's Rivanna River Trail System, make the best use of volunteers.

Thinking Regionally

With dwindling resources and increasing management needs, regional efforts and coalition building are needed to bring together all who are involved in the development of greenways and trails – land conservation interests, recreational interests, heritage tourism advocates, health advocates – to work together on a regional basis as a means of gaining leverage and access to diminishing resources. Funding requests must clearly demonstrate a strong relationship to the

broadest array of public values and economic development advantages (heritage, recreational and nature-based tourism, public health, etc.), while presenting a unified, regional, ask.

Regional thinking is not new. From Garden Cities in England to comprehensive park systems in the United States, communities have been thinking regionally about their “greenways” and open space. Frederick Law Olmsted first proposed Boston’s Emerald Necklace in Back Bay, a system that evolved into the Metropolitan Park System of Greater Boston. Other regional park systems evolved throughout the late 19th and early 20th century in Buffalo, NY, Louisville, KY, Cleveland, OH and Seattle, WA, many designed by Frederick Law Olmsted or his sons, the Olmsted Brothers. Other luminaries such as Horace Cleveland, the designer of the Minneapolis regional park system, and planners such as John Nolan who incorporated parks and open space into his town planning efforts, spread the regional and holistic approach.

However, not all areas were so fortunate. Today’s greatest challenges rest with communities that were not the recipients of earlier generations who laid the groundwork for a regional system of parks, parkways and pathways. This, in combination with a lack of dedicated federal funding, complicates the future development of trail and greenway systems. With the advent of the dedicated funding source for greenway and trail development twenty years ago, a number of communities began to show interest. Groups constructed continuous segments of greenways and trails, partially establishing regional systems. How to finish the job? Are there any organizations that are positioned to build upon these past successes? If so, what opportunities have they taken advantage of to gain that position? The answer may lie with those organizations that articulated a strong vision, capturing their public’s attention and combined the twin towers of conserving a region’s natural and cultural resources with a companion program that provides public access to those conserved resources. One approach to counter these challenges has been the resurgence in forging regional partnerships and leadership in the effort to articulate, embrace and implement a common vision.

The following case studies are three distinctly different entities that have been “thinking regionally”, established a clear and focused vision and have implemented that vision by linking conservation and/or preservation and public access (greenways and trails).

Carolina Thread Trail

The Carolina Thread Trail (The Thread) is literally weaving together a regional network of greenways and trails with the goal of providing better access to nature for 2.3 million people in the Charlotte/Mecklenburg, NC region. To date, they have ‘woven’ 113 miles of The Thread’s trails – opening the trails to the public and linking people together with places and attractions throughout the region. According to the Thread’s web page, the Carolina Thread Trail system is conceived “as a ‘green interstate system’ of major trails and conservation lands created through local efforts throughout the region. The Thread will emerge over time as communities work together to plan and build trails reflecting community character, aspirations and priorities.” (Carolina Thread Trail, 2013)

The Thread was conceived in 2005 out of a confab of environmental and community leaders looking to identify the region’s most pressing environmental needs and concerns. The Catawba Land Conservancy took up the mantle to lead the fledgling organization’s efforts. This was

especially prescient as it brought together the twin towers of preserving open space and providing access to that nature that was to be preserved. Initiated in 2007, five plus years later it has established a system of 113 miles of trails with a number of new projects in the planning stages. Covering fifteen counties in two states, it has involved urban, rural and suburban constituents in a unified vision. A mixture of public, private and nonprofit supporters have coalesced to fund and encourage its efforts, including private foundations and corporations. (Duke Energy and others).



Figure 1 –Weaving Communities Together (Carolina Thread Trail)

Rivanna River Greenway, Charlottesville, Virginia

The Rivanna Trails Foundation evolved from a late 1980’s and early 1990’s community-based vision for a trail system along the Rivanna River and its tributaries. The foundation was established in 1992 to implement that vision by creating and protecting footpaths, trails and greenways within the Rivanna River watershed. The volunteer organization’s mission, supported largely by tax-deductible contributions and volunteer effort, is “to create and protect natural footpaths, which follow the Rivanna River and its tributaries, for the enjoyment of all”. The end result is a more than twenty-mile “loop” of rustic foot trails over both public and private land (with permission) creating a “greenbelt” around Charlottesville. The Rivanna Trails Foundation has done this with some federal funds for trail development – but most of it is through cajoling

landowners to allow access as well as a dedicated trail crew of volunteers that are committed to not only achieving the vision but keeping it that way.

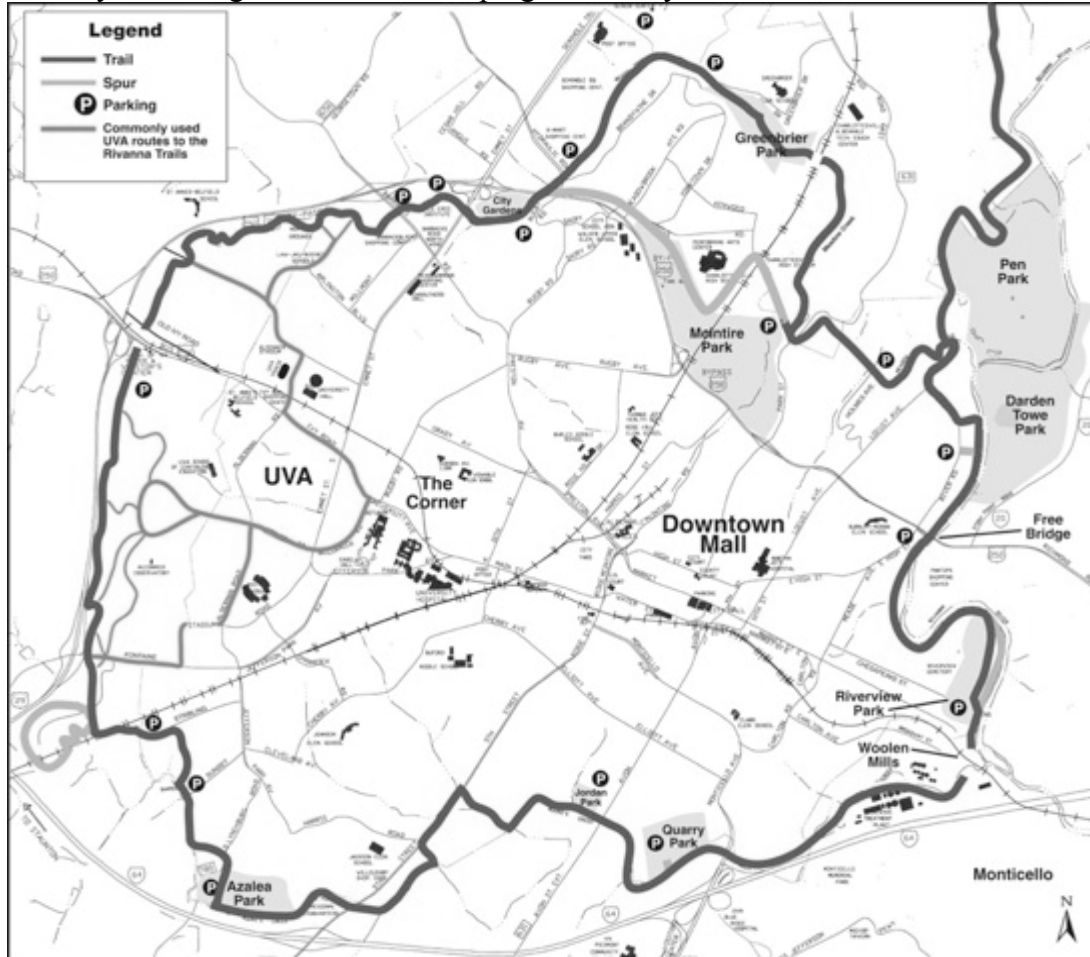


Figure 2 – Rivanna Trails Loop (Rivanna Trails Foundation)

Delaware and Lehigh Canal Corridor, Inc., Pennsylvania

The Delaware and Lehigh Canal Corridor (D&L) is a five-county area within northeastern Pennsylvania, subdivided into three distinct geographic subareas. The D&L, designated by Congress as a National Heritage Area in 1988, has a mission to “restore historic places, conserve green space for public use and preserve and interpret our heritage to enhance life for generations to come”. The management entity was created directly from the National Heritage Area designation effort. It is a joint effort of “private groups and interested citizens, county and municipal governments, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and the federal government to conserve cultural and natural resources in the five-county region of Pennsylvania that traverses the historic Delaware and Lehigh Canals.” The bulk of the management organization’s funding (D&L Canal Corridor, Inc.) has come in the past from the National Park Service as a dedicated funding stream associated with its National Heritage Area designation. They have also worked extensively to aggregate federal, state and private funding sources together and pass those through to local projects as part of a community-based grant program.

The 165-mile D&L Trail (including its side trails) is the most visible element of the heritage corridor and therefore plays an important role in maintaining strong public support. The D&L Heritage Corridor Inc. established the D&L Trail Alliance for the purpose of bringing “together municipal, state and non-profit landowners to coordinate the stewardship and promotion of the D&L Trail”. Other programs within the D&L Heritage Corridor emphasize preservation, interpretation, way finding, and economic development in support of their mission.

The Benefits of Thinking Regionally

The common theme amongst the three programs – whether locally based and privately funded, mostly public agency funded, or some combination of the two – is that the greenway project or program succeeds using a strong vision and establishes the greenway as a community, regional or state priority. The strong vision must be paired with a regional network of supporters – the developers of the strong vision – who are ready and willing to do the heavy lifting. The benefits of regional collaboration that follow are born out in these three greenway programs - the creation of an entirely new vision of a region woven together such as The Thread; the development of a vision for watershed education and access as in the Rivanna River project; or for a vision of a linear corridor associated with a natural or cultural feature like the D&L.

Benefits of regional management among these and other organizations are multiple:

- **Financial** - The competition for funding from government-sponsored programs as well as from private grantmaking organizations is extremely stiff. Sponsors are looking for ways to make their funds go further and to be utilized more efficiently and effectively. By linking smaller projects and programs together on a regional basis, the benefits can be broadened by tying a community-based project into a larger regional goal. A sponsor is often more interested in funding projects that benefit an entire region, rather than one that only benefits a single community. Metrics are important and often are more demonstrable on a larger scale. By sharing resources, administrative costs can be spread out more broadly as well as making for a more effective use of limited dollars. The Carolina Thread Trail has demonstrated these benefits by leveraging the land conservation mission of the Catawba Land Conservancy with the need to provide public access to the lands preserved.
- **User Experience** - Coordination of signage, enhancement projects, trailheads and other physical improvements that have similar components that must be reviewed and coordinated by the same funding agency (e.g. a DOT) provides another opportunity for implementing a regional outlook. Joint contracting (both on the design and construction side) results in greater value. Joint efforts may reinforce a regional identity and sense of place if the design is conceived at a regional scale. The Rivanna Trails Foundation has successfully focused volunteer efforts on a common goal to create a “loop trail” around the City of Charlottesville. Using volunteer efforts and the willing cooperation of landowners, the circle is complete. The continuity of the trail system is a remarkable accomplishment given that no trails existed prior to 1989 and limited funding. Most important is the community’s success in stretching trail segment acquisition funding by making use of voluntary access agreements to privately owned and privately retained lands in a property rights-centric state like Virginia.

- **Interpretation** – There currently is little coordination among agencies and organizations that install interpretive signs or run interpretive programs. Too many signs and unrelated interpretive programs drown out the interpretive message. In addition, existing signs are frequently outdated and not well maintained. The D&L is a good example of developing a coordinated visual and graphic identity that established standards as a very early action (1995) in the implementation of their Heritage Area Management Plan. The established graphic identity creates a way that visitors can link together the stories and places associated with the D&L Canal Corridor through a family of signs, brochures, wayside exhibits, trail markers and wayfinding. The use of the common visual and graphic identity at a regional scale serves as a kind of “good housekeeping seal of approval” so that visitors will know that a particular site or a trail or travel route is part of a nationally significant resource – the Delaware and Lehigh Canal National Heritage Area.

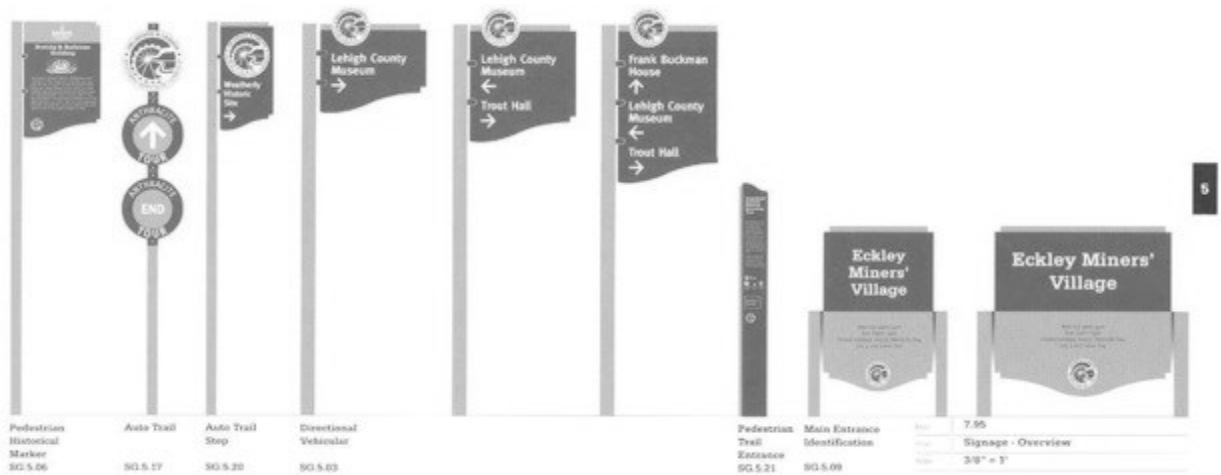


Figure 3 – “Visually Speaking” Design Guidelines (D&L Canal Corridor, Inc.)

- **Conservation and Preservation** – A regional approach is necessary for good coordination and preservation actions that identify and affect critical natural and cultural resources and landscapes. If the intent is to raise the level of awareness and recognition so that conservation and preservation of these lands and sites can be competitive with other regional and national priorities, greater involvement by many partners provides necessary support. All three of the examples noted above have rooted their success in the underlying goal of preserving and conserving the regional landscape within which they reside. Rivanna Trails Foundation mission (emphasis added) is to “*create and protect* natural footpaths, which follow the Rivanna River and its tributaries, for the enjoyment of all.” The Catawba Land Conservancy is “dedicated to saving land and connecting lives to nature” and uses the Carolina Thread Trail as the primary vehicle for making the connections. The Delaware and Lehigh Canal Corridor Inc.’s mission is to “restore historic places, conserve green space for public use and *preserve and interpret* our heritage to enhance life for generations to come.”

Goals and Objectives

The goal is to encourage greenway and trail enthusiasts to think more regionally about their long and skinny places and to encourage collaboration among regional partners as a means of increasing significance, awareness and leverage associated with such a regional identity. The

Rivanna Trails Foundation's original "greenbelt" evolved to a "loop" which helped the community visualize the benefit of a continuous trail system. The Carolina Thread Trail used the imagery of the rich textile heritage of the region to help their region visualize how such a trail system and communities can be woven like whole cloth. The D&L Canal created a visual and graphic identity early on in the process to help their regional partners and visitors see and understand resources differently. Each strong vision helped these regions establish strong financial, organizational and volunteer partnerships to achieve a common regional goal. Organized into management entities that have helped gain national and regional recognition and awareness of important natural and cultural resources, the entities have also raised and distributed funds for project implementation and drawn together volunteers to work on pieces of larger and more ambitious goals.



Figure 4 – Rivanna River Trails seek to preserve a rustic trail experience within walking distance of City neighborhoods and the University of Virginia (Rivanna Trails Foundation)

Conclusion

Thinking regionally links together similar experiences – making use of a trail and eating or staying overnight in a community along the greenway for example – increasing economic activity for the community and the region. Visitors are more likely to visit a “region” when they are offered a range of choices – whether it is the use of a greenway corridor for recreation, for access to nature, for transportation or heritage tourism. Long and skinny places of all stripes can gain leverage and a stronger identity by finding ways to work together on a regional basis to plan, finance, manage and interpret their greenway assets and infrastructure.

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