

# Trail Towns

## What is a Trail Town?

A *Trail Town* is a community in which local officials have used their trail system as the focal point of a tourism-centered strategy for economic development and local revitalization. The Trail Town concept was originally developed by the Allegheny Trail Alliance, a coalition of seven trail organizations along the Great Allegheny Passage, a 150-mile multi-use trail running through Pennsylvania and Maryland. Many communities in Michigan are now working to develop their own local Trail Town Program. The basic Trail Town concept is simple: **ensure that communities along the trail are better able to maximize the economic potential of trail-based tourism.**



The local Trail Town effort can be centered around any type of trail (e.g., non-motorized, snow-mobile, equestrian and kayak). While the Trail Town concept is primarily geared toward cities and towns, the concept is very much applicable in rural areas that have at least one small center of commercial activity. Most Trail towns are not isolated communities — they are linked together by the trail, creating a regional destination for residents, trail users and tourists.

## How Does a Community Establish a Trail Town?

While there are a number of different ways in which local communities can organize around an effort to create a Trail Town Program, the most common approach has been to use the “Four Point Approach” developed by the National Main Street Center of the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

1. **Organization.** Establish consensus and cooperation by building partnerships among various groups that have a stake in the local trail system and the downtown.
2. **Promotion.** Sells the image and promise of a Trail Town to all prospects.
3. **Design.** Gets the Trail Town into top physical shape to create a safe and appealing environment.
4. **Economic Restructuring.** Helping existing businesses expand and recruit new businesses to respond to current trail activities and market forces.

## What are the Benefits of Becoming a Trail Town?

Over the last several years, as the full economic potential of linking trails, recreation, tourism and business development has become better known, the Trail Town concept has caught on. According to an article from the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, “Communities around the country are increasingly utilizing the ‘Trail Town’ model of economic revitalization that places trails as the centerpiece of a tourism-centered strategy for small town revitalization.” In fact, studies from neighboring states like Wisconsin have shown that bicycle tourism supports more than \$900 million in tourism and residential spending each year.