COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS

MASSTRAILS GRANTS PROGRAM
Accessibility and Trails Guide

Accessible Design Standards: All trail amenity construction projects must comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) and the Architectural Access Board in Massachusetts (AAB or the Board) design standards. Under The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), a law passed in 1990, all newly designed and constructed or altered State and local government facilities, public accommodation, and commercial facilities must be readily accessible and usable by persons with disabilities. The design standards issued under the Americans with Disabilities Act by the Department of Justice and the Department of Transportation ensure access to the built environment for people with disabilities. The ADA Standards apply nationwide, in addition to any applicable state or local codes, where facilities are newly built or altered. The ADA Standards do not include design standards for shared use pathways/trails, but they do include standards for other elements like parking lots and site amenities.

The Architectural Access Board in Massachusetts develops and enforces regulations to make public buildings and facilities accessible to, functional for, and safe for use by persons with disabilities. These regulations are known as 521 CMR. If there is a conflict between ADA standards and AAB standards, the stricter standard applies. The AAB standards also do not include design standards for shared-use pathways/trails, but they do include standards for other elements and amenities, including picnic areas.

Shared Use Pathways: Defined as off-road infrastructure that is physically separated from motorized vehicle traffic and designed for use by bicyclists and pedestrians, including pedestrians of all ages and abilities. Shared use paths are typically paved, but can also use stabilized aggregate, crushed stone, or unimproved natural surfaces. They are designed as independent facilities for two-way travel, supplementing the existing active transportation network, and provide flexible transportation options and recreational opportunities for a wide variety of settings. Shared use paths take several common forms, and paths may transition between types at different points along their routes. Variations of shared use paths include rail trails, rails with trails, canal towpaths, waterfront trails, and paths along utility corridors.

The US Access Board, a federal agency that develops accessibility guidelines and standards, has published Pedestrian Right-of Way Guidelines (PROWAG). The guidelines address access to sidewalks and streets, crosswalks, curb ramps, pedestrian signals, on-street parking, and other components of public right-of-way, including shared use paths.

Shared Use Path Accessibility Resources: Accessibility requirements are complex and can be challenging to interpret. Contact the MassTrails Grants Administrator with any questions and refer to the links below for helpful resources:

- FHWA Designing Sidewalks and Trails for Access, Chapter 14:
- MassDOT Design Guide

Hiker/Pedestrian Trails: Trails are designed, constructed, and maintained for hiker/pedestrian use. Trails are classified by their **designed use** and **managed use**. According to the Federal Trail Data Standards (FTDS), a trail has only **one designed use** that determines the design, construction, and maintenance parameters for the trail. However, a trail can have more than **one managed use** based on a management decision to allow other uses on the trail.

Accessible design guidelines for natural surface hiking trails have not been included in ADA or AAB guidelines. For trails designed for hiker/pedestrian use, DCR follows the US Forest Service Trail Accessibility Guidelines (FSTAG), which maximize accessibility while recognizing and protecting the unique characteristics of the natural setting, level of development, and purpose of each trail. Trails that have a designed use for hikers and pedestrians are required to comply with the accessibility guidelines for trails. Trails that have a designed use other than for hikers or pedestrians, such as mountain bike or equestrian trails, are not required to comply with the technical accessibility guidelines for trails.

New Trail Projects: All new trail systems funded through MassTrails which are designed for hiking must comply with the trail accessibility guidelines. If a new segment of an existing trail system that is designed for hiking directly connects to a trailhead or other trail that substantially meets the accessibility guidelines for trails, the new trail must comply with the accessibility guidelines.

Trail Restoration Projects: When a trail designed for hiking is reconstructed or restored, and the altered portion of the trail connects directly to a trailhead or other trail that substantially meets the accessibility guidelines for trails, the altered portion of the trail must comply with the accessibility guidelines.

The FSTAG accessibility guidelines maximize accessibility, while recognizing and protecting the unique characteristics of the natural setting, level of development, and purpose of each trail. Unlike ADA and AAB guidelines for the built environment, trail guidelines include exceptions for when a trail designed for hiker/pedestrian use cannot reasonably comply with accessibility guidelines. These exceptions ensure that accessibility is provided to the extent appropriate to the setting where it will have the most benefit, be practicable, and provide a meaningful recreational opportunity. All other appropriate design options should be considered before applying an exception.

Exceptions are permitted for any portion of the trail where compliance would:

- Cause substantial harm to cultural, historic, religious, or significant natural features or characteristics;
- Substantially alter the nature of the setting or the purpose;
- Require construction methods or materials that are prohibited by Federal, State, or local regulations or statutes; or
- Not be feasible due to terrain or the prevailing construction practices.

The basis for all exceptions must be documented and submitted to MassTrails as a part of the grant application. Documentation will include the rationale for the determination, which conditions for exception are present, which exceptions apply to the project overall, the date of the determination, and the name and contact information of the individuals who made the determination.

Section V of the MassTrails Grant Application includes the "Trail Accessibility Guidelines Checklist". All applicants must complete Part 1 of the form. If the project will construct or alter a hiker/pedestrian trail, applicants must fill out Parts 2-5. Entities are encouraged to seek technical assistance from MassTrails when considering exempting an entire trail.

Trailhead Facilities, Structures and Staging Areas: All trailhead facilities and furnishings must comply with the accessibility requirements, to the extent practicable. Any trail structure (e.g., bridges, viewing platforms, shelters) must comply with accessibility standards in all instances. For example, if a project involves new bridge construction on an existing trail that is not accessible, the bridge must still be built to accessibility standards as outlined in the ADA and AAB. If the project will construct or restore trailhead or staging area facilities, those facilities must be brought up to current accessibility standards.

Hiker/Pedestrian Trail Accessibility Resources: Contact the MassTrails Grants Administrator with any questions and refer to the links below for helpful resources:

- **US Forest Service Accessibility Guidelines (FSTAG)**
- **FHWA, Recreational Trails Program Accessibility Guidance**
- **Tips and Techniques for using Crusher fines surfacing for trails**
- **The Art of Building Crushed Stone Trails**

Universal Design: Beyond MassTrails requirements for accessibility, grant applicants and land managers should consider other universal design techniques and apply an accessibility lens to all projects. Universal design attempts to meet the needs of all people, and includes those of all ages, physical abilities, sensory abilities, and cognitive skills. It includes the use of integrated and mainstream products, environmental features and services, with the need for adaptation of specialized design. Examples of universal design elements in a trail project include mounting ramps and block for riders to mount their horses, installing safety barriers that don't obstruct views for wheelchair users, and taking the width of recumbent bikes into account when placing bollards or other barriers on a bike trail.