

Circuit Trails Coalition FINAL Strategic Plan

September 28, 2021

Introduction

The Circuit Trails Coalition advances completion and use of the Circuit Trails so that the Greater Philadelphia area in Pennsylvania and New Jersey¹ has an inter-connected, multi-purpose, trail network unlike any other in the country — connecting the urban, suburban, and rural communities of one of the largest metropolitan regions in the United States. The Circuit Trails will make our region stronger by providing a place for active transportation and recreation, connecting our communities to green spaces and waterways, and making our neighborhoods more attractive and healthy places to live and work. Once connected, the Circuit Trails will be one of the nation’s premier regional trail networks and it will provide multiple benefits to neighborhoods, communities, and the region as a whole.

The Circuit Trails Coalition, formed in 2012, has convened trail funders, organizers, and advocates to build hundreds of miles of trails, promote and encourage their use, advocate for funding, and create a strong network of professionals who freely share their knowledge and expertise. The Coalition has encouraged the adoption of its vision and goals by each county in the Circuit region; advocated for increased federal, state, and local funding; and launched a highly effective communications campaign. As a result of its efforts and those of its members, since 2012 the Circuit Trails network has increased by over 100 miles and received over \$300 million in investments.

This strategic plan will build on the Coalition’s success and guide its agenda for three years, beginning in April 2022, a period in which the public’s interest in trails has never been higher and the prospects for increased funding have never been brighter as a result of potential significant federal investment in infrastructure. Of continuing concern as we go about our work is the adverse impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the human and other resources needed for implementation. The silver lining brought by the pandemic--if there is one--is heightened use, demand, and appreciation of the value of trails and green spaces for physical and mental health.

¹ Participating counties in Pennsylvania are Bucks, Chester, Delaware, Montgomery, and Philadelphia counties, plus the City of Chester. In New Jersey the participating counties are Burlington, Camden, Gloucester, and Mercer, plus the cities of Camden and Trenton.

Who This Plan is For

The Circuit Trails Coalition was formed in recognition that trail development requires the active engagement of federal, state, county, and local/municipal governments along with a host of nonprofit organizations that develop, manage, promote, program, use, and advocate for trails. This plan, while not excluding our governmental and funding partners, is focused primarily on the important roles of the variety of nonprofit organizations that are members of the Coalition.

How Data Informed This Plan

In fall 2020, the Circuit Trails Coalition, through the support of the William Penn Foundation, commissioned market research on equitable access to trails. Conducted by OpinionWorks, the study aimed to better understand how under-resourced communities use trails, barriers to trail use, and what steps need to be taken to make the Circuit Trails more appealing and accessible for all. OpinionWorks' findings and analysis serve as a guide for the Coalition's work over the next three years and are woven into this plan.

Mission

The mission of the Circuit Trails Coalition is to raise the profile of multiuse trails and their public benefits so that the Circuit Trails network becomes a *completed* and *widely used* significant regional project. The successful execution of the goals in this plan will enable the 65 Coalition members, working with an active Steering Committee of elected member representatives, to fulfill this mission.

Values of the Coalition

The Circuit Trails Coalition is motivated by the belief that trails are for the use, enjoyment, and benefit of everyone. To expand the number and diversity of users we must think and act differently about mobility -- from the personal choices of individuals to the allocation of dollars that support more environmentally friendly, energy efficient modes of transportation that connect people to jobs, major destinations, the natural environment, and to one another. Addressing modes of transportation alone will not result in increased trail use or increased user diversity. This realization underscores the importance of justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion as core values in all aspects of trail planning, programming, outreach, and advocacy, including the composition and work of the Circuit Trails Coalition and Steering Committee. Every aspect of our work must be guided by integrity, transparency, and accountability to our members, partners, funders, and each other. In addition to our "people values", we are committed to building, maintaining, and using safe, comfortable, accessible trails in ways that contribute to environmental sustainability.

Looking Ahead to 2025

Over the next three years, the Circuit Trails Coalition will:

- Expand the Circuit Trails network, adding miles and making it more accessible and inclusive.
- Expand the Circuit Trails community, increasing the diversity of trail users.
- Expand the Circuit Trails Coalition, making it more relevant and representative.

Successful completion of this ambitious strategic plan will require a significant investment of time and talent by members of the Coalition. The return on that investment, however, is huge, resulting in:

- Increased trail access within under-resourced communities and progress toward the goal of 500 miles of trail by 2025
- Trail spurs that create connections between under-resourced communities and Circuit Trails
- Increased and more stable funding for trails, especially for trails in under-resourced communities
- Increased awareness of the Circuit Trails network, particularly within under-resourced communities
- Increased diversity of users on Circuit Trails, including community-based groups that incorporate OpinionWorks research findings in their programming
- Creation of a learning community of trail professionals and advocates benefiting from information sharing
- More diversity and inclusion on the Circuit Trails Coalition and Steering Committee in terms of organizational and individual members
- Active, sustainable partnerships with organizations and individuals based in and representative of the wide array of communities that may be adjacent to or that will benefit from Circuit Trails
- Wide awareness of and celebration of the achievements of the Circuit Trails Coalition and its members
- Satisfaction of having more diversity of all types on Circuit Trails and knowing that together we have made progress in advancing the belief that Circuit Trails are for the use and benefit of everyone.

➤ EXPAND THE CIRCUIT TRAILS NETWORK, ADDING MILES AND MAKING IT MORE ACCESSIBLE AND INCLUSIVE.

Goal #1: Complete 500 miles of Circuit Trails by 2025 with a focus on increasing trail access within under-resourced² communities.

Objective 1: Identify Priority Projects of the Circuit Trails Coalition.

1A: Identify gaps in the Circuit Trails network as well as opportunities for improved community connections to existing trails.

1B: Develop a methodology to prioritize gaps and community connections that (1) improve access to trails within under-resourced communities, (2) address trail development in under-resourced communities, and (3) strengthen the overall Circuit Trails network.

Objective 2: Generate public and governmental support for Priority Projects.

2A: Continue to support county Action Teams to campaign to advance specific trail segments in their areas, encouraging the use of the Inclusive Trails Planning Toolkit.

2B: Build and sustain a diverse and local grassroots base -- “the Circuit Citizens” -- that will advocate for and inform the development of Priority Projects.

Objective 3: Increase, diversify, and stabilize trail funding, particularly for Priority Projects.

3A: Identify and encourage funding of Priority Projects as well as other community connectors and trail improvements that would increase access to the Circuit Trails, especially in under-resourced communities.

3B: Provide guidance, assistance, and support to groups interested in pursuing funding for these projects.

3C: In NJ, increase state support for active transportation networks.

- I. Increase awareness among federal, state, county, and local leaders of trails in their districts and their importance.
- II. Among New Jersey Trails & Greenways Summit participants, advance a discussion and develop a shared strategy to increase state support for active transportation networks.
- III. Advocate for funding for the creation and maintenance of trails in partnership with other coalitions, such as the Keep It Green Coalition.

² Under-resourced communities include areas of high-poverty and/or low-income, BIPOC communities, communities with limited English proficiency, environmental and climate justice communities, and communities that have experienced disinvestment, displacement, or have otherwise been impacted by historically racist policies and practices, such as redlining and isolating and/or dividing communities of color with physical infrastructure or land uses.

3D: In PA, defend state funding for trail planning, construction, and programming.
I. Participate in the Growing Greener Coalition, taking action to defend state funding when necessary.

3E: Advocate for an increase in programmed funding for Circuit Trail segments within the DVRPC-prepared New Jersey and Pennsylvania Transportation Improvement Programs.

3F: Activate Circuit Trail Citizens for key calls to action around state and regional efforts: long range plans, budget hearings, policy efforts, etc.

Objective 4: Secure maintenance funding for trails in under-resourced communities.

4A: Advocate for resources that can be used to upgrade trail segments in disrepair in under-resourced communities.

4B: Investigate and support shared job-training/re-entry trail-related workforce development programs (e.g., PowerCorps PHL).

➔ EXPAND THE CIRCUIT TRAILS COMMUNITY, INCREASING THE DIVERSITY OF TRAIL USERS.

Goal #2: Expand the number of Circuit Trail users among under-represented groups and residents of under-resourced communities.

Objective 1: Market the Circuit Trails to potential new trail users with a particular focus on under-represented groups and under-resourced communities.

1A: Develop marketing materials that reflect the diversity of identities among Circuit Trails communities and incorporate recommendations of the OpinionWorks research (e.g., use of the term “network” rather than “circuit” in communications).

1B: Partner with local organizations within trail communities to develop culturally relevant signage directing residents to their nearby trail.

Objective 2: Support programming, events, placemaking, and group activities on the Circuit Trails, particularly with a focus on increasing awareness of the Circuit Trails, increasing perceptions of safety on trails, creating a welcoming space for all, and improving local trail maintenance.

2A: Provide resources and/or support for community-based programming on the Circuit Trails.

2B: Actively encourage events on the Circuit.

2C: Assist in promotion of community events on or adjacent to the Circuit Trails.

- Metrics: # of blog posts, # of social media posts/videos, # of events, participation from # groups, number of people targeted

2D: Support local partners and member organizations to personalize the trail experience in their area (e.g., post signage or art that makes people of various identities feel safe, seen, heard, and welcome).

Objective 3: Evaluate and improve the efficacy of the Circuit Trails Ambassador program, particularly with a focus on increasing awareness of the Circuit Trails, increasing perceptions of safety on trails, creating a welcoming space for all, and improving local trail maintenance.

3A: Conduct an assessment of Circuit Trails Ambassadors' current activities, their own interests, and their capacity.

3B: Based on assessment findings, consider whether and how to activate Ambassadors to achieve the Circuit Trails Coalitions' goals of increased awareness of local trails, perceptions of safety, creating a welcoming environment, and improving trail maintenance. Consider whether another role, such as a trail ranger program, is needed to help meet these goals.

3C: Create guidance around the Circuit Trail Ambassador role, and develop strategies for mobilizing, retaining, and cultivating Ambassadors.

3D: Consider whether and how to compensate Ambassadors for their efforts and implement a compensation and recognition program.

➤ EXPAND THE CIRCUIT TRAILS COALITION, MAKING IT MORE RELEVANT AND REPRESENTATIVE.

Goal #3 - Better understand the coalition's make-up, capacity, and structure and evolve the Coalition as necessary so that it can better achieve its short- and long-term visions.

Objective 1: Assess the Coalition model and structure and make short-term changes as necessary based on the assessment.

1A: Review and update governance documents to reflect current reality.

1B: Reconnect with current Coalition members to better understand their capacity, needs, and interests.

1C: Implement short term changes that have consensus.

1D: Assess the long-term future of the Circuit Trails Coalition and make recommendations for longer term changes that require more discussion and or work, planning, etc.

Goal #4 - Based on assessment findings, develop a Coalition and Steering Committee that is more diverse and representative of the various identities and lived experiences of current and potential trail users, where principles of justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion are central to our work.

Objective 1: Increase the number and diversity of members of the Circuit Trails Coalition and Steering Committee in terms of the institutions and the individuals who represent those institutions with regard to age, gender, race, ethnicity, perspective, ability, sexual orientation, and skill sets.

1A: Identify priority communities and population groups in which the Circuit Trails Coalition should foster relationships based on shared interests (including trail user groups, trail adjacent community-based groups, and region-wide and or citywide groups, particularly representing under-resourced communities).

1B: Cultivate non-transactional relationships with organizations, institutions, and individuals within those communities and groups. Assign priorities to recruitment and orientation.

1C: Identify and address potential barriers to participating in the Circuit Trails Coalition and Steering Committee meetings (i.e. funding, location, time, etc.).

1D: Consider a potential funding structure for under-resourced and over-burdened organizations to participate in the Coalition and/or Steering Committee.

1E: Ensure there are role descriptions for various types of involvement in the Circuit Trails Coalition, making it clear to potential members the specific commitment they are making and how they will be supported.

1F: Once relationships are formed, recruit organizations, institutions, and individuals to formally participate in the Circuit Trails Coalition and/or Steering Committee.

1G: Consider strategies to retain, sustain, and increase activity among Coalition members.

Objective 2: Create and sustain a learning community to support Coalition members in understanding and implementing the findings of the OpinionWorks research and other studies to increase diversity, equity, and inclusion on specific trail segments.

2A: Broadly disseminate the results of the OpinionWorks study through four conferences/webinars, two journal articles, and 3 blog posts.

2B: Create templates for conducting intercept studies, surveys, questionnaires, and focus groups to facilitate the creation of baselines and the aggregation of data across the Circuit Trails.

Objective 3: Secure at least \$150,000 (\$75,000 for two years) in funding for JEDI initiatives to be undertaken by Coalition members, and work to leverage it for greater investment.

3A: Identify and submit applications for at least five potential sources of funding.

3B: Develop and implement a system for disbursing funds among member organizations engaged in JEDI initiatives.

Resources List (forthcoming):

- Inclusionary Trail Planning Toolkit
- Gap Analysis (Priority Projects List)
- OpinionWorks Survey Results
- NJ Trails Action Network Info