

A Case for A County Trail Coordinator to implement Strategic Development Of Recreational Trails in Jefferson County, New York



Overview:

Development of trails for motorized recreation in Jefferson County, especially snowmobile and ATV's, presents a significant opportunity to improve tourism and local access to recreation. Jefferson County offers diverse and attractive open spaces for trails. Access to US Highway 81 makes travel to the County's trails convenient for a large market and many facilities already exist to service tourists. There is a large local base of snowmobile and ATV owners who actively pursue and support trail activity.

Despite these assets, Jefferson County's trail system is limited and key trails do not interconnect or provide access to important centers of activity. To take full advantage of the opportunities presented by ATV's and snowmobiles, more development of trails must take place.

While much discussion and speculation about various opportunities and issues has taken place, no initiative has been set forth to move forward with development. This paper suggests that it is now time for the County to take a pro-active role in organizing trail development.

Trail development and management is a complex issue. Planning miles of trail involves dealing with numerous land owners regarding easements and right-of-ways. Organizing development involves bringing together the interests of land owners, governments, recreational users and private businesses. A myriad of technical details involving construction, safety, law enforcement, maintenance standards and other concerns must be considered.

Given the complexity of issues and the mix of interested parties, it is clear that someone needs to play a coordinating and planning role. Given those same complexities, it would be naive to believe that the best economic and social interests of the County will be served by continuing to allow trails to develop without planning and management.

Now is the time to move forward with empowering a Trail Coordinator to lead efforts toward creating a trail system that will enhance the economic development of the County.



Current Status:

New York's snowmobile trail system depends almost entirely on club volunteers, who receive some support in the form of State aid raised through snowmobile registration fees. The State aid is based on miles of trail and amount of snowfall in the trails' zone. For 2005, Jefferson County will receive \$84,500 from the State's \$5.8 million fund (Lewis - \$319,918.75 St. Lawrence - \$238,275.00; Oswego - \$209,100.00) State trunk snowmobile trails are separately maintained in southern and northern Jefferson County.

State corridor snowmobile trails exist in segments along the Oswego County line near Mannsville; connecting Adams to the Lewis County network; and connecting Carthage to the Lewis County network. In northern Jefferson County, a State Corridor trail links Cape Vincent, Clayton, Alexandria Bay, Lafargeville and Chaumont. Clubs have developed other trails outside of the State corridor system. The Jefferson County Planning department works with several clubs to coordinate the State aid for their efforts.

ATV enthusiasts do not have a dedicated state fund that provides aid for trail maintenance. Trails and roads open to ATV use are limited. In New York State, some DEC forest access roads in locations like Winona Forest have provided riding opportunities. Local towns in some jurisdictions (not Jefferson County) open low-traffic roads to ATV use. However, both of these situations have drawbacks. A successful example of partnership between the Thousand Islands Land Trust and Rivergate Wheelers ATV Club has opened the old New York Central rail line bed between Clayton and Philadelphia to multi-use activity.

It is important to note that the availability of State funding need not be the driving force in development and maintenance of trails. Other localities have worked with models that incorporate user fees, private business support, and volunteer or in-kind support.

Today, no coordinated trail management or planning exists in Jefferson County. Several active and dedicated clubs maintain the trails that exist with the support and cooperation of both government and the private sector. However, no plan or initiative exists to develop a county-wide network of trails, coordinating the efforts of all interested parties.



The Opportunity:

According to the International Snowmobile Manufacturers Association snowmobilers in Canada and the United States spend over \$26 billion on snowmobiling each year. This includes expenditures on equipment, clothing, accessories, snowmobiling vacations, etc.

Surveys show that, on average, snowmobilers taking overnight trips (24% of these surveyed) take 3 - 5 trips per year, spending 2 nights per trip away from home.

The New York State Snowmobile Association, in cooperation with SUNY Potsdam, performed an economic impact analysis in 1998 showing the economic impact of snowmobiling in New York state is estimated at \$476.2 million.

The sales and use of ATV's have increased dramatically in the past decade. From 1998 to 2002 national ATV sales saw an average yearly increase of approximately 17 percent, while the years 2003 and 2004 have shown single digit percentage increases. However sales in New York State still saw double-digit growth in 2003. The Motorcycle Industry Council's 2004 sales projections for ATV's exceeds 33,000 units in both New York and Pennsylvania and projects a national total of 816,474 ATV units.

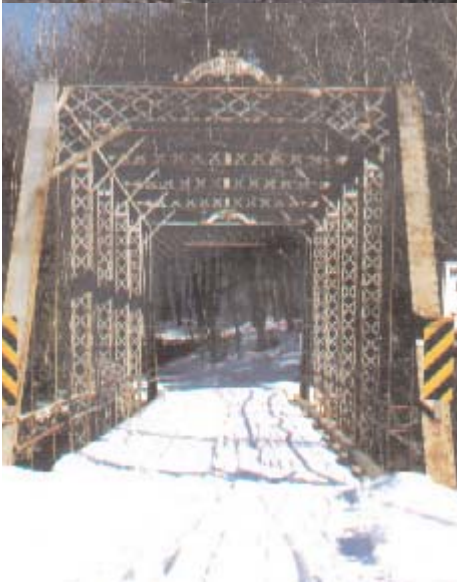
Fewer studies have been made on the economic impact of ATV enthusiasts. Wisconsin's Department of Tourism released an in-depth study of their 2003 ATV tourists revealing that the average ATV party spent \$523 per trip and stayed 3.5 nights. The total impact of ATV tourists on Wisconsin was \$295,285,693.

A 2004 survey of Jefferson County tourism businesses showed that well over half derived 80% or more of their income from June-August. This extreme seasonality has been a deterrent to new investment and development. Multi-use, multi-season trails are an opportunity to strengthen the County's existing tourism industry.

Clearly a multi-million dollar local impact is at stake. Consistently attracting snowmobile and ATV tourists will fill local tax coffers and support hundreds of jobs. Beyond the visitor impact, there is a real opportunity to improve quality-of-life with additional recreational trails. Raising quality-of-life is an increasingly important factor in attracting new employers.

Neighboring Counties have enjoyed substantial economic benefits from trail use. Frankly, they've also suffered through some difficulties in managing those trails. Jefferson County's opportunity is to learn from both positive and negative experiences and strategically implement a trail program that truly improves the local economy and lifestyle.

Consistency is key. In order to attract private recreation-related investment, businesses must be assured that the trail system supporting their operations is stable and well managed. Those same conditions are necessary to implement a marketing program attracting snowmobile and ATV tourists.



Goals

The overall mission of this trail development proposal is economic development. A well-planned and managed trail system can generate real economic benefit to the County, while supporting access to recreation for its citizens. Goals of trail development can be summarized as follows:

- Increase tourism spending
Provide quality trails that will attract recreational tourist and associated spending.
- Attract investment
Organize a stable, well used trail system that will encourage entrepreneurs to invest in related business opportunities.
- Improve recreation - quality of life
Provide a four-season recreational asset that enhances the quality-of-life that Jefferson County is able to offer as a benefit to employees of the area's businesses.
- Encourage safe and harmonious enjoyment of trails
Assure that the community has done due diligence in managing its outdoor resources for the benefit of its citizens.

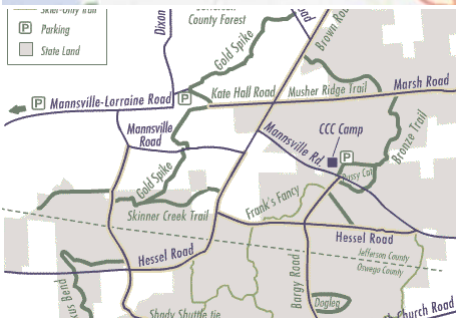
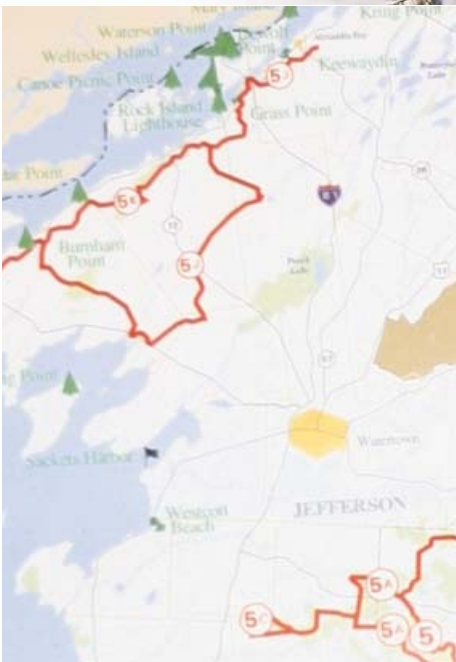
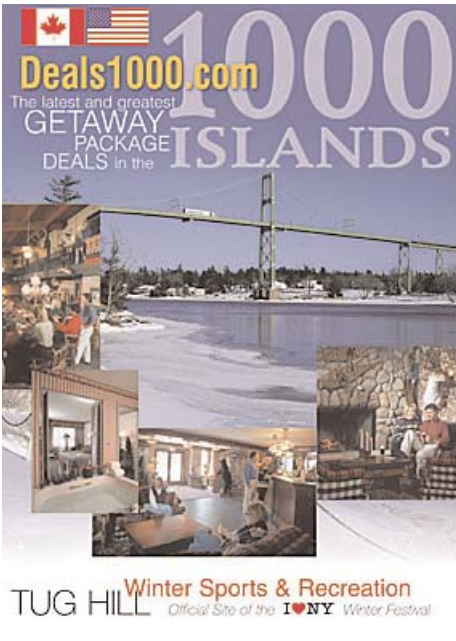
Objectives & Measurements:

The work objectives of a County Trail Coordinator must be focused on tangible projects that move the process of trail development forward. Working within the existing economic development framework of the County, a Trail Coordinator will be provided with a specific set of objectives and measurements. These objectives will likely include:

- Organize a public-private partnership to develop and manage trails
- Create a strategic plan for county-wide trail development
- Prioritize trail development opportunities
- Initiate development of top priority or best opportunity trails
- Implement a management system for trails

Measurements:

- Number of partners in public-private organization
- Value of in-kind and cash investment committed to projects
- Evaluation of value of new private investment encouraged by trails
- Evaluation of new visitor spending encouraged by trails
- Evaluation of jobs and business income supported by trails
- Evaluation of increased property values supported by trails
- Evaluation of improved State and Federal investments due to trail planning
- Evaluation of perceived quality-of-life improvements



Issues to address:

As has been mentioned, trail development presents complex issues. This proposal does not intend to discount the need to address and deal with these issues. Nor does it envision an exercise that allows the County's future to be held prisoner by the frustrations presented in addressing issues. Rather, it proposes to focus the effort of a dedicated trail coordinator on creating solutions and overcoming issues in order to realize the benefits of a trail system.

Some commonly mentioned issues that will be addressed include:

- Trail right-of-ways through public and private lands
- Insurance and liability
- Law enforcement on trails
- Four-season access to trails
- ATV and Snowmobile co-use
- Trail construction standards and responsibilities
- Maintenance responsibilities of trails
- Relationships with clubs
- Use of public roads for recreational vehicles
- Funding options and availability
- Environmental sensitivities

Costs and Funding:

Start-up funding for a Trail Coordinator will need to cover the costs of a full-time position, support and overhead. This proposal initially envisions a specialist position within the Jefferson County Job Development Corporation structure allowing for efficient operation and quick assimilation into the County's existing economic development programs.

During a three-year development period, the coordinator will also be charged with organizing an operational transition to long-term trail coordination and development. It is anticipated that on-going operations will ultimately be handled by another organization.

The product of the Trail Coordinator's effort will require capital and operational spending that will far exceed start-up costs of the office. The Coordinator will be charged with showing the return on investment of the trails as part of the development plan. The Coordinator will also be charged with identifying all potential sources of income and positioning the County to take full advantage of those sources.

Conclusion:

Although the challenges in creating a trail system in Jefferson County are real, the potential benefits justify a concerted effort to overcome those challenges and move forward. Experience has shown that this type of project demands concentrated effort by a professional charged with meeting the goal.