

Fact Sheet

Working With Trail Opponents

You can take various approaches when working with people who may oppose your rail-trail project. In general, you should always stress the benefits of rail-trails and keep adjacent landowners involved in the process. Here are 10 techniques you may find helpful.

1. **Reach out:** Don't wait for nearby residents to learn about your proposal by reading about it in the newspaper. Talk to them directly, either by traveling door-to-door, circulating an open letter or giving a presentation at a community gathering.
2. **Listen:** Take time to understand why adjacent landowners are opposed to the trail. Many of their concerns stem from fear of the unknown. Listen carefully, address specific concerns and try to arrive at solutions that benefit as many people as possible. While you may think their concerns are unreasonable, to your opponents they are real. Never trivialize opponents concerns.
3. **Find allies:** Within the group of people who live adjacent to the proposed rail-trail, you may find bicyclists, walkers, runners, horseback riders, families with active children or individuals with disabilities—all of whom could be likely trail supporters. Seek out these individuals, explain the trail's benefits and urge them to get involved in supporting the project.
4. **Get involved:** Establish a trail advisory committee and ask adjacent residents to serve along with advocates and user groups. Often, when given a chance to participate in the process, a group of adjacent landowners may be willing to work toward developing solutions.
5. **Enlist converts:** If your group has some travel money, invite an articulate landowner who was once opposed to a rail-trail to come and speak in your community. Hearing the story of how an opponent became a trail advocate can help allay the concerns of future trail neighbors.
6. **Build consensus:** If you are having difficulty building consensus, consider enlisting a third party to identify the concerns of trail opponents and trail supporters. Bring in someone who is respected and trusted by both sides such as the National Park Service's Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program or your state Department of Conservation.
7. **Be positive:** Although it may be difficult at times, do not react in anger to claims made by trail opponents. No matter how unpleasant a discussion becomes, always treat everyone with fairness and sincerity. Be firm, factual and reasonable.
8. **Work hard:** Don't let outspoken opponents side track your project. Identify milder opponents of the project and those individuals who are still undecided. Work hard to address the concerns of these individuals and convert them to be in favor of the trail—they can add to your majority.
9. **Differentiate:** A completed rail-trail is quite different from an abandoned railroad corridor. People who are unhappy with a littered, overgrown, unmanaged corridor should be educated to the fact that a developed rail-trail is managed and maintained, and has permitted uses and trail rules.
10. **Work the media:** Favorable coverage in the media helps defuse the opposition and generate support for your cause. Give your project the best opportunity for positive exposure by supplying TV, radio and newspaper reporters and editors with interesting and accurate factual information.

While trail opposition is one of the more difficult hurdles to overcome during rail-trail development, it need not stall your project. If you take the initiative from the outset to inform potential opponents about the trail project, listen to their concerns and keep them involved in the planning process, you will have a much easier time building strong support and creating a trail for your community.