



Trail User Counts and Surveys



Pedestrian and Bicycle
Information Center

Problem

Planners and advocates for a new county bicycle/pedestrian trail needed usage data to strengthen grant requests and influence policy and funding decisions.

Background

The Ozaukee Interurban Trail is a paved, 30-mile shared-use trail that connects six communities in Ozaukee County, Wis. (immediately north of Milwaukee). Most of the Interurban Trail is off-road, using an old rail right-of-way now owned by WE Energies. Where the right-of-way has been lost, the trail uses existing roadways. A particular two-mile stretch carries cyclists along a heavily traveled county road (speed limit 45 mph), across Interstate 43 on a bridge with low railings, and through a suburban subdivision. Planners wanted to replace this section with an off-road segment whose centerpiece is a bicycle/pedestrian bridge spanning both the county highway and I-43. The original cost of this Trail Improvement Project was \$1.24 million.

A partnership of three county departments (Planning, Resources and Land Management; Parks; Highway) and the Ozaukee Interurban Trail Advisory Council, a volunteer group charged with overseeing trail development, worked to secure funding for the project through a Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality (CMAQ) grant from the Wisconsin Department of Transportation (WisDOT). CMAQ grants are funded with federal dollars appropriated under SAFETEA-LU; they require a 20 percent local match. WisDOT awarded \$991,600 to the Trail Improvement Project in 2004.

The Ozaukee County Board of Supervisors had about one year to decide whether to accept the grant. Ozaukee County residents tend to be fiscally conservative and pressure their elected officials to limit property tax increases. Some supervisors considered the Interurban Trail a pleasant amenity but not an essential service, and believed residents wouldn't want to use tax dollars to pay for improvements. The county board decided that the necessary local match (\$248,000) would not be funded with county tax revenue. To convince the county board to accept the CMAQ grant and to apply successfully for grants to help make up the local match, planners and advocates needed data on trail use and impact.

Solution

Lack of data sometimes confounds advocates and local officials in smaller jurisdictions who want to justify policy and funding decisions for bicycle/pedestrian facilities. Developing and administering a survey that produces reliable results can be difficult, time-consuming, and expensive. The federal government and regional planning agencies do large-scale surveys, but the results lack detailed data for a specific geographic area. Sometimes data from other locations can be used to forecast usage or impact in a similar area, or local questions can piggyback on a regional survey. In this case, planners used several sources of data.

The Interurban Trail opened in September 2002. A survey conducted during the trail's one-year anniversary celebration asked about trail usage habits (frequency, time of day, distance traveled, reasons for use, etc.) and economic impact. The responses were encouraging, but this first survey's usefulness was limited because the group sampled was small, composed mainly of people who supported the trail, and respondents' self-reported behavior was not inherently reliable.

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The Trail Advisory Council and Parks Department next arranged a trail count in August 2004. The counts were conducted at two different intersections for seven 14-hour days in each location. Volunteers counted the total number of people passing, their use of the trail (walker, dog walker, runner/jogger, cyclist, other), and their movement along the trail (crossing, entering, exiting). They also noted significant details about the weather. The data were summarized by day and hour, user type, and movement on the trail. (Of the week's 8,825 total users at the two locations, 68.5% were cyclists; 17.5% were walkers; 6.5% were runners/joggers; 4% were dog-walkers; 3% were in-line skaters or other users.) Planners used the data to create assumptions about year-round trail use.



The Interurban Trail is used year-round.

The third source of information available to planners was a survey from the county's comprehensive planning process. The survey used a random digit dial sampling procedure to find and interview 406 county residents; several questions about the Interurban Trail were part of the instrument. The survey, done in March 2005, found that 53 percent of respondents had used the trail and nearly 70 percent favored expanding it. Furthermore, 76 percent of those who wanted to expand the trail favored using county tax dollars to do so; even a majority of respondents who didn't use the trail supported using tax dollars for expansion.

Finally, because the trail is promoted in print and television as a tourism destination in Ozaukee County (and several of the cities it links rely on tourism), planners wanted to estimate the trail's potential economic impact. They built estimates by extrapolating from the 2000 U.S. Census, the 2002 National Survey of Pedestrian and Bicyclist Attitudes and Behaviors, and research from the Wisconsin Department of Tourism; cited the results of another Wisconsin trail study; and used data from the 2003 anniversary survey.

Results

The information from these surveys, counts, and estimates provided the documentation that county staff and their partners on the Trail Advisory Council needed to convince county supervisors to accept the CMAQ grant and to secure funding toward the \$248,000 local match goal. The county applied for, and received, two Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources Stewardship Grants (\$50,000 and \$74,000), a \$10,000 grant from the Bikes Belong Coalition, and a \$25,000 grant from the Wisconsin Energy Corporation Foundation, among others. The county board voted to accept these and the CMAQ grant, and approved the Trail Improvement Project; however, construction planned for 2006 is stalled for other reasons. (Updates on the status of the Trail Improvement Project are available at <http://www.interurbantrail.us/TrailEnhancementProject/TalkingPointsAug2.pdf> and <http://www.jsonline.com/story/index.aspx?id=671921>)

Costs

The main cost associated with developing the data was staff time. Volunteers collected the data during the trail usage survey and the 2003 survey. The comprehensive plan survey was contracted with the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's Center for Urban Initiatives and Research; questions about the Interurban Trail were a small part of the whole, which was paid for through a Wisconsin Comprehensive Planning Grant.

For more information, please visit the Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Center Web site at www.walkinginfo.org.

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Web sites and resources

The Ozaukee Interurban Trail Web site: <http://www.interurbantrail.us/Index.htm>

The Ozaukee County Web site: <http://www.co.ozaukee.wi.us/>

For basic guidelines on developing and administering surveys to trail users, see Trail User Survey Book: How to conduct a survey and win support for your trail (Rails to Trails Conservancy, 2005) at http://www.railtrails.org/resources/documents/resource_docs/UserSurveyMethodology.pdf

This 1998 study of the Mohawk-Hudson Bike-Hike Trail in New York includes a survey and user count sheet at the end of the document: <http://www.cdtcmpo.org/bike/usersurvey.pdf>

A summary of existing national or multi-state sources of bicycle and pedestrian data can be found in Table 2-1 of the USDOT — BTS publication, Bicycle and Pedestrian Data: Sources, Needs, & Gaps (BTS00-02), Washington, DC: 2002

http://www.bts.gov/publications/bicycle_and_pedestrian_data

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References

This case study was developed with information provided by the Ozaukee County Planning, Resources and Land Management Department, the Ozaukee County Parks Department, and the Ozaukee Interurban Trail Advisory Council.

Image Source

Association of Pedestrian and Bicycle Professionals (APBP)

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