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REGIONAL

Plans are afoot to connect Capital Region trails

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by [Sean Mulkerin](#)

ALBANY COUNTY — For residents who together make millions of visits to the Capital District’s rail trails and greenways, interconnectedness is a feat worth celebrating — probably with exercise.

Under the Capital District Trails Plan, the design is to connect the multi-use trails of Albany, Schenectady, Rensselaer, and Saratoga counties into a single network that is accessible to all the region’s residents.

Jennifer Ceponis, a senior transportation planner for the Capital District Transportation Committee, said the plan would let residents travel from one county to the next by foot or by bike. “I think connecting it [the trails] will increase the likelihood that people will look at it as a way to get to work or other non-recreational trips,” she said. “Trails attract community ... and improve the quality of life within that community, and throughout the region.”

An [earlier plan](#), asked readers to imagine “a future where residents and visitors of the Capital Region can walk or bike along the Hudson and Mohawk rivers; hike or bike the perimeter of our region in the foothills of the Catskills, Berkshires, and Adirondacks; enjoy a healthy commute to work without consuming fossil fuels; and enjoy both economic growth and environmental sustainability.”

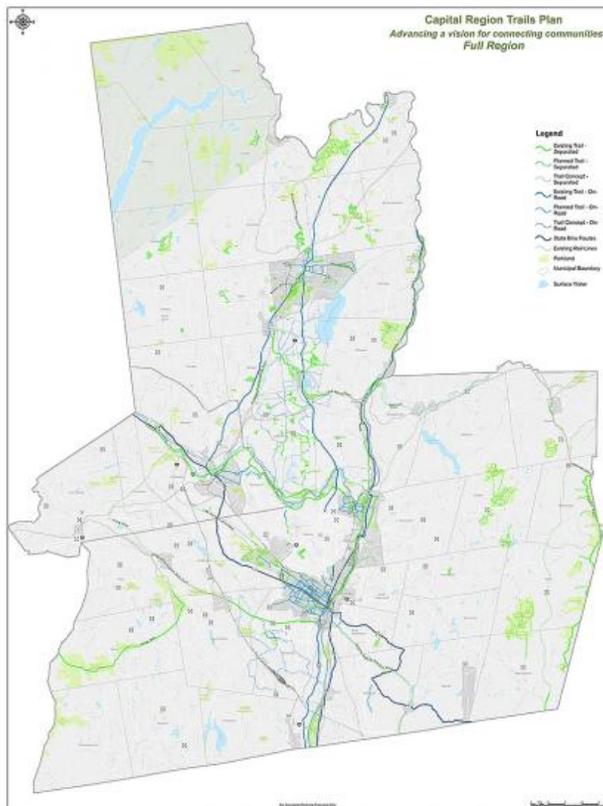
Rail trails

Through surveys, both online and in-person, of trail users as well as surveys of adjacent property owners, the CDTC gathered information on how the region, local communities, and trail users have benefitted from and been affected by nine multi-use trails: Mohawk-Hudson Bike-Hike Trail, Albany County Helderberg-Hudson Rail Trail, Albany Shaker Trail, Delaware Avenue, Uncle Sam Bikeway, Ballston Veterans Trail, Zim Smith Trail, Railroad Run, and Spring Run.

Ceponis said that, in 2016, there were an estimated 1.6 million visits to the nine trails. And, on three trails — the Mohawk-Hudson, Zim Smith, and Uncle Sam trails — there was a 25-percent increase in visits since a decade-old report that tracked use on those three trails.



Enterprise file photo — Michael Koff
Soon enough: With spring only weeks away, local residents will be looking to take to local trails again. Voorheesville’s was in use last June.



— Map courtesy of Capital District Transportation Committee

It's all connected: A plan from the Capital District Transportation Committee is seeking to connect the rail trails and greenways of the four counties of the Capital Region into a single network.

The newer survey determined that the trails are used predominantly for health and exercise. But based on data and stakeholder meetings, Ceponis said that there is interest in being able to use the trail system for more non-recreational trips and as the maps are drawn currently, there are short distances where the trails could be linked that could lead to a significant interconnection.

For example, Michael V. Franchini, the executive director of CDTC, said that, after a study examined connecting the Albany County Helderberg-Hudson Rail Trail — which starts in Voorheesville and ends at the Port of Albany — to the Mohawk-Hudson Bike-Hike Trail — near the U-Haul storage building on Broadway and close to Quay Street — a plan is now in place for the city to connect those two trails.

“That is the kind of connection that will encourage people to use it for walking to work,” he said.

Determining the economic impact of the trails has been more difficult.

Local chambers of commerce, tourism bureaus, and the Center for Economic Growth have been consulted about what would make for a viable trail-related business.

In 2016, when surveys of trail users were conducted, there was also an attempt to survey local businesses, but there were few that were directly adjacent to the trail, Ceponis said. The researchers reached out to Stewart’s Shops, she said, because many survey respondents

had indicated that they'd stopped at the ubiquitous convenience store. But Stewart's had no data about sales from trail traffic; anecdotally, the company said it had a lot of people come from the trail.

Ceponis said that a regional impact analysis, which has yet to be conducted, will analyze the present economic conditions of the system and project what kind of economic activity there could be with an interconnected rail-trail system.

Uncertainty of economic impact hasn't stopped local municipalities, which are hoping the rail trail is a path to prosperity.

Local progress

[Voorheesville](#), which sits at one end of the Albany County Helderberg-Hudson Rail Trail, made a significant effort to incorporate the trail into its [proposed](#) comprehensive plan.

The village has already made investments: A pavilion was recently installed, echoing the train station that once stood nearby, and there is talk of a viewing platform modeled after a train-station platform, Richard Straut, a village trustee, told The Enterprise this past December.

The idea is to be able to attract bikers to the downtown area for a bite to eat or to visit shops. "There's a thought that a bike shop could do well — people come to Voorheesville as a hub to go biking," Straut had said.

On Monday, March 12, the Albany County Legislature voted to authorize a contract to install permanent [bike-sharing stations](#) on the Albany County Helderberg-Hudson Rail Trail. "The three-year contract allows the Capital District Transportation Authority to permanently expand the "CDPHP Cycle!" program onto Albany County property by placing bikes at four locations on the Rail Trail starting in April," according to a release from the legislature.

Also, the town of New Scotland, in relocating a century-old barn to save it, envisions hikers and bikers from the same trail one day stopping at the Hilton barn and its surrounding park.

Successful trail systems can be pointed to as working models, Ceponis said.

Parks and Trails New York, a not-for-profit organization that advocates for parks and trails, conducted an economic impact analysis of the Erie Canalway Trail — which stretches from Buffalo to Albany — a few years ago, Ceponis said, and the joke was that economic growth was measured in ice-cream cones and take-out food, which are the types of businesses that are popular along the trail.

The study reported increased sales, jobs, labor income, and tax revenue — all related to the Erie Canalway Trail: an estimated \$253 million in total sales, \$28.5 million in total taxes, and over 3,000 jobs generated.

Another study, of the Walkway over the Hudson in Poughkeepsie, forecasted that it would generate \$21 million in new sales, almost \$8 million in new wages, and create 258 new jobs when it was built. Since the walkway opened in 2009, it has surpassed those expectations, generating nearly \$24 million in economic activity, creating 383 new jobs, \$9.4 million in



new wages, and \$780,000 in new tax revenue, according to the Regional Trail Perspectives report.

Tags: [Voorheesville](#) [Helderberg Hudson Rail Trail](#)

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