

# Trails for the People and Economy of Taos



*Photograph by Michael DeYoung*

## **Community, Health, and Economic Benefits of Trails for Biking and Other Recreation in the Taos Area**

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by  
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## **Trails**

Trails are part of the human experience and part of our history in New Mexico, from ancient trade routes and roads radiating out from thousand-year-old Puebloan ruins at Chaco Canyon to the Camino Real and Spanish Trail linking our colonial ancestors to the larger world to the trails we hike and bike today. Trails always take us somewhere new, keep us healthy and sane, and keep us excited for what's around the next bend.

In northern New Mexico, a landscape imprinted by at least a thousand years of permanent human settlements, every trail is part of that history and has a story. We are blessed by a stunning and open natural landscape, but also by an absolutely unique and distinctive cultural landscape. Trails help us discover that landscape.

With that rich legacy in mind, this report is intended to make the case for investment in trails in the Taos area to benefit the community, enhance the economy, and celebrate our landscape and history.

## **Who Bikes**

Outdoor tourism in general and biking in particular continue to grow in popularity among all age groups, economic classes, and ethnicities. Mountain biking and road biking have become part of our American mainstream, growing into one of the most popular outdoor recreation activities in the U.S. As of 2006, more than one in five Americans six years and older biked—the second favorite outdoor activity among all age groups, outranked only by jogging and trail running<sup>1</sup>. It is the favorite outdoor activity for kids ages six to 17, but no longer just a young person's activity: 23% of all bike trips are taken by people between 25 and 39 years old and 27% by people 40 and older. Due in part to its affordability and democratic access for all, biking has steadily increased in popularity between 2006 and 2011 and there are now more bikers in the U.S. than skiers, snowboarders, and golfers combined.

In our state, 23% of New Mexicans participate in biking, either on trails or on roads, and 41% engage in some sort of trail sport.

Anglo-Americans are still by far the predominant group involved in biking, accounting for 77% of those who participate in bike trips. But it is catching on with other racial and ethnic groups. Between 2001 and 2009, biking rates rose fastest among African Americans, Hispanics, and Asian Americans. Those three groups also account for a growing share of all bike trips, rising from 16% in 2001 to 21% in 2009. Hispanics, who make up nearly half of New Mexico's population and are the fastest growing minority in the U.S., are an important part of this growing trend. In 2006, more than three in ten Hispanics surveyed spent at least two days a year biking and/or hiking, and over half expressed medium to very high interest in those activities. In 2009 Hispanics accounted for 9% of all bike trips.

As an anecdotal observation, in my personal experience as an Hispanic outdoor recreationist and biker, I have seen a significant increase in Hispano involvement in those activities around Taos

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, most data throughout this report is from 2006.

over the last 15 years. At Taos Ski Valley, for instance, most of the brown faces used to work in the shops, but now I see far more of them of all ages on the slopes. The same is true of biking.

## **Health Benefits**

In a country facing a crushing epidemic of obesity, type 2 diabetes, and other accompanying health problems—like heart disease and hypertension, stroke, and certain types of cancer—the health benefits of trails for biking and walking cannot be overstated. According to the latest study, about 36% of all American adults and 26% of New Mexican adults are obese—that’s about 78 million adults nationwide and 541,500 in our state alone. One in three children in New Mexico is considered overweight.

Diagnosed diabetes affects about 7.1% of the adult Anglo population, but hits Native American and Hispanic populations harder, with rates of 16.1% and 11.8% respectively. This fact has a very real and direct impact on our community in Taos.

Annual medical costs for people who are obese are \$1,429 higher than for those of normal weight. Nationally, that comes to an estimated \$147 billion a year, while costs associated with cardiovascular disease are over \$400 billion. In New Mexico, treating obesity and diabetes costs over \$300 million each year, with the public paying for \$130 million of that through Medicare and Medicaid.

Physical activity can cut in half the risk of developing coronary heart disease, and cut the risk of developing hypertension by almost a third. To that end, the World Health Organization recommends walking and cycling as the easiest and most affordable ways to get some exercise. And the benefits are huge. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that increasing regular moderate physical activity among the more than 88 million inactive Americans over age 15 might reduce annual national direct medical costs by as much as \$76.6 billion. One recent cost-benefit analysis concluded that every \$1 investment in trails led to almost \$3 in direct medical benefit.

Simply put, investing in trails can only make us healthier and reduce medical costs.

## **Economics**

There is no question that the economics of trails pays off. Bikers travel to their destinations, stay in hotels multiple days, eat out, and purchase retail items. Nationwide, biking on trails and on roads contributes \$133 billion to our economy, including \$53.1 billion in retail sales and services and \$17.7 billion in federal and state tax revenues. And it supports nearly 1.1 million jobs across the U.S.

In New Mexico, biking contributed a total of \$308.5 million annually in equipment purchases and other travel-related expenditures, while other trail sports contributed an additional \$634.2 million. Non-resident travelers account for about 22% of those totals, while the rest were New Mexicans. These are significant numbers—and this with minimal public investment—but still only about 1.2% of the state’s gross domestic product.

Looking at the entire bundle of outdoor recreation, including biking, hiking, and other outdoor activities, we start to see a truly significant economic impact. Outdoor recreation contributes \$730 billion to the U.S. economy each year, including \$289 billion in retail sales and \$49 billion in tax revenue, and supports nearly 6.5 million jobs. In New Mexico, outdoor recreation contributes \$3.8 billion annually to the state economy, including \$2.75 billion in retail sales and \$184 million in tax revenue, and supports 47,000 jobs. This accounts for 4.6% of the state's gross domestic product.

As mentioned above, there are now more bikers in this country than skiers, snowboarders, and golfers combined. The investment in money and land for snow sports and golfing sports may or may not pay off economically, but arguably that investment benefits far fewer people because of the expense of those activities. Imagine the community and economic benefits if local governments invested in world-class trails that would engage more local participation and attract more tourists from other places.

Below are several case studies that describe the costs and benefits of investing in local trails.

## **Case Studies**

There is no shortage of success stories where communities have invested in local trails for exceptional benefit to one and all. Not every study discuss the actual dollar investment for the return—in some cases it may not be easy to parse—but from those that do, it is clear that a little investment can have a tremendous economic return, not to mention the health and other community benefits.

### *Fruita*

Fruita, Colorado, near Grand Junction, is a small agricultural community of about 13,000 nestled in a dramatic landscape next door to the Colorado National Monument, comparable in many ways to Taos, now with its own national monument. Biking has grown in popularity over recent years with a variety of mountain bike trails on BLM land now considered to be some of the best in the country. A classic road bike ride through the monument was featured in the 1985 movie “American Flyers” and still attracts many bikers. Fruita now hosts an annual Fat Tire Festival, sponsored this year by New Belgium Brewing, US Bank, Shimano, and others, attracting hundreds of families and participants of all ages from throughout the region for four days of biking, live music, and other festivities. Bikers contribute an estimated \$25 million annually to the local economy.

### *Gallup Project*

Close to home, Gallup, New Mexico's High Desert Trail System has become a new destination for mountain biking after investment of about \$10 million in trails and infrastructure improvement since 1999. It has been awarded National Recreational Trail designation and selected as the site for the prestigious 2013 and 2014 Mountain Bike 24-hour National Championships. The long-term payoff of this investment remains to be seen, but so far, formal mountain biking events have generated \$750,000 over the last five years and the trail system attracts 32,000 users a year from outside the community. Applying per-person expenditures from

other studies of mountain biking benefits below: if those 32,000 users are just there for a day trip, they are generating at least \$800,000 per year; if staying overnight, it could be as high as \$6.5 million.

### *Jackson Hole*

The Jackson Hole Trails Project involved developing and promoting public trails on Bridger-Teton National Forest lands in Teton County, Wyoming, spanning a total of 153.5 miles. This may be one of the most comprehensively studied trails systems in the country with a report from May 2011. The primary activity on these trails is biking, at 53.4%, with hikers making up 39.1% and trail runners the remaining 8.3%. It is considered a world-class trail system that attracts tens of thousands of users annually. A slight majority of the trail users were local (56.4%), but the rest were visitors from elsewhere. Non-local users spend more money on food, lodging, entertainment, and other services, but local users spent more on direct purchases of bikes. With an estimated \$1.7 million investment over the last ten years, these trails now generate a total of over \$18 million a year in retail purchases. Employee wages and salaries directly related to trail use are another \$3.6 million, with \$1.08 million in total county and state tax revenues. Bike shops and guide services in the community reported between 40% and 236% increase in business over the last five to ten years. This investment worked. But here is a very important point: 63% of the local users surveyed strongly agreed that well-maintained trail systems were important to their quality of life at home; nearly 84% of the non-local users agreed or strongly agreed that well maintained trails systems were important to their decisions for travel destinations.

### *Moab*

The Moab area was discovered early on in the growing popularity of mountain biking and has benefited greatly. In a study of the economic value of public lands in Grand County, Utah, it was determined that mountain bikers in 1998 were generating between \$197 and \$205 per person in economic benefit, or a total of between \$8.42 million and \$8.77 million per year. And they were willing to pay as much as \$1,483 per trip, or a total of \$1.33 million per year. According to Bureau of Land Management data, mountain biking stimulated 313 local jobs in the sparsely populated rural community, for more than \$8.4 million in income in 2007. The even more popular trail use of hiking stimulated another 772 jobs. More than 80% of those bikers surveyed—the majority from outside the Moab area—said they support user fees to help improve management of the area. Overall, tourism and recreation on public lands are the largest economic sector in Grand County, accounting for 44% of private employment. Tax revenue for tourism and recreation in 2009 was \$7.4 million, 16% of total county revenue.

### *Virginia Creeper Trail*

This 34-mile “rails to trails” project in southwest Virginia has become one of the most renowned bike trails in the U.S. In 2004, it was estimated that the Virginia Creeper Trail generated \$2.5 million for the State of Virginia, over \$1.5 million of that spent in the two local counties. At least 27 new jobs were created as a direct result of the trail and local tax revenues increased up to 60% in just five years.

### *Others*

- Raccoon Mountain and Tanasi Trail Systems, Tennessee: day users spent between \$15 and \$50 per day on food and fuel; overnight visitors spent between \$65 and \$100 per day; a majority of users said that trails were a factor when deciding where to travel.
- The Great Allegheny Passage, Pennsylvania: \$14 million annual revenue while half finished.
- The Mineral Belt Trail, Colorado: 19% increase in sales tax revenues.
- Mineral Wells to Weatherford Rail-Trail near Dallas, Texas: annual revenue of \$2 million.
- Visits to National Forest Service lands primarily for mountain biking generated \$205 million in 2005, 3/4 of that year's budget for forest and rangeland research.

### **Destination Taos**

Like Jackson Hole and the Tetons or Moab, Taos has well-established name recognition and market appeal for tourists. People know Taos and already have reason to travel here, and the appeal will only be stronger since the designation of the Río Grande del Norte National Monument. A recent study projected that the designation of the national monument could mean \$15 million in additional tourism dollars annually and 279 new jobs for the region. It would be an easy marketing task to dovetail on that reputation to turn Taos into a world-class destination for biking, in addition to its other attractions.

The Town of Taos has already started the process with the Vision 2020 Master Plan adopted in 1999 and the Revision 2020 written in 2012, both of which emphasize the importance of a bike-friendly community with bike lanes and trails. To that end, in 2009 the Town adopted a comprehensive Bicycle Facilities Master Plan with the worthy goal of receiving a "Bicycle Friendly Community" award from the League of American Bicyclists. In its comprehensive plan, Taos County has stated a goal of adding five miles of bikeways and multi-use pathways each year and including dedicated bike facilities in new roadway projects.

We have already seen some increased notoriety and economic benefit from the investment the Town made in the FIFA-ranked soccer field at the Taos Eco Park. That park has also benefited local youth who practice and play on the field. Investing in a bike-friendly community linking our many recreational and outdoor opportunities would undoubtedly bring similar and greater benefits to our community.

Taos and northern New Mexico have the added attraction of being the most enchanted part of the land of enchantment, a region of unique cultural diversity and cultural history, reflected in our landscape of rural villages and pueblos, *acequias* and productive farmlands. Cultural tourism is a burgeoning interest and New Mexico has a wealth of the kind of cultural resources and authentic experiences people crave. We take our unique history and our rural Native and Indo-Hispano communities for granted, but travelers from elsewhere find it fascinating and romantic and are willing to pay for experiences with real people in real communities. As one example, a recent initiative in the region involves urban dwellers paying significant fees to help with the annual *acequia* cleaning in traditional rural villages, which provides revenue for the local community and *acequia*, validates locals' history and culture, provides invaluable cross-cultural exchange, and revitalizes the *acequia* community. These kinds of pursuits could easily be bundled together

with biking experiences, the way that travelers can bike from inn to inn in Ireland, Scotland, parts of New England, and other places.

A recent article in the *Santa Fe New Mexican* discussed the challenge of attracting younger tourists with our aging baby boom population, saying that “if the city doesn’t attract more young vacationers, Santa Fe’s tourism-dependents economy could suffer in the future.” The very same can be said about Taos. Outdoor and adventure travel are certainly one way to attract younger tourists. Baseline economic indicators for Taos County specific to biking and outdoor recreation are difficult to find, but we can very roughly project the benefit of a targeted investment in trails for biking and other activities in some economic categories, based on up to 60% increases from the case studies above. Taos gross receipts in 2011 were about \$1.8 million for retail sporting goods and \$89 million for accommodations and food services. Outdoor and biking tourism could increase those figures to \$2.9 million and \$142 million, respectively. Similarly, local tax revenue related to those categories could increase from a total of about \$7.2 million to \$11.5 million. The latest figures from the Rough Rider 200 bike ride held in June 2013 in Taos showed over \$33,000 in hotel and food revenues associated with the two-day event.

Many sectors and many people in the community benefit directly and indirectly from enhanced tourism, as well as from direct access to more and better trails. Those benefits include health, jobs, economic growth, and tax revenue. The benefits of trails go further than just health and economy, however, to include the opportunity for local people to learn new skills and gain new experiences, which enriches our lives in intangible but important ways. Trail-based outdoor recreation also encourages the protection of open space and inspiring views, habitat and healthy watersheds, which are values that benefit even the general public who never sets foot on the trails.

All this requires some public investment in trail building, infrastructure, maintenance, and marketing. In every case study presented above, investment in local trails unquestionably has paid off or is paying off for those communities. It is an easy calculation.

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