

## Outdoor Recreation

Outdoor recreation is a key economic opportunity within the region. With the shared values of preserving open space and natural resources and investing in outdoor amenities like trails and water sources, growing this industry to attract visitors and businesses is consistent with the character of the area and is a form of growth that the communities would likely support. From an economic perspective, for example, visitors from out-of-state who stay overnight and utilize multi-use trails spend nearly double (\$332) what in-state day-trip users do<sup>2</sup>. Thus, promoting longer stays for visitors from around the northeast is a critical opportunity. Outdoor recreation is now further poised for growth because of COVID-19, as people are seeking recreational opportunities outdoors instead of in confined spaces with ventilation concerns.

The recommendations that follow represent ways to transform a recreational opportunity for the region's residents into an economic driver, attracting more visitors and related businesses.

### Inventory Assets

In order to successfully promote the outdoor recreation opportunities in the region, each town should inventory its assets. Assets include hiking and biking trails, water resources (i.e. lakes, ponds, rivers), and public open space (i.e. forests, parks, community gardens). Municipal Plans of Conservation and Development often contain information on many of these amenities, but the Towns should engage with other partners like land trusts, the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection, the Last Green Valley, and local Conservation and Inland Wetlands Commissions to work toward a complete inventory. The Towns should start with their top attractions and build the inventory over time.

Once a list of assets is created for each town, a regional map showcasing their locations (including parking and access) should be created. The map should also include the locations of complementary businesses such as food service, sporting goods stores, watercraft rentals, and other recreational facilities (i.e. Adventure Park at Storrs and Matt's Paintball). As some of the Towns have completed an inventory of some key assets through the Sustainable CT certification process, staff might consider incorporating this list. Drawing the users of these amenities to local businesses is a critical opportunity for economic growth. The map should be posted on each town's website and on the recommended regional website (see Visibility and Marketing section). It should also be distributed in print form among local businesses, public institutions, and other relevant locations.

The Town of Manchester has included layers onto its online GIS mapping tool that show public open space and trails. Following this example, the implementer can use existing tools to map out these assets on a public-facing platform. Incorporating this onto a GIS platform is a good first step while more user-friendly, marketing-oriented maps and guides are created.

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<sup>2</sup> Brown, Laura. Multi-Use Trails and Greenways as Economic Development Engines (International Economic Development Council, 2020).

Moving forward, the implementer may consider creating a smart phone app (see Visibility and Marketing section) that could include a trails and/or water resource component that houses the map and connects trail and water resource users to each other. This is an opportunity to promote discussion around the region's outdoor recreation opportunities and to create meet-up groups for those with shared interests.

The information gathered through ongoing engagement with outdoor recreation enthusiasts can also guide the implementer in creating an open space plan and, accordingly, determining which projects will be most impactful in connecting trails, water resources, sidewalks, businesses, and town centers when exploring funding opportunities. The implementer should create a list of priority projects to ensure that residents and visitors can easily reach local businesses from these outdoor amenities, capturing that discretionary spending.

The implementer should post signs at well-utilized outdoor recreation locations throughout the region that instruct visitors to take a short online survey about their experience using these amenities. This is a way to reach the most people while taking into account limited staff and volunteer resources available to collect this information in-person. The region might also consider working with the Connecticut Trail Census to determine whether there are opportunities to partner on the survey already managed by this group. There are additional recommendations for engaging smaller groups of outdoor recreation enthusiasts below, and those should also be utilized to collect information from these groups while convening individuals with shared interests.

### Invest in Infrastructure

Making the region's outdoor amenities highly visible and easy to access and use is an important component of creating a recreation "destination" with repeat visitors and thriving complementary businesses. Visitors' spending patterns at businesses are most directly affected by the quality of multi-use trails and the amenities to support these users, including access to commercial areas via transit or pedestrian connectivity<sup>3</sup>. Thus, investing in infrastructure to create this visitor-friendly environment should be a top priority.

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Smaller investments like purchases of benches, trash cans, trail markers, and signage in and around these locations are a great way to make an impact. Businesses are often interested in sponsoring higher-visibility items like wayfinding signs and benches, so each town should create a list of businesses to seed sponsorships from, particularly complementary businesses like restaurants, sporting goods stores, and watercraft rentals. Note that there may be restrictions on business advertising on some state- or federally-funded amenities.

Visibility and ease of use is also a critical component of encouraging returning visitors. Wayfinding signage should be installed to direct them from town center locations and other highly trafficked roads to the most utilized amenities. Local public works departments and, potentially, the State Department of Transportation

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<sup>3</sup> Brown, Laura. Multi-Use Trails and Greenways as Economic Development Engines (International Economic Development Council, 2020).

should be engaged for support with signage installation. Trailhead markers and parking areas should also be clearly marked to ensure a seamless and enjoyable experience for visitors.

As mentioned in the “Inventory Assets” sub-section above, the process of inventorying and mapping the outdoor assets of the region and engaging the users of these amenities can help the implementer determine the most impactful projects in terms of promoting connectivity between them. That means connecting trails, water sources, and other outdoor amenities to town centers and key businesses within the region. This should be done by extending trails and sidewalks and, further into the future, creating public transportation opportunities to promote this connectivity. These types of projects are often funded through grants, and specific opportunities will be discussed further in this report (see Funding Plan Implementation section).

### Grow and Attract Complementary Businesses

Business expansion and attraction can be challenging and often depend on market factors like population density, traffic counts, and demographics. However, with a growing number of visitors to the region as a result of exciting and highly-visible outdoor recreation opportunities, complementary businesses will benefit. While, on their own, some of the business types described below may struggle, creating an outdoor recreation “destination” with a critical mass of similar businesses will be key to their success and to the broader placemaking effort for the region. Expansion of businesses already existing in the region as well as attraction of new businesses tied to outdoor recreation represent a viable opportunity for economic growth and job creation as a result of promotion of these amenities.

*“Being able to bike to shops and restaurants really appeals to me.” – Tolland business owner*

Businesses and residents interviewed for this project shared that the following types of complementary businesses are desirable and have potential for growth within the region:

- Bike sales and repair shops
- Watercraft sales and/or rental shops
- Sporting goods shops
- Cross country ski shops
- Bait and tackle shops
- Ice cream shops
- Other recreation facilities (youth summer camps, sports complexes, etc.)
- Shops containing several of the “offerings” described above (general “outdoor recreation supply” store)

Further, creating a recreation “destination” encourages additional tourism industry-related businesses to take interest in the region. These businesses include:

- Lodging

- Restaurants
- Tour companies
- Transportation companies

In New England, Stowe, Vermont is an example of a small, mostly rural community that has built a successful commercial base off of its outdoor recreation amenities. While AdvanceCT recognizes that there are some key differences between Stowe and the region, it should be used as a model for the type of economic growth that is well-suited to the area. Stowe offers a large mountain popular for skiing in the colder months and hiking, biking, kayaking, and other opportunities in the warmer months. The community contains many niche shops like outdoor supplies, clothing, souvenirs and locally-made goods, etc. because it has invented itself as a destination. The region could provide a similar experience for visitors and encourage a successful environment for small-scale, independent retail.

To achieve the same type of destination-based experience, business recruitment work needs to be undertaken. The implementer can facilitate the business expansion and recruitment process by determining common and allowable uses for key outdoor amenities. For example, the implementer should well understand the types of watercrafts and other activities associated with different bodies of water as well as the ways that different trails and trail systems are used (i.e. hiking, biking, ATVs). Additionally, through engagement with users of these amenities, the implementer may determine opportunities that are not as common but could be promoted more to engage new users with other interests (i.e. ice fishing, ice skating, birding). This knowledge will allow the towns to determine the most suitable locations near those assets for certain types of businesses. Additionally, the towns should determine key commercial real estate opportunities for the location or expansion of these businesses, particularly as they are able to create more defined opportunities for connectivity between outdoor amenities and commercial centers.

Also, as part of this effort, the implementer should approach successful businesses from outside the area that would make a good fit to determine whether they have any interest in expanding in the region. Even if not immediately interested, the implementer should develop a list of prospects and engage them periodically to learn about any future plans. This list of prospects could be developed through a number of angles, including engaging outdoor recreation enthusiasts about their favorite related businesses in the state or contacting relevant statewide interest groups and professional associations related to the outdoor recreation industry (Connecticut Recreation and Parks Association, Connecticut Forest and Park Association, Connecticut Fly Fisherman's Association, New England Mountain Bike Association, etc.). Not only are the association members helpful in providing feedback on successful businesses throughout the state, but some have specific business memberships that represent potential "leads" for the region's business recruitment efforts.

For businesses that have near-term interest, the implementer's "pitch" should highlight the outdoor recreation amenities and how they might benefit as a result, demographics of residents and visitors, currently successful complementary businesses in the region, and real estate opportunities within the four towns that fit best with the business use.

More generally, streamlined and predictable local permitting processes and continuous engagement between prospective and expanding businesses and a single municipal point of contact representing economic development is key to successful business expansion and attraction. See the Small Businesses and Entrepreneurs section for more information on this.

## Engage Community

While the discussion has largely been around attracting visitors to the region's outdoor assets, resident and workers within the region also play a significant role in its economic growth. Users of these assets are drawn into the community where they spend their disposable income at local businesses. By creating more engagement around these opportunities, this economic growth can occur.



*1Bolton Lake (source: <https://www.ctfishfinder.com/bolton-lakes-14-location.html>)*

The implementer may consider involving local partners to create programming around the many outdoor amenities in the area. Specifically, creating guided hikes or “paddles” along trails or water sources for specific interests like history, wildlife, astronomy, or arts and culture could be a way to draw in visitors and residents alike for unique educational and cultural opportunities while enjoying the outdoors. The implementer should leverage partnerships with subject matter experts like representatives from local historical societies, university faculty, and the Last Green Valley to undertake these activities. While much of this work is being done by individual towns, there should be increased emphasis on leveraging these partnerships to enhance this regional effort.

Additionally, relevant local entities overseeing the use of open space, trails, natural resources, etc. (i.e. Parks and Recreation departments and Conservation Commissions) should work together to coordinate hiking, biking, paddling, birding, etc. meet-up groups and disseminate that information through their typical advertising channels as well as the smart phone apps Meetup and Nextdoor, which are social networking platforms designed specifically for local communities and neighborhoods. Eventually, they should share that information through the region's tourism-focused smart phone app (see Visibility and Marketing section). These types of groups are attractive to residents in particular because of their recurring nature and the opportunity to connect and develop relationships with community members who share similar interests.

The Parks and Recreation departments should also jointly coordinate educational workshops related to these outdoor amenities as a means of encouraging their proper and meaningful use and bringing the region's residents together. The departments can bring in experts on topics like safe bike path/trail/water source usage, trail maintenance, environmental stewardship, and local flora and fauna.

One statistic that should be widely promoted to engage the community around expansion of trails, in particular, is that homes near these trails, on average, have 5-10% higher property values than those not located near

trails.<sup>4</sup> Beyond offering community amenities, trails have a direct economic impact for homeowners, which is yet another reason to draw resident support for investment in these types of projects.

Continuous engagement of the community around the region's outdoor recreation assets can be done in many ways and will likely evolve as this plan is implemented. No matter the forum, this engagement is critical to promoting the growth of this opportunity from those that know the area best.

### Partner Strategically

Identifying regional partners for collaboration on programming, technology, maintenance, marketing, and other aspects of creating an outdoor recreation-focused industry cluster in the region is essential to maximizing the impact of these recommendations. With limited staffing capacity in the four towns, it will be critical to leverage the ability and expertise of partner organizations to support this effort.

For example, organizations like land trusts, the Last Green Valley, UConn's College of Agriculture, Health, and Natural Resources, the Nathan Hale Homestead, and others could provide support with informative programming. Chambers of commerce like the Windham Regional Chamber and the Tolland County Chamber can provide support in marketing events. AdvanceCT, the Department of Economic and Community Development, and the MetroHartford Alliance can provide support with business engagement and attraction.

Further, partnerships can also mean cost savings. The implementer should create a joint volunteer forestry and trail management team. By pooling these volunteer resources, the trails and open space in most need of maintenance can be focused on first. The towns might even consider investing in and sharing equipment to support these maintenance practices (or encourage the volunteer to bring their own) and other outdoor recreation assets (equipment related to maintaining water quality, landscaping equipment for public open space, etc.).

Developing these connections within the community and the region also supports community building, as described above. As community members are engaged to support this effort through their subject matter expertise, they will undoubtedly take interest in participating more generally in maintaining and enjoying all the outdoor recreation opportunities available in the region. There may be an opportunity for recruiting volunteers to a regional forestry and trail management team.

### Desired Outcomes and Program Evaluation

To determine whether these efforts have been successful, the implementer should disseminate surveys to visitors (see Appendix E). The implementer should include a survey link on its (future) website, smart phone app, and social media and on printed postcards distributed at key local businesses like restaurants and lodging and

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<sup>4</sup> Brown, Laura. Multi-Use Trails and Greenways as Economic Development Engines (International Economic Development Council, 2020).

events like the Coventry Farmer's Market. The implementer might also consider putting up signs at trailheads, parks, and water accessways that contain a QR code linking users to the survey.

Based on the survey results, the implementer should determine whether patronization of businesses and outdoor sites has picked up since the implementation of key activities and determine which components of the plan are the most well-received by residents and visitors alike. This feedback can guide the implementer in evolving the plan over time to best suit the needs of the users.

Additionally, the implementer should encourage volunteer involvement in the Connecticut Trail Census, which tracks information on trail usage, including spending. The results of the Census may provide further evidence of the positive economic impacts of the usage of outdoor amenities. Local conservation groups and land trusts are a possible source of volunteers.

### Examples and Resources

Below is a list of additional resources to be used for implementation of different components of the Outdoor Recreation section of the plan:

#### **Mapping outdoor assets**

- The Town of Manchester has incorporated its trails and public open spaces into its online GIS mapping tool. The implementer may consider reaching out to Manchester staff for more information on the process they went through to create these map layers. See it here: <http://gis1.townofmanchester.org/ParkLocator/default.htm>.
- The Connecticut Forest and Park Association has some trails in the region mapped out, showing parking and trailheads. This information could be utilized for the creation of the asset inventory. See it here: <https://www.ctwoodlands.org/>.
- The US Forest Service's online, interactive mapping tool shows all outdoor amenities located in each of the country's national forests. It serves as a strong model for the types of recreational opportunities that should be mapped and the level of detail that should be included. See it here: <https://www.fs.fed.us/ivm/>.
- Maine Trail Finder is another great online tool that showcases the locations of trails across the State of Maine, with visitors to the site being able to sort trails by trail activity, difficulty, distance, etc. See it here: <https://www.mainetrailfinder.com/trails>.
- The Eight Mile River Watershed area in Haddam has a dedicated website with maps showcasing a number of types of open space, natural resources, and outdoor recreation opportunities. See it here: <http://www.eightmileriver.org/maps/>.
- The Northwest Hills Council of Governments has created a regional trails viewer that includes the towns in its area. It includes specific details about the hikes to guide user experiences like "family friendly", "destination trails", and "loop trails". See it here: <https://northwesthillscog.org/nhcogtrails/>.

### Apps to promote social gatherings

- Meetup is an app used by individuals looking to connect socially with others with similar interests. It could be used to promote outdoor recreation-focused meet-up groups. See it here: <https://www.meetup.com/>.
- Nextdoor is an app used by communities nationwide to promote local events and meet-ups, businesses, and more. It could be used to promote outdoor recreation-focused meet-up groups. See it here: <https://nextdoor.com/find-neighborhood/>.

### Regional forestry and trail maintenance

- While coordinated through a dedicated nonprofit organization on a much larger scale, the Pacific Crest Trail Association organizes groups of volunteers along various sections of the Pacific Crest Trail from California through Washington. This could be done on a smaller scale through the local Parks and Recreation departments, and, if successful, the implementer may be able to acquire grant or local funding to support some larger trail maintenance programs. See it here: <https://www.pcta.org/>.
- The Connecticut Forest and Park Association coordinates groups of volunteers to engage in trail maintenance statewide. The implementer should engage this organization to reach a new group to provide support for the outdoor recreation amenities. See it here: <https://www.ctwoodlands.org/>.

### Stowe, Vermont

- Stowe is an example of community that has built a strong commercial base of small-scale, independent retail and services around its outdoor recreation amenities. See it here: <https://gostowe.com/>.

### Connecticut Trail Census

- Additional information on the goals and methods of the Connecticut Trail Census can be found here: <https://cttrailcensus.uconn.edu/>.

### Trail-based economic vitality

- While trails are only one component of the region's outdoor amenities, there is strong literature demonstrating their economic value. This article can be used to make the case for investment in trails. See it here: <https://www.iedconline.org/documents/members-only/multi-use-trails-and-greenways-as-economic-development-engines/> (*note: accessing this article requires a paid membership*)
- The Iowa Department of Transportation created a guide for the implementation of trail-based economic development programs. See it here: <https://iowadot.gov/iowabikes/trails/web-pdf/EconHandbook/HANDBOOK.pdf>.