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MSU completes research on Lansing River Trail

Lansing (November 30, 2004) – This summer, Michigan State University researchers studied users of the Lansing River Trail to provide a current estimate of the number of trail users and profile users by activity, access points, time on the trail, and satisfaction with the trail experience.

Drs. Christine Vogt and Charles Nelson, both professors in the Department of Community, Agriculture, Recreation and Resource Studies, worked with Mid-Michigan Environment Action Council (Mid-MEAC), the City of Lansing Parks and Recreation department, and Rails-to-Trails Conservancy on survey design and methodology prior to a two-month time period when researchers and volunteers intercepted and observed trail users. The project was funded by a grant to Mid-MEAC from the Dick Allen Lansing to Mackinac (DALMAC) bike tour to further positive environmental and quality of life efforts in the Greater Lansing Area.

This was the community's first major effort to learn who uses the Lansing River Trail. Based on over 350 completed surveys and over 140 hours of observing trail users and classifying them into adult, children, bike, walking/running, or in-line skating, the following highlights resulted:

Observation Highlights

- The Lansing River Trail (LRT) had 72,040 estimated uses May 1- Sept. 30, 2004, with 64% on weekdays and 36% on weekends.

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- Adults (18 and over) accounted for 86% of the uses and children for 14%. Of the adult uses, 49% were bicycling, 46% were walking/running and 5% were inline skating. For children, 62% were bicycling, 34% were walking/running and 4% were inline skating.

Use Highlights from Surveys

- Most (56%) LRT uses were by Lansing residents, with 15% by E. Lansing residents and 29% from elsewhere.
- For adults, males accounted for 57% of the uses and females for 43%. One-third (33%) of the adult uses were by people who were 50 and over, 39% were by those 35 to 49 and 28% were by those 18 to 34.
- More than half (55%) of LRT use was done without driving a vehicle to it. Approximately half (48%) of the uses were by people that lived two miles or less from the trail.
- Eighty-four percent of uses were for two hours or less and 93% were rated as satisfactory experiences.

Distinct User Highlights from Surveys

- On average, distinct visitors used the LRT 10 times per year, with about half their uses during June – August.
- Five percent were disabled (had an impairment that seriously limits their participation in work or recreation).
- Thirty-five percent were Lansing residents, 18% East Lansing residents and the rest (48%) lived elsewhere.
- When asked in an open-ended question about the one most important improvement needed for the LRT, the three most common suggestions of distinct users were better maintain/improve trail surface (29%), no suggestion/doing fine (26%) or extend the trail (11%).

The survey was released Saturday, November 20, 2004 at the Heart of Michigan Trail Summit in East Lansing. The event was hosted by Rails-to-Trails Conservancy Michigan Field Office, Tri-County Regional Planning, City of East Lansing, City of Lansing, and Ingham County. There were 100 participants, including elected officials, parks and recreation directors, trails enthusiasts, environmental advocates, bicyclists, and others from at least 23 local governments who received an update on trail systems in Michigan and brainstormed around potential trail connections through Clinton, Eaton, and Ingham Counties to form a regional trail network. “The event brought many local units of government in Mid-Michigan together to discuss future connections to the Lansing River Trail. It established the bigger picture for nonmotorized transportation in the region. The survey solidified our beliefs and suspicions that the Lansing River Trail is one of the most used recreation facilities in the Greater Lansing region.”

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Use and Users of the Lansing River Trail

Introduction

The Lansing River Trail (LRT) is a multiple use, non-motorized trail of seven miles in length. It meanders along the banks of the Red Cedar and Grand Rivers between Michigan State University (MSU) and North Lansing. In addition there is a spur that runs from River Point Park to Moore's River Park following the Grand River upstream for more than a mile. In 2004 the Mid-Michigan Environmental Action Council (Mid MEAC) received a grant from the DALMAC Bike Tour to assess the use and users of the LRT. To accomplish this they contracted with researchers from the Department of Community, Agriculture, Recreation and Resource Studies at MSU. On-site trail use observation, coupled with a self-administered survey of selected trail users, was conducted from July 17 through September 16, 2004 to provide the data for this assessment. The authors thank Gene Townsend and Sharon Goble (Mid MEAC), Murdock Jemerson (City of Lansing), Melissa Lott (survey administrator), Nancy Krupiarz (Michigan Rails-to-Trails) and Bob Ford (Landscape Architects and Planners) for their assistance.

Methods

Trail use was observed at six different points (five segments) on the LRT on systematically selected days and times during the study period. Observation points were Clippert St., Aurelius Rd., Pennsylvania Ave., River Point Park (western spur), Impressions 5 and Turner-Dodge Two trained survey administrators (the junior author and Melissa Lott), often accompanied by Mid MEAC volunteers, were positioned adjacent to the trail. They counted all individuals going one direction, classifying them as adults or children and noting their mode of travel (bicycle, inline skate, foot or other). The authors then extrapolated these observations to estimate use from May-September. At ten-minute intervals during two-hour observation periods, the survey administrator would select the next adult passing and ask him/her to respond to a self-administered one-page questionnaire. The minimum number of surveys distributed was two per observation period and the maximum was 12. During the study period, 495 surveys were distributed, with 354 (72%) completed and returned. Those not responding were most likely to cite a lack of time, training and couldn't stop or already completing a survey and not wanting to do a second.

Survey data provides two important measures. When considering respondents this information provides accurate information about uses, but it is not representative of distinct individual users, as those who visit more frequently are more likely to be sampled and to be asked to complete a survey. However, when the data are weighted to account for this frequent use bias, the characteristics of distinct users/visitors can be appropriately assessed. This report is organized by first describing levels of use based on observations, then characteristics of uses based on unweighted survey data and finally, characteristics of distinct users based on weighted survey data.

Observation Highlights

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- Adults (18 and over) accounted for 86% of the uses and children for 14%. Of the adult uses, 49% were bicycling, 46% were walking/running and 5% were inline skating. For children, 62% were bicycling, 34% were walking/running and 4% were inline skating.

Use Highlights from Surveys

- Most (56%) LRT uses were by Lansing residents, with 15% by E. Lansing residents and 29% from elsewhere.
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- More than half (55%) of LRT use was done without driving a vehicle to it. Approximately half (48%) of the uses were by people that lived two miles or less from the trail.
- Eighty-four percent of uses were for two hours or less and 93% were rated as satisfactory experiences.

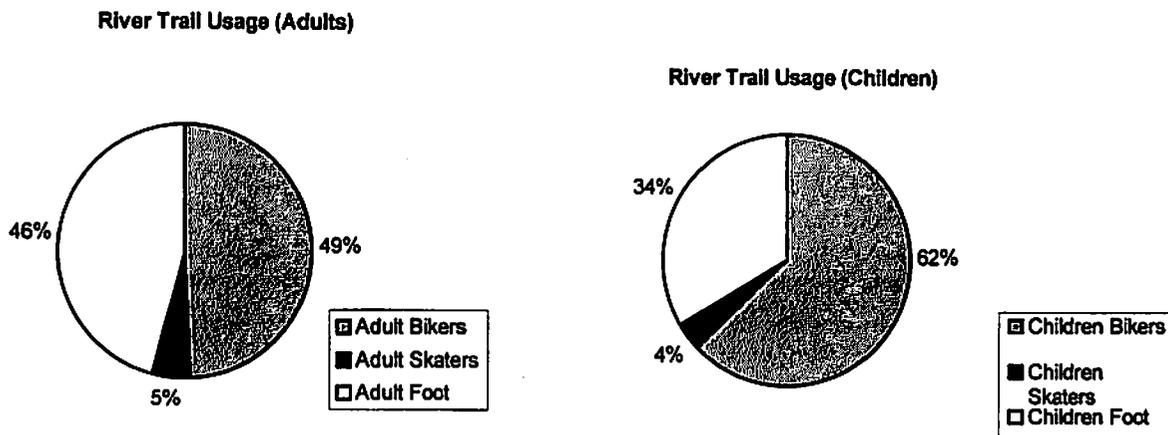
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- On average, distinct visitors used the LRT 10 times per year, with about half their uses during June – August.
- Five percent were disabled (had an impairment that seriously limits their participation in work or recreation).
- Thirty-five percent were Lansing residents, 18% East Lansing residents and the rest (48%) lived elsewhere.
- When asked in an open-ended question about the one most important improvement needed for the LRT, the three most common suggestions of distinct users were better maintain/improve trail surface (29%), no suggestion/doing fine (26%) or extend the trail (11%).

Trail Use Estimate and Characteristics

LRT Use Estimate

Adding the use estimated for each segment based on observations provides a total estimate of 187,305 uses from May 1st through September 30th, 2004. However, based on survey data, the typical use involved 2.6 segments of the five segments. Hence, this use of multiple segments (2.6) is divided into the total estimate (187,305) providing a more conservative and realistic estimate of 72,040. Of those 46,298 were weekday uses and 25,742 were weekend uses. Adults (18 and over) accounted for 86% of the uses and children for 14%. Figure one shows that bicycling was the most common trail use for adults and children.



Purpose of LRT Use and Trail Access

Survey data suggest the primary purpose of most LRT uses was either for normal exercise (44%) or recreation (36%). Training level exercise accounted for 12% of uses and 8% had a primary purpose of transportation to work, school, or other locations. The vast majority (93%) of LRT uses were rated satisfactory by the participants (6-9 on a scale of 1-9 with "9" being highly satisfied and "1" being highly dissatisfied), with 57% being rated "9" and 23% "8." Three percent of uses were rated as neutral ("5") and 4% as being unsatisfactory ("1-4").

Slightly more than half (54%) of LRT uses were by those who did not drive a vehicle to reach the trail. While more than half (60%) lived three miles or less from the trail, many who work in Lansing or East Lansing and commute used the trail during their work day. Hence distance of one's residence from the trail is not an especially valuable statistic as it would be in a more rural or bedroom community environment. As one would expect with an urban trail, numerous points were used for access points. Some of the most common were Kalamazoo/Clippert Street area, Moore's River Park, Hazel Street, the MSU campus, Pennsylvania Avenue in the Potter Park area, the Turner/Dodge House and the Michigan Avenue area near the Lansing Center and Museum Drive. Almost half (47%) the LRT uses were for one hour or less and over four-fifths (84%) were for two hours or less.

Most (58%) of the use was by solo trail participants. For all parties (solo and group), the average number of members was 1.6. Few parties (10%) contained children. Of the children uses, 56% were by males and 44% were by females. Parties that included children typically had one or two children. For adult uses, males accounted for 57% and females for 43%. One-third (33%) of the adult uses were by those who were 50 and over, 39% were by those 35 to 49 and 28% were by those 18 to 34. Six percent of uses were by those defined as disabled under the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act.

Tourist Data

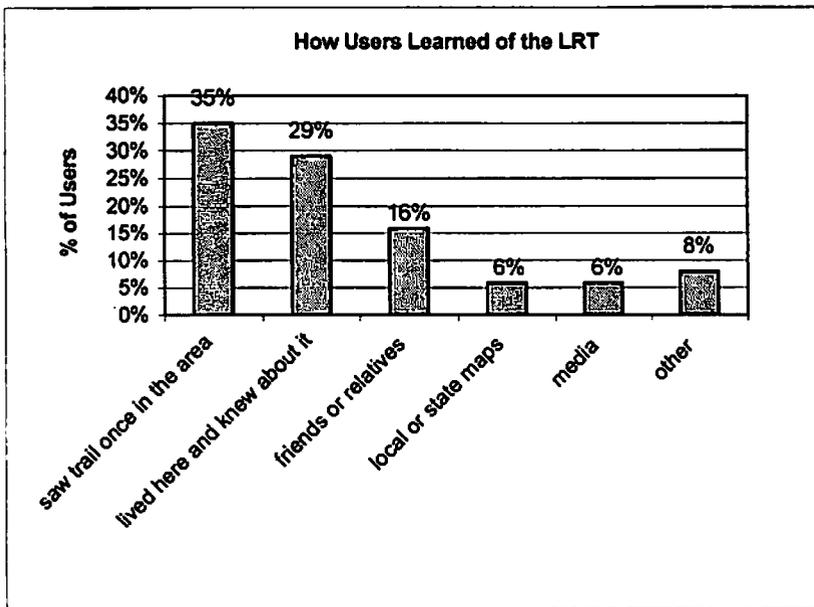
Tourist uses, use by those who do not live or work in Lansing or East Lansing, accounted for 15% of the LRT uses. Tourist uses were more likely to be for recreation (50% vs. 36%) and less likely to be for normal exercise (38% vs. 44%), training level exercise (8% vs. 12%) or transportation (4% vs. 8%) than all uses. Tourist use was most likely to occur on the eastern half of the LRT from the MSU campus to the Potter Park Zoo. Seventy-six

percent of tourist uses involved a vehicle driven to the trail. Eighty-four percent of tourist uses were rated as satisfactory, 8% as neutral and 8% as unsatisfactory. Adult tourist uses were primarily by males (67%) and 57% were by a user 50 or more years of age. Thirteen percent of tourist uses involved eating in a restaurant during their trail use and 6% included shopping during their trail use. The majority (59%) of those citing a primary reason for their LRT visit noted bicycling, 36% walking/running, 2% in-line skating and 2% shopping.

An additional postage paid postcard questionnaire was distributed to all those who completed a survey and were identified as tourists. Of the 53 provided a postcard, 36 (68%) completed the additional questionnaire and returned it by mail. Of these tourist respondents, 71% were from Michigan and 29% resided elsewhere. When asked if the main purpose of their visit was the LRT, 45% responded yes. This suggests that approximately 7% of all LRT uses are by tourists who primarily visit Lansing to use the LRT. Of the tourists surveyed who visited Lansing primarily to use the LRT, 21% stayed overnight in Lansing and 79% were on day visits. While in the Lansing area, none spent money on lodging (stayed with friends/relatives). However, 77% purchased restaurant food/drink, 31% on groceries, 46% on their vehicle, 31% on recreation related items and 8% on all other items.

Distinct Trail User Characteristics

Source of Discovery of the LRT



The largest proportion (35%) of distinct trail users first learned of the LRT by seeing the trail once they were in the area. Another 29% lived here and knew about it. Sixteen percent users learned of the trail by word of mouth from friends or relatives. The remainder of users surveyed learned of the trail from local or state maps (6%), media (6%), or by a variety of other means (8%) including the internet, tourism literature about the greater Lansing area, fellow employees at work and bicycle salespersons.

Distinct LRT Users' Trail Activities during the Past Twelve Months

Of those who had previously used the trail, the average use the previous 12 months was 10 uses with almost half occurring during June – August. Recreation was the most common motivation for distinct trail users (59%), followed by normal exercise (35%), training level exercise (3%) and transportation (3%).

Distinct User Suggestions for LRT Improvement

Users were asked in an open-ended format to suggest one most important improvement to the LRT. Suggestions noted by 4% or more of distinct users were: better maintain/improve trail surface (29%), no suggestion/doing fine (26%), extend the trail (11%), better maintain/clean facilities/resources other than trail surface (9%), better trailside maps/signs (7%), more drinking fountains (6%), more security patrol/lighting (4%) and all other suggestions combined (10%).

Distinct User Suggestions for LRT Extension

When asked if they had specific suggestions on where they would prefer the LRT be extended, 59% provided a suggestion. Of those providing a suggestion, 29% supported extension in a southerly direction (including linking

to Hawk Island County Park), 17% suggested northward extension, including past Turner-Dodge and into North Lansing, 10% recommended an easterly extension including through the MSU campus and to Lake Lansing and 11% suggested a westward extension including links to the Waverly area and even to Grand Ledge. Another 6% supported extension in any direction. Finally, 16% had a variety of other suggested directions that were too difficult to categorize, 8% did not want to see any trail expansion and 2% responded that they had no specific idea.

Distinct Tourist Users

Tourists first learned of the LRT primarily through seeing the trail once in the area (49%), friends or relatives (18%) or living in the greater Lansing area and knowing about it (13%). Other sources of first knowledge of the LRT were the internet (8%), maps (6%), the media (4%) and all other sources (2%).

Management Implications of the Study

The LRT serves residents, workers and visitors to the Lansing/E. Lansing community. On an average daily basis the trail receives 471 uses from May – September. Of those users, 7% are tourists that make a specific trip to Lansing to use the LRT, with most spending money in Lansing at one or more of the following: restaurants, filling stations, convenience stores, sporting goods outlets, etc.

In total, most trail users are highly satisfied, but some key sources of dissatisfaction have been identified and many suggestions for improvement made by respondents. The greatest source of dissatisfaction is the LRT's uneven surface. This can influence enjoyment and safety. It is related to both paving and the boardwalk system. One reflection of this is the low proportion of trail uses involving inline skating compared to similar paved trail studies elsewhere in Michigan such as the Pere Marquette Rail-Trail in Midland County. Fortunately resurfacing is underway on both the boardwalk portions and on the eastern paved sections. Such work should focus on providing a high quality, long lasting surface. Trail surface maintenance procedures should be reviewed to maximize the useful life of the new surface.

Trail users also advocate extending the LRT. This is also in progress to the south, extending the LRT to Hawk Island County Park and Scott Woods City Park. There is support for additional extensions to the north, west and east. Linking with other jurisdictions including townships, county and other municipalities will enhance the prospects for trail extension as will working with interested citizens and organizations.

Many users support improved maintenance of trailside vegetation, trash, litter, river shorelines, etc. With 72,040 visits annually and 15% of those by tourists, the LRT and its trailside environs are key assets of the Capitol City area. Their condition reflects on the perceptions of residents, workers and visitors about the region's condition.

Improved signage, more drinking fountains and improved security, while noted by fewer people than the above mentioned concerns also merit consideration. While signs or maps for regular resident users showing directions, distance and "you are here" may be unneeded, such visible information is important to help a first visit by a tourist, new resident or new worker be an enjoyable one. Additional drinking fountains provide a valued service, allowing trail users to be less burdened with gear and promoting good health. All trail users need a sense of security about the LRT. While the trail does not appear to be perceived as dangerous as evidenced by 33% of adult uses by those over 50, security is best based on prevention and a visible security presence, not solely on response after a criminal incident. This includes appropriate lighting, trail visibility from easily patrolled streets, uniformed officers visible on the trail at unpredictable times and clearly identified volunteer safety patrol personnel trained to be "eyes and ears".

Conclusion

The LRT is a prominent and valued asset of Lansing. Its already high standing in the community can be enhanced and strengthened by listening to this representative cross-section of trail users and prudently acting on their suggestions.