

# Greenways and Public Safety

**Issue**: Do recreational trails and other types of greenways cause crime, vandalism, and other disturbances? What evidence is there to support or to alleviate the concerns of adjacent land owners?

**Facts**: There is little evidence to support the fear that greenway trails will produce disturbance to private landowners. In fact, the evidence is to the contrary:

- The Rails to Trails Conservancy (RTC) issued results from their 1998 survey *Rail-Trails and Safe Communities*, that out of 372 nationwide trails, including 7,000 total miles and 45 million estimated users, only 3% of trails had experienced major crime.

- Four separate studies conducted between 1979 and 1997 concluded that rail-trails do not increase crime. The Rails to Trails Conservancy reports that "all four studies found that while some residents were apprehensive about rail-trail projects, most did not experience problems after the trail's opening".

- Former opponent of Burke-Gilman trail in Seattle (whose home is on the trail) stated that the "trail is much more positive than I expected. I was involved in citizens groups opposed to the trail. I now feel that the trail is very positive; [there are] fewer problems than before the trail was built; [there was] more litter and beer cans and vagrants [before it was built]." Not a single resident surveyed said that present conditions were worse than those prior to construction of the trail.

- A study of Burke-Gilman Trail found that adjacent property owners experienced little or no crime or vandalism. The study surveyed property owners, realtors, and police officers. According to the realtors, property "near" the trail is significantly easier to market and sells for an average of 6% more than similar properties located elsewhere. Nearly two-thirds of adjacent landowners believed that the trail "increased the quality of life in the neighborhood," and not a single resident thought the trail should be closed. (*Evaluation of the Burk Gilman Trail's effect on Property Values and Crime*, Seattle, WA Engineering Dept., 1987).

A 1992 National Park Service study of the impacts of rail-trails on nearby property owners found that "a majority of landowners reported no increase in problems since the trails opened, living near trails was better than they had expected it to be, and that living near the trails was better than living near unused railroad lines before the trails were opened"(*Impact of Rail-Trails*, National Park Service, 1992).

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Comments from adjacent landowners interviewed for the NPS study included the following:

"Vandalism, robbery and safety concerns I originally had were unfounded." - Landowner on California's Lafayette/Moraga

"We are a small town and most everyone uses the trail at one time or another. The city of Durango has no bad comments to make on the trail; they all like it very much." - Public Official on Iowa's Heritage Trail

- Frequent trail usage minimizes crime and can revitalize abandoned corridors. The Chief of Police in Buena Vista, PA stated that "the trail brings in so many people that it has actually led to a decrease in problems we formerly encountered such as underage drinking along the river banks. The increased presence of people on the trail has contributed to this problem being reduced"(*Rail-Trails and Safe Communities,* RTC, 1998).

- A 1988 survey of greenways in several states has found that such parks typically have not experienced serious problems regarding vandalism, crime, trespass, or invasion of privacy. Prior to developing park facilities, these concerns were strongly voiced in opposition to proposed trails. After park development, however, it was found that fears did not materialize, and concerns originally expressed by opposing neighbors have not proven to be post-development problems in any of the parks surveyed. *(A Feasibility Study for Proposed Linear Park,* Oregon Department of Transportation, Parks and Recreation Division, May 1988).

- The Rails to Trails Conservancy's 1998 survey found that minor crimes such as littering and graffiti were only reported by one-fourth of the surveyed trails. Routine trail management easily and quickly corrected these problems.

- A 1990 study by the Appalachian Trail Conference of crimes on the Appalachian Trail found that despite use by three to four million persons per year, that there were only 0.05 per 100,000, or 1 in 2 million. One is more likely to be struck by lightning or victimized at home than as a hiker on the Appalachian Trail *(Appalachian Trail Conference,* Harpers Ferry, West Virginia).

- The Rails to Trails Conservancy also advocates safety design strategies to maximize trail safety, including security lighting, emergency call boxes, the prohibition of motorized vehicles, and trail patrol programs partnering community groups with local law enforcement.

**Resources**

*The Impacts of Rail-Trails: A Study of User and Property Owners From Three Trails*, The National Park Service, 1992. Available Online at www.nps.gov

*Rails-Trails and Safe Communities: The Experience on 372 Trails,* Rails to Trails Conservancy, 1998. Available Online at http:// safety.fhwa.dot.gov/fourthlevel/pdf/rt_safecomm.pdf

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**American Greenways Program**
**The Conservation Fund**
**1800 N. Kent Street, Suite 1120**
**Arlington, VA 22209**
**Phone (703) 525-6300 Fax (703) 525-4610**
**www.conservationfund.org**