

Trail advocates and health agencies are joining forces to get Americans off their duffs.

Rails-to-Trails Conservancy



A Healthy

The Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, based in Washington, D.C., helps turn defunct railroad tracks into community trails. Above: the Levee Trail, part of the Wyoming Valley Wellness Trail system (map) in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. Right: the Kokosing Gap Trail in Knox County, Ohio.

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ilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, is not exactly an *Outside* magazine kind of place. A former coal-mining town, it has an aging, sedentary population with high rates of heart disease and other health problems. While yuppies in other towns lift weights at their health clubs, Wilkes-Barre residents lift beers at their favorite watering holes.

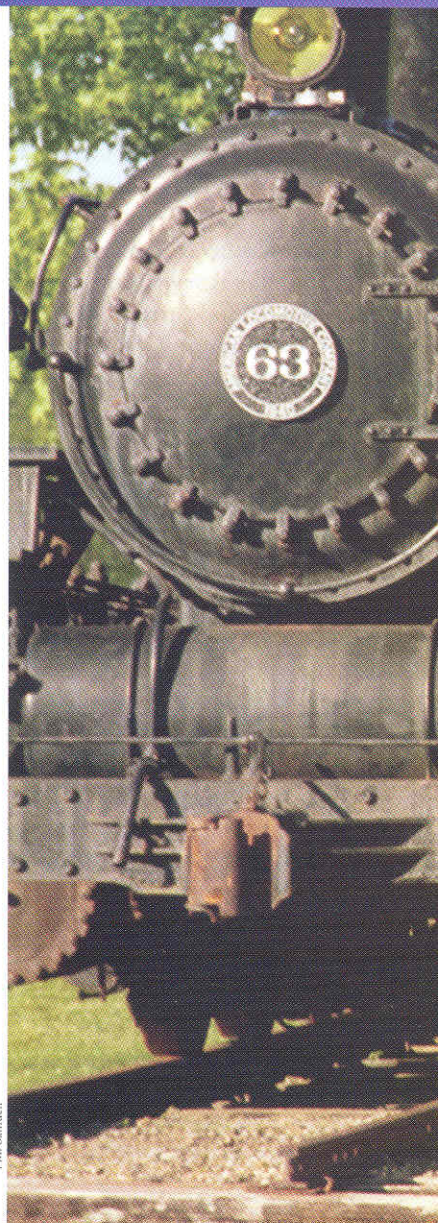
“People were used to getting paid to sweat,” says Tom Sexton, northeast regional director of the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy. But no pay, no sweat. And that situation led to the community’s health problems.

In 1999, community organizations joined forces to find a solution to those problems. With the encouragement of the National Park Service and the Pennsylvania Environmental Council and funding by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, they formed an alliance called the Wyoming Valley Wellness Trail Partnership. The coalition—which includes the local chapter of the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, the Gateway Health Plan, and the state health department—hopes to develop 100 miles of multi-use trails linking 36 com-

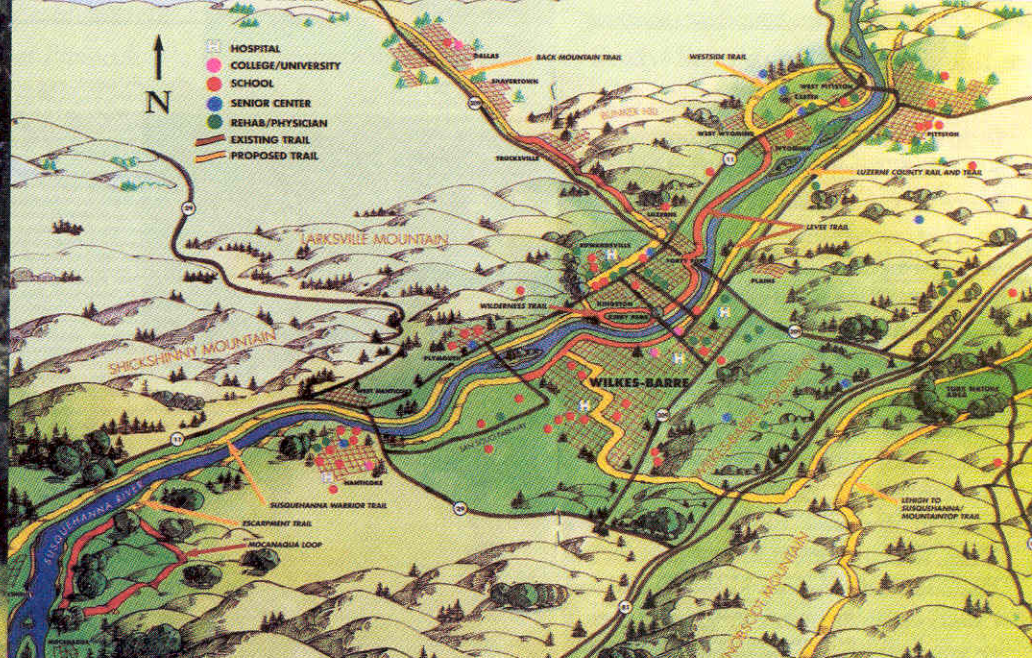
munities along the Susquehanna River.

This effort puts Wilkes-Barre at the forefront of a new trend in which trail advocates and health-care organizations are joining forces to improve public health by building and promoting the use of recreational trails. From Albuquerque, New Mexico, to Wheeling, West Virginia, these new partners are blazing the trail. Some examples:

- In the Upper Valley region of Vermont and New Hampshire, doctors prescribe trail recreation instead of pills as part of a “physicians’ prescription program for physical activity.”
- In El Paso, Texas, a border region that suffers from a high rate of obesity and more than 2.5 times the national average rate of diabetes, the first segments of a multi-use trail along the Rio Grande are under way, thanks to funding from the city, the state parks and transportation departments, and the Paseo del Norte Health Foundation.
- In Bolivar, Missouri, citizens who want to discuss business with the mayor are invited to join him on fitness walks on the town’s rail-trail. Local residents turn out in groups of 20



Phil Samuel



Relationship

By Elaine Robbins



to 50 to get face time with the mayor.

- In Utah, beginning in 2001, Utah's Alliance for Cardiovascular Health helped to improve several multi-use recreational trails and developed a media campaign to raise awareness of the benefits of physical activity. It also created two statewide walking programs: the Utah Walks Mile Tracker Program and the Gold Medal Mile program.

For trail planners, these partnerships offer an important new source of funding and credibility. "Essentially they're interested in the same things we are," says Helen Mahan, community planner for the National Park Service's Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program. "There's an advantage in having public health officials as trail advocates. Nursing is the number-one most respected profession. Most people look to health professionals as people with great credibility."

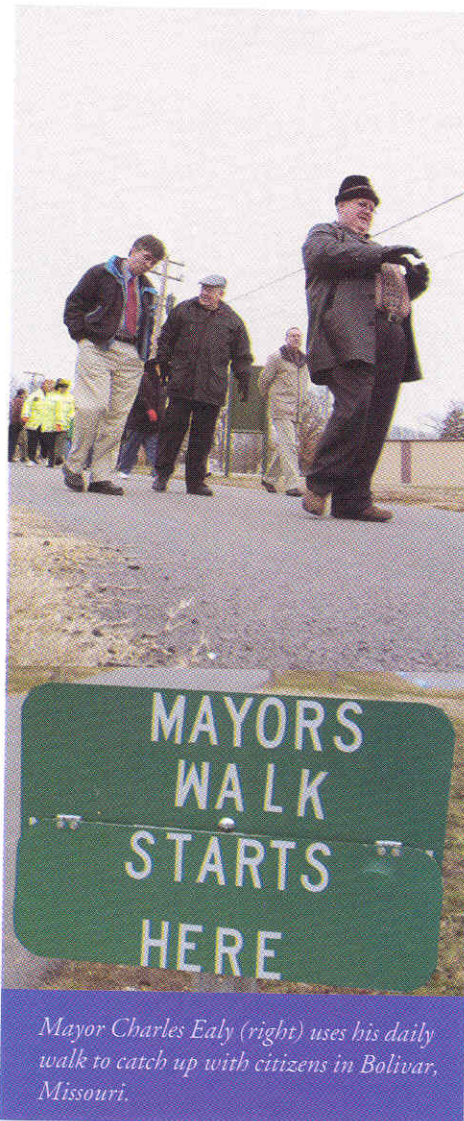
For health professionals, trails offer a cost-effective weapon against the staggering health-care costs associated with the sedentary American lifestyle. Some 64 percent of American adults are either overweight or obese. One in four adults is almost completely sedentary. Inactivity plays a significant role in heart disease, stroke, colon cancer, and diabetes, including Type 2 diabetes in children. The CDC estimates that obesity resulted in health-care costs of \$75 billion in 2003 alone.

Increasingly, public health advocates are recognizing that walking holds tremendous potential as a prevention tool. According to the Surgeon General, as little as 30 minutes of moderate exercise each day, including brisk walking, can bring significant health benefits. Even members of high-risk groups—seniors, the overweight, and people with low education and income levels—consider walking the most acceptable form of exercise.

While recreational trails seem to offer an obvious solution, those links are just starting to be studied. "We've always intuitively known that trails improve health," says Richard Dolesh, senior policy associate in the public policy office of the National Recreation and Park Association. "But can you prove it? If any community or government agency wants to claim health benefits associated with the use of trails, it's vitally important to have measurable results."

The trail-health connection

In the last five years, a flurry of new research is starting to document those benefits. The Indiana Trails study, which surveyed users of



Mayor Charles Ealy (right) uses his daily walk to catch up with citizens in Bolivar, Missouri.

trails in six Indiana cities in 2001, found that more than 70 percent of trail users increased their chosen activity—primarily walking and bicycling—when they had a trail nearby.

Other research shows that while trails require an up-front investment, they produce savings in health-care costs later on. A study published in the April 2004 issue of the *American Journal of Public Health* found that while trails cost an average of \$235 per user to build and maintain, they offered a direct medical savings in 1987 of \$330 per person. With inflation taken into account, the researchers calculated a 2002 medical savings rate of \$622. By that calculation, trails paid for themselves three times over. For planners to calculate the health-care costs of inactivity in their own communities, the Active Living by Design website offers a physical inactivity cost calculator.

Those potential benefits have attracted the attention of professionals in a wide range of disciplines. Special issues dedicated to the

built environment's impact on community health have been published by several peer-reviewed journals, including the *American Journal of Public Health* (September 2003) and the *American Journal of Health Promotion* (September-October 2003). The Winter 2006 issue of the *Journal of the American Planning Association* will focus on this topic as well.

A leader in this movement is the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the nation's largest philanthropic organization devoted exclusively to health and health care. The foundation has funded research on physically active communities and supports the Active Living by Design program, administered by the University of North Carolina School of Public Health in Chapel Hill. Active Living by Design has awarded \$200,000 grants to 25 partnerships nationwide that promote active living through community design.

From the Centers for Disease Control and the National Institutes of Health to the Department of Transportation and the National Park Service, a diverse group of federal agencies is promoting and funding trail recreation. The National Institutes of Health's National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute has joined with the National Recreation and Park Association to develop Hearts N' Parks, a program that encourages physical activity and other heart-healthy behavior in more than 140 participating communities.

The National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences at the NIH has agreed to study the impact of community design and marketing strategies in the 25 Active Living by Design partnerships to measure their effects on physical activity, obesity, and other health indicators.

There is still much to be learned. During a presentation at last year's American Trails national conference, Richard Dolesh and Stuart Macdonald, chair of the National Association of State Trail Administrators, urged trail planners to start asking the hard questions:

- How do we measure, and how do trail users measure, positive health outcomes from regular and increased trail use?
- Can we make a case that increased funding to develop trails and greenways will save health expenditures in the long term?
- What kinds of trails are the most useful and attractive for health and fitness seekers?
- How can we design better trails that encourage use by people who don't see themselves as "outdoors enthusiasts"?

