

Best Practices and Recommendations for

Marketing the Morris Canal Greenway

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The Morris Canal Greenway is a vision for a continuous on- and off-road trail that would connect Phillipsburg to Jersey City, cutting across six counties in northern New Jersey. Government officials, non-profits and volunteers across the state have been working for years to complete segments of the greenway. However, it wasn't until the North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority (NJTPA) completed the Morris Canal Greenway Corridor Study in 2018 that there was a cohesive plan that linked the various trail segments and historic sites together. Much work remains to complete the greenway and some projects will take a significant amount of time – like those that require land acquisition and buildings pedestrian bridges to safely cross highways that now bisect the former canal's path. Although the corridor study was completed in 2018, and work continues to preserve and build canal segments piece-by-piece, little is being done to market the existing trails, engage partners or raise awareness about the larger effort to complete a continuous greenway. This project reviewed existing research on greenways and efforts to promote other trails to develop best practices and recommendations for marketing the Morris Canal to the public and to partners.

Background

The Morris Canal is a former system of 23 lift locks and 23 inclined planes that were built to overcome an elevation change of 1,674 feet as it carried canal boats filled with goods across the state (NV5, 2018). It was an engineering marvel that allowed boats to be raised or lowered up to 100 feet at a time. The canal was decommissioned in 1924 after railroads made its use obsolete.

The NJTPA organizes a group of stakeholders, the Morris Canal Working Group, interested in completing individual trail segments and contributing to the overall greenway's completion. Unfortunately, the group has not met since the corridor study was completed.

Literature Review

Communities across the United States are developing greenways to support walking and cycling and create more public spaces. In some places former rail lines are being converted into trails (a practice known as rails-to-trails); elsewhere land is being acquired to connect existing trails and parks to create a larger network, as seen with the East Coast Greenway; and in others, flood prone properties are being reverted back to open space and passive recreation, like hiking trails. These projects require a significant amount of groundwork. A study of six trails in Hawaii, Massachusetts, Missouri, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Washington explored challenges to trail development (Eyler et al., 2008). While the trails were developed in vastly different jurisdictions, there were common themes across all six projects. In each case, local champions and community engagement were key to seeing the projects through to completion. "Support from government offices or elected officials was important to trail development, but the active participation and involvement of the champions got things done," the researchers said.

Four of the six trails studied had master plans to guide development (Eyler et al., 2008). In many cases the organizations promoting the trails worked with the various local governments to gain consensus for trail development. "Master plans seemed particularly important for trails in larger communities or for trails that crossed several legislative boundaries," the researchers concluded, though they note this wasn't required to advance trails in the more rural areas included in the study. Greenway plans can also be used to gain support from outside agencies,

like a state department of transportation, and help secure low- or no-cost easements from public agencies.

The Morris Canal Greenway Corridor Study is essentially a master plan for developing the Morris Canal Greenway (NV5, 2018). It presented for the first time a preferred alignment for a 111-mile continuous greenway as closely aligned with the canal's historic right of way as possible (in some cases the proposed trail detours around buildings and private property).

Championing Trails

In many places it was local officials, community groups or even a single “champion” who helped bring trails from concept to reality. The Canal Society of New Jersey has partnered with counties and municipalities to complete various Morris Canal Greenway trail segments and was a key player in the development of a preferred alignment (NV5, 2018). Another example is Bike the Neck, a community group, which was responsible for spearheading completion of the Waccamaw Neck Bikeway in Georgetown County, South Carolina. The group vocally supported getting the bikeway designated as part of the East Coast Greenway (Walker, Evenson, Davis, Bors, Rodriguez, 2011). This move spurred the Waccamaw Council of Governments (a planning organization like the NJTPA) to allocate 80 percent of its federal transportation enhancement funding — which can be used for trails — to East Coast Greenway projects, including the Waccamaw Neck Bikeway.

Creating Recreational and Transportation Opportunities

While many communities recognize the public health benefits greenways offer, these trails also provide transportation options, particularly for low-income populations who may not own a car. A study found that Minneapolis, Minnesota saw an increase in commuting by bicycle after the city expanded its trail system (Hirsch, Meyer, Petereson, Zhang, Rodriguez, Gordon-

Larsen, 2017). The study found that people who lived closest to the trails were most likely to use them for commuting. The researchers believe that the key to success in increasing bicycle commutes was that the trails provided people with a safe off-road space to ride on. They note that Minneapolis also “optimized routes connecting residential and employment areas,” which likely encouraged more people to ride bicycles or walk to work.

Historically studies have shown that low-income and diverse populations live near trails, however there is a lack of diversity when it comes to greenway users. But, a study of two trails in Georgia and Texas found that both sites had success in attracting diverse users (Keith, Larson, Shafter, Hallo, Fernandez, 2018). Researchers surveyed users of the Eastside Trail near downtown Atlanta, Georgia and the Leon Creek Greenway in the suburbs of San Antonio, Texas. These trails were selected because they are in diverse neighborhoods or large cities. The study found that both greenways attracted diverse users and that exercise was the top reason people visited the greenways (75 percent).

The Leon Creek Trail was viewed as a more regional destination, with many users driving to the greenway to experience nature. Meanwhile, the Eastside Trail was predominately used by local residents who valued the connections the trail provided from their communities to key locations, like parks, restaurants and shopping, which encouraged more people to walk and bike to those destinations (Keith, Larson, Shafter, Hallo, Fernandez, 2018). When planning a trail, it is important to consider the location, the needs and expectations of residents in order to maximize use, the study notes. It’s also important to effectively communicate the trail’s unique functions and benefits, like connections to larger greenway networks, which can attract even more users.

The City of Philadelphia had two primary goals when it constructed the 58th Street Greenway, to create more public spaces for people to be physically active, and to connect to the larger East Coast Greenway, which could provide residents with additional health and transportation benefits (Auchincloss, Michael, Kuder, Shi, Khan, Balletser, 2019). The trail was developed in a disadvantaged urban area and the city hoped it would improve public health. However, a study of the area before and after the trail was completed showed only a slight increase in walking, running and bicycling attributed to the greenway.

One challenge Philadelphia faced was that residents did not feel safe using the trail at night as the greenway did not help deter crime in the neighborhood (Auchincloss, Michael, Kuder, Shi, Khan, Balletser, 2019). And while the greenway improved the sidewalk and streetscape conditions, there were still issues with the infrastructure that discouraged people from using it. The researchers suggest that physical activity programming may be necessary to engage community members and get them to use the greenway for moderate- or high-intensity physical activity.

Economic Benefits

Though it can be costly to develop and maintain greenways, once completed they can help boost the local economy. Today the Morris Canal Greenway is a disconnected patchwork of smaller trail segments. But the greenway study presents a vision for a connected network that ties into other major trail systems, which could help attract users from near and far (NV5, 2018). The study notes:

Over time, through the combined efforts of government and nonprofit organizations, the greenway can increase in stature from a regional attraction for biking and walking to a nationally significant destination for heritage tourism.

If a greenway rises to the level of tourist attraction, it can draw visitors that support local hotels, restaurants and bike shops. Bicycling is a popular outdoor activity that contributes \$133 billion to the U.S. economy, supports 1.1 million jobs and supports \$50 billion in non-cycling businesses, including restaurants, hotels, clothing and entertainment (Chakraborty, 2019).

Chakraborty's research also finds that greenways positively impact property values. A comparison of similar homes showed that those closest to a trail or greenway would sell at a higher rate than those further away. Highlighting the above economic benefits, could help build community support for greenway projects.

Addressing Concerns

While greenways offer many benefits, trail champions should also be prepared to face opposition. A study of the Atlanta BeltLine Trail found that nearby residents were concerned about crime, how the trail would affect their property taxes and property values, and vandalism (Weber, Boley, Palardya, Johnson Gaitherb, 2017). The researchers split the surrounding neighborhoods into quadrants. This included the Northside quadrant, which was more affluent, and the Southwest quadrant, which is an area in transition. When comparing results from these neighborhoods, those living in the more affluent area viewed the trail more positively than those living in the transitioning neighborhood.

The Northside residents said the trail added to the neighborhood's aesthetics by providing more natural space for outdoor recreation (Weber, Boley, Palardya, Johnson Gaitherb, 2017). Meanwhile, the Southwest residents saw the trail as a potential to boost business development and entertainment options. The researchers note that trail managers need to understand the diverse needs of the population while developing the trail through various neighborhoods. This can help ensure the trail addresses those needs and attracts local users.

Branding

The Morris Canal Greenway Corridor Study set forth guidelines for designing trail segments and creating a consistent brand. These design guidelines are important because they help create a cohesive greenway that is recognizable to trail users even as segments remain disconnected (NV5, 2018). Prior to completion of the study, various types of signage were used along different Morris Canal segments and the designs were not uniform or necessarily recognizable as part of a larger, connected system.

The Morris Canal's branding guidelines are similar to the Great Rivers Greenway. Both guidelines strive to provide a consistent look and feel for the entire trail network, but also allow for flexibility so that communities can select an aesthetic look that complements the location. Another example of branding is the American Tobacco Trail in Durham, North Carolina, which uses consistent directional signage, road markers and maps along the trail to orient users (Walker, Evenson, Davis, Bors, Rodriguez, 2011). The Morris Canal Greenway Corridor Study also calls for consistent wayfinding signage and trail markers so that users can clearly follow the greenway through various jurisdictions (NV5). These trail designs and branding guidelines can be incorporated into social media posts and emails to partners to better market the Morris Canal.

Great Rivers Greenway also uses consistent branding on its website, in its trail design (such as trail markers and signage) and on social media. All these elements work together to promote the greenway in a way that is recognizable to the public. The greenway's logo is green and includes artistic elements that symbolize the Missouri and Mississippi rivers that cut through the region. Similarly, the Morris Canal Greenway's logo, which is also predominately green, incorporates a canal boat.

It's notable that both brands use green, which can convey the trails as being vibrant (Cunningham, 2017). Green, which is often associated with nature, has also been tied to feelings of security. Using consistent colors in branding is important, because people will think of a specific brand when they see a certain color, such as the iconic red of Coca-Cola cans.

Online Engagement

Many of the examples cited above acknowledge the importance of communicating the benefits of trails to not only garner community support for a new project, but to also encourage trail use over time. Marketing is also critical to turning a greenway into a tourism attraction.

The Great Rivers Greenway adopted an engagement strategy to help develop the trail network through St. Louis City, St. Louis County and St. Charles County, and encourage people to use it. This included attending existing events to promote greenway projects and completed trails; using targeted communications across various platforms to reach as many people as possible; and being responsive and transparent (Great Rivers Greenway, 2018). Rather than using a one-size-fits-all approach, the greenway focuses public engagement on individual trail segments to build support in that community.

The study of the American Tobacco Trail and Waccamaw Neck Bikeway found that both trails use websites, trail events, booths at festivals, route maps and local tourism groups to encourage people to use and visit the trails (Walker, Evenson, Davis, Bors, Rodríguez, 2011). Both trails are part of the larger East Coast Greenway, a national trail network that aims to connect Maine to Florida. The East Coast Greenway also has a website, including trail maps and information by state, and a robust social media effort that includes regularly posting to Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. By contrast, the Morris Canal Greenway has not

consistently updated its website since the study was completed in 2018 and rarely posts to Facebook or Instagram.

The Great River Greenway offers an example of a successful online marketing effort. It has an interactive website that includes a map where visitors can explore existing trail segments and it contains information about future development of trail segments. The greenway also provides an annual report with information about work completed in the previous year. And Great Rivers has robust social media messaging, posting regularly on Instagram, Twitter and Facebook. Great Rivers uses social media to share information about projects and events and promote trail use.

Marketing the Morris Canal

The Morris Canal Working Group has a small but growing following on Facebook and Instagram, as well as a website that has seen traffic drop off as it has not been updated. Until a non-profit or another organization is created to manage the greenway's development and marketing, the NJTPA has allocated staff with limited resources to oversee the greenway's social media accounts and website. Due to the limited resources, it is recommended that staff create and schedule three posts each week structured around the following goals:

- Raise public awareness about the greenway
- Promote existing trails and parks
- Build partnerships to complete the missing segments

These posts can serve a dual purpose of educating the public about what is already in place and building support among trail users, local officials and volunteers to complete the proposed greenway.

Scheduling Social Media

To ensure that there is sufficient content, staff can use images from the Library of Congress, which maintains a database of historic Morris Canal photographs for public use. Staff can also take advantage of existing content by sharing posts from others about the Morris Canal. Examples include the Canal Society of New Jersey, which regularly announces the completion of new trail segments and Morris Canal events, as well as Metro Trails, which posts a “Then and Now” history series that often features the Morris Canal. Another option is to encourage followers to share their own Morris Canal images, which can then be shared on Instagram and Facebook with the owners’ permission. Encouraging followers to tag the Morris Canal Facebook and Instagram accounts and use the hashtag #MorrisCanal could help keep track of these images.

Regularly updating the Morris Canal’s social media accounts has the added benefit of providing fresh content to <http://morriscanalgreenway.org>, which features a gallery of Instagram posts. The website should also be updated to remove the events section from the homepage, since the COVID-19 pandemic has temporarily closed many parks and trails, leading to the cancellation of events. A sample interactive map was developed (it can be viewed at <http://morriscanalgreenway.org/greenwaymap.html>) following the greenway study. The NJTPA should work with the Canal Society of New Jersey to populate information about the remaining existing trail segments and historic sites, which are publicly accessible. This interactive map could help drive interest in the greenway project and encourage people to use existing sites. The East Coast Greenway and Great Rivers Greenway both have user friendly trail maps on their websites, which could serve as a model for the Morris Canal Greenway. The map should include information about parking, handicapped accessibility, whether trail segments are smooth enough for cycling as well as the location of historic sites and museums.

Engaging Partners

The NJTPA should convene a meeting of the Morris Canal Working Group. This will re-engage partners and allow stakeholders an opportunity to share updates about trail segments that have been completed since the corridor study. This meeting should also be used to discuss the corridor study's recommendation that a non-profit be formed to oversee trail development and maintenance (NV5, 2018). This non-profit could also seek donations for trail work, something the NJTPA is unable to do.

The Morris Canal Working Group meeting can also be used to recruit volunteers from partners agencies and organizations who could help manage the social media accounts. The working group should also designate someone to create and distribute a monthly email update. This will allow partners to share information between meetings, which were typically only held twice a year, and keep stakeholders better engaged in the greenway project.

The NJTPA should also create a monthly newsletter to keep the Morris Canal Working Group engaged. It could feature updates from members, like upcoming events, new trail signage or trail openings. The newsletter also presents an opportunity to showcase active members, similar to the Great Rivers Greenway, which has a "People of the Greenway" social media series to highlight staff and volunteers. These features could also be shared on social media as a way of thanking trail champions for their work to complete the greenway.

Conclusion

The above research, and analysis of websites and social media initiatives illustrate that developing a successful greenway requires several key elements. It starts with a plan and a person or group that has a vested interest in seeing the project advance from concept to

completion. Public engagement is also critical to garner support for projects, but also to ensure that greenways are developed in a way that meets the needs of the community. If the community's needs are not considered, those living closest to the greenways may not use them, as seen in the Philadelphia example. And it's also imperative to develop consistent branding and greenway design guidelines — particularly for trails that span multiple jurisdictions — to ensure the networks are recognizable and easy to navigate.

Overall, the Great Rivers Greenway presents a model that the Morris Canal Working Group could aspire to. It is funded through a voter-approved dedicated tax and has an organizational structure that includes a full-time staff. There is also a non-profit foundation that conducts additional fundraising to support greenway initiatives. By contrast, the Morris Canal Greenway effort is led by a stakeholder working group, which meets inconsistently. The group does not have funding to hire a staff or market the greenway. The Canal Society of New Jersey partly serves the role of organizing greenway initiatives by working with municipal and county governments to secure grants and complete trail segments.

While it would take a significant amount of work to develop the organizational infrastructure that the Great Rivers Greenway has, the Morris Canal Greenway can start small, but first working to market the trail and raise awareness about the project. Laying a foundation of public awareness, will not only get more people to use existing trail segments, it could help spur donations for future trail projects and recruit volunteers and additional partners who could help move the project forward.

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