



connections

*The newsletter of the Massachusetts
Greenways and Trails Program*

February, 2011, No. 38

The Recreational Trails Program: Special Issue

Recreational Trails: A Beginning

In 1929, a regional planner and outdoorsman from New England named Benton MacKaye, shared his vision of a backwoods highland footpath from Maine to Georgia in an article written for the *Journal of the American Institute of Architects* (October 1921). The trail was to invite hikers, help preserve a portion of the mountain wilderness, and offset the Nation's growing industrialization. MacKaye clearly intended a trail that combined recreation and conservation values. One key component of this "trailway" included the construction, maintenance, and protection of the trail largely by the work of dedicated volunteers.

MacKaye's vision became a reality through the support of countless volunteer organizations which oversaw the design, development, and continued maintenance and stewardship of the trail. It also saw additional support with its selection as one of the first two US National Scenic Trails, designated by Congress through the National Trails System Act of 1968, with initial funding of \$5.5 million allocated towards land acquisition for the permanent protection of the trail corridor.



The Appalachian Trail is one of the most recognized and popular recreational trail success stories in America. It exemplifies the values of Benton MacKaye's contemporaries who saw the importance of providing recreational trails as a means of escape, and for preservation and stewardship of the land. Today, the protection and continued maintenance of long-distance trails is a priority among states and users alike. However, innovations, changing landscapes, pollution concerns, health, and educational purposes have diversified recreational trail needs and changed the way we view the recreational landscape.

Trails now provide the same benefits as they did back in 1921, though a myriad of new, modern values can be added to the original list. They support a much more diverse set of user groups within very diverse settings. These are trails that exist within small communities and large; connecting schools to residential or commercial areas; connecting cities or habitat corridors across a state for people to hike, bike, skate, and commute; providing accessible walkways for the disabled; or providing backcountry ATV or snowmobile trails for enthusiasts to enjoy. These

new types of trails represent our country's progression toward modern recreational needs and preferences in the form of trails and greenways, which continue to evolve even today.

Unfortunately, no trail in this country has benefited from the level of financial and organizational support that the AT has, though the importance of these links and networks are widely recognized as equally vital for the health and quality of life for future generations. Modern trail systems are supported by local, grass-roots community efforts, non-profit organizations,



municipalities, and states. More often than not, the volunteer groups and government entities who are shaping the landscape and network of trails for our future have had little to no financial support to do so.

In 1991, Congress recognized the need for a funding mechanism to promote the creation and maintenance of community, municipal, state, and federal trails across the country, which culminated in the development and funding of the **Recreational Trails Program**.

The Recreational Trails Program : Nuts and Bolts

The Recreational Trails Program (RTP), was created through the National Recreational Trail Fund Act as part of the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 (ISTEA). It was reauthorized in 1998 and again in 2005 through the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU).

The RTP provides funding assistance for acquisition, development, rehabilitation and maintenance of both motorized and non-motorized recreation trails. These federal transportation funds benefit recreational uses including hiking, bicycling, in-line skating, equestrian use, cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, snowmobiling, off-road motorcycling, all-terrain vehicle riding, four-wheel driving, or use of other off-road motorized vehicles. By law, 30% of each states' RTP funding must be earmarked for motorized trail projects, 30% for non-motorized trail projects and the remaining 40% for multi-use (diversified) motorized and non-motorized trails or a combination of either.

The RTP funds come from the Federal Highway Trust Fund, and represent a portion of the motor fuel excise tax collected from fuel used for off-highway recreation by snowmobiles, all-terrain vehicles, off-highway motorcycles, and off-highway light trucks. The RTP funds are distributed to the states by the Federal Highway Administration. In Massachusetts, RTP is administered through the Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR). Funding for the program is apportioned by the Federal government while actual funding levels are programmed into the State Transportation Improvement Plan (STIP) by the Massachusetts Executive Office of Transportation. The Massachusetts Recreational Trails Advisory Board (MARTAB) is made up of representatives from most



recreational trail user groups in Massachusetts. It provides guidance to DCR, and reviews grants to select recommended projects for funding.

RTP in Massachusetts

Massachusetts has participated in the Recreational Trails Program since 1993, receiving over \$6 million in federal funding and awarding approximately 263 grant projects to date. As DCR's largest annual grant program, communities and government entities alike have participated in the program with great enthusiasm. In a given year, the program will provide \$600,000 to possibly \$1 million in total federal funding while grantees will typically exceed the 20% required match, often providing a local match that is equal to or exceeds the federal funding awarded for the project.



Similar to Benton MacKaye's original vision of a volunteer-driven work force to develop and maintain the AT, the majority of RTP projects are completed by volunteers who dedicate their own time to the planning, design, collection of donations, organization of work days, and actual on-the-ground trail work. Often, the federal grant will pay for the purchase of materials for trail creation or maintenance, the hiring of design professionals for the more complex trail structures such as bridges and culverts, and funding youth trail crews. The local match often consists of a combination of sources, including donations, in-kind services, and occasionally other grants, usually in the case of large-scale projects.

Several RTP grantees have worked to make a community or state trail vision become a reality by developing a phased approach and applying for grant funding in multiple years. This allows for small groups with even smaller spending capabilities to think big, while making significant accomplishments along the way. This has been the case with a dedicated force of trails volunteers in Great Barrington, who have been awarded multiple grants to establish a network of recreational trails in their community, which has included handicap-accessibility considerations and local river clean-up and restoration efforts:

“Our RTP grant has allowed for the building of community trails conceived over 30 years ago,” writes Christine Ward from the Lake Mansfield Alliance. Prior to this funding, the community just wasn't able to get started. The grant acted as a catalyst, empowering a surge of community interest, involvement and investment. We have consistently over-reached the 20% match with donations from local government, local granting organizations, and other project dedicated donations. In addition, our project has been powered by over 450 hours of donated trail work hours. Though still developing, our trails have already seen much community use and it is certain they will have an enormous impact on community health. We are enormously appreciative of the Recreational Trails Program.”

The RTP has also been a factor in facilitating projects to create recreational trail infrastructure within low-income and minority communities, funding projects to provide for environmental education, recreation, and passive enjoyment by



children, families, seniors and handicapped individuals where no other sources of funding could be found. For instance, funding from the RTP was instrumental in allowing the residents of Boston's Four Corners and Bowdoin/Geneva Dorchester neighborhoods to reclaim an overgrown, dumped on, and unappreciated natural resource in their neighborhood. "The Geneva Cliffs Urban Wild is now an inviting open space with a walking trail that loops around the 2.5 acre site that is attracting young and old to explore this natural area, to appreciate its features and to enjoy special community events in the more open section of the site. The Friends of Geneva Cliffs greatly appreciate the support from (RTP) in helping the community to realize its vision of transforming this area into a true community asset," said Sherry Flashman, Project Coordinator.

RTP in Massachusetts has also provided funding to maintain the state's popular long distance hiking trail system, awarding grants throughout the state which have benefited these trails, section by section, through land acquisition for corridor protection, re-routing, and maintenance funding. In the particular case of the Metacomet-Monadnock trail, the dedication of a multi-community, proactive volunteer work force and the funding it has successfully solicited and put to use has likely had a part in raising the trail's profile to a national level.

"The Recreational Trails Grant made it possible to save an important trail head for the Metacomet~Monadnock Trail here in Northfield," said Joanne McGee a volunteer and resident of Northfield. "Now, thanks to the Federal Government, the M&M trail has been re-designated and renamed the New England National Scenic Trail, and will join the other national scenic trails (including the AT) as an important recreational asset for all."

Reauthorization: Will RTP Continue?

The Recreational Trails Program has had a dramatic and positive impact on the quality of life in America through thousands of projects nationwide and through new cooperation among diverse trail enthusiasts, government officials, and local and national organizations in the conservation, recreation, and transportation fields. More recently, the trails community has better understood the role of RTP-aided trails in the nation's campaign to attack inactivity and obesity, in facilitating environmental education, and in provoking a sense of stewardship for the ecology, culture, and history of a particular area.

In 2009, the Surface Transportation Act expired. A new multi-year transportation funding program is being worked on but has not been passed. Because of the current economy and political gridlock, SAFETEA-LU funding has been extended only temporarily through continuing resolutions, and the **Recreational Trails Program will not be included in new legislation unless a member of Congress writes it in.** Representative James Oberstar, Chair of the 75-member House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure planning is working on a draft for the new transportation bill and has stated that the new bill "can't be business as usual". Predictably, the national trails community and its supporting organizations would like to see an increase in RTP funding in a new bill, recognizing that this program and trail development in general are essential for the country to move forward in its efforts to promote a healthier, cleaner, and more economically sustainable quality of life. As the process for reauthorization continues, the national Coalition for Recreational Trails is calling on trail supporters to recognize the significance of the RTP program in making a better life for all Americans.

As the population of the world continues to increase and corridors of unaffected landscapes become more rare, trails and land protection advocates see this as a crucial time period for establishing trail corridors and protected open space, before it is too late. A program such as RTP creates the possibility of reaching these goals, by giving groups a little nudge to get out there and make a difference.

Action

For more information on how you can help to support the Recreational Trails Program, click on the following link to the American Trails website: <http://www.americantrails.org/rtp/>

Five ways to support the Recreational Trails Program **NOW!**

- Get your group and any other group in your trails community to support the Coalition for Recreational Trails and sign on to Recreational Trails Council of Advisors in support of the RTP: Go to www.americantrails.org/rtp/crt.html
- Tell your Congress members! See the form letter on the American Trails link (above) and call, email, or send a letter to them today. Invite them to an RTP-funded trail ground-breaking, to a volunteer work day, or to an opening celebration. Tell the media, and send news clips to your Congressional offices. Tell them about your success stories and about the myriad of people of all ages and abilities that love and use these trails!
- Get local governments to pass resolutions in support of RTP funding and then make sure that Massachusetts Congress members get that information.
- Spread the word and send this information along to anyone with an interest in advocating for this very important federal program.

Tips and Tools

(Resources, links, and publications)

The DCR Recreational Trails Program website provides grant program criteria and other application guidelines for upcoming grant rounds:

<http://www.mass.gov/dcr/stewardship/greenway/regionalGrants.htm>

The FHWA Recreational Trails Program website contains national news on the program and provides state by state contacts and information: <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/environment/rectrails/>

American Trails provides additional information on the Recreational Trails Program reauthorization as well as all things trails at their website: <http://www.americantrails.org/rtp/>

The Coalition for Recreational Trails (CRT) is a federation of national and regional trail-related organizations. Its members work together to build awareness and understanding of the Recreational Trails Program and are focused on supporting its continued, effective implementation and its extension and enhancement through the next round of transportation legislation. For more information: <http://www.funoutdoors.com/coalitions/crt>

To unsubscribe from this list, simply email paul.jahnige@state.ma.us with your email address and type “unsubscribe” in the subject or body.

To subscribe, please email your contact information to paul.jahnige@state.ma.us.

Please forward to others who might be interested in Massachusetts Greenways and Trails.



Connections is the electronic newsletter from the Department of Conservation and Recreation’s Greenways and Trails Program,

Paul Jahnige, Director

136 Damon Road

Northampton, MA 01060

(413) 586-8706 ext. 20

paul.jahnige@state.ma.us

www.mass.gov/dcr/stewardship/greenway/index.htm

Deval Patrick, Governor

Tim Murray, Lieutenant Governor

Ian Bowles, Secretary, Energy and Environmental Affairs

Rick Sullivan, Commissioner, Department of Conservation and Recreation