



michigan

trails 2050



VISION
2050

Note from MTGA Executive Director

Dear Trail Friends,

Michigan is a state stitched together by trails, pathways that link water to woods, and people to place. From the sandy shores of the Great Lakes to the greenways that wind through our cities and neighborhoods, trails connect the landscapes and lives that define us. With one of the most extensive and diverse trail networks in the nation, Michigan's trails are more than recreation, they are essential infrastructure that supports health, community, and connection for generations to come.

As a trail user myself, I know the difference they make in our quality of life. For some, trails provide a safe way to commute to work or pick up their kids from school. For others, they are spaces for physical activity, moments of respite, or a chance to reconnect with nature. Trails invite us to explore new places, strengthen community ties, and enjoy the simple delight of being outdoors. They are everyday infrastructure for healthier, happier lives. Over the past year, thousands of voices from every corner of Michigan joined us to dream big about the next 25 years. Your stories, insights, and ideas shaped this plan—our shared blueprint for trails through 2050.

This vision is about more than miles of pavement or packed dirt. It's about healthier communities, thriving local economies, protected landscapes, and ensuring that every Michigander, no matter their age, ability, or zip code, can safely and joyfully access the outdoors.

Together, we are building a legacy of connection, conservation, and opportunity. Thank you for walking this path with us. The trail ahead belongs to all of us.



**With gratitude,
Andrea LaFontaine
Executive Director
Michigan Trails & Greenways Alliance**

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With **Gratitude**

The MI Trails 2050 vision was made possible through the voices, energy, and commitment of trail users, advocates, and community leaders across Michigan.

Steering Committee

Erica Briggs* Rails to Trails Conservancy

Brad Garmon* Michigan Outdoor Recreation Industry Office (MEDC)

Tim Novak* Michigan Department of Natural Resources

Stacy Bare Friends of Grand Rapids Parks

Brent Bolin Top of Michigan Trails Council

Susan Estler Travel Marquette

Marcy Hamilton Southwest Michigan Planning Commission

Leona Medley Joe Louis Greenways Partnership

Michael Smith Michigan Department of Transportation / TAP

Kristen Thrall US Forest Service

Tyler Klifman Southeast Michigan Council of Governments (SEMCOG)

Peaches McCahill The McCahill Group

Chris McInnes Crystal Mountain, MI Natural Resources Trust Fund Board & Michigan Trail Fund

Elizabeth Iszler Wayne County Parks

** Founding Steering Committee Member*

Community Voices

Trail users, organizations, community leaders, elected officials, advocates, and outdoor enthusiasts contributed through summits, surveys, and conversations. Their insights built this blueprint for the future of trails.

Partners & Supporters

5 Healthy Towns Foundation
Anderson, Eckstein & Westrick (AEW)
Battle Creek Unlimited
Charlevoix Township
Charter Township of Garfield
Cherry Capital Cycling Club
Chesterfield Township
Chippewa Watershed Conservancy
Chocoday Township
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Friends of Grand Rapids Parks
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Friends of Rouge Park/Black to the Land Coalition
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Fresh Systems LLC
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Grand Traverse Safe Streets Alliance
Great Lakes Four Wheel Drive Association & ORVAW
Headwaters Land Conservancy
Headwaters Trails Inc.
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Ingham County
Ironfish Distillery
Iron Ore Heritage Recreation Authority
Isabella County Parks
ITC Holdings Corp.
Jay's Sporting Goods
Joe Louis Greenway Partnership
Kent County Parks
Kent County Parks Foundation
Land Conservancy of West Michigan
League of Michigan Bicyclists
Little Traverse Conservancy
Manistee County Community Foundation
Manistee County Planning Department

Marquette Charter Township
Marquette Mountain Resort
MDNR (Michigan Department of Natural Resources)
MDOT (Michigan Department of Transportation)
MDOT – Metro Region
MHEF (Michigan Health Endowment Fund)
MI Outdoor Recreation Office / MEDC
Michigan Horse Trails Association
Michigan Trails Advisory Council
Middle Michigan Development Corp.
NEMCOG (Northeast Michigan Council of Governments)
Newaygo County Tourism Council
North Country Trail Association
Peaches – Michigan Trail Fund Putnam Township
Rails-to-Trails Conservancy
Saginaw County Parks
SEMCOG (Southeast Michigan Council of Governments)
Shiawassee River Water Trail Coalition
Stantec
TART Trails, Inc.
Top of Michigan Trails Council
Travel Marquette
West Michigan Trails



Executive Summary

Imagine a Michigan where every person, in every community, can be outside their door and within minutes be on a trail—whether that’s a neighborhood greenway, a rail-trail, or a paddling route along one of our 12 state-designated water trails. Trails connect us to neighbors, businesses, schools, health, and the natural beauty that defines our state.

By 2050, Michigan will not only be known as the Trails State—it will be recognized nationally as the place where trails of all types, on land and water, transform everyday life.

That is the vision of MI Trails 2050: to create a world-class network of trails that is safe, connected, and welcoming for all.

This bold vision is rooted in the voices of thousands of Michiganders who joined us through five regional summits, surveys, and community conversations. Together, they told us that trails are not a luxury, but essential infrastructure, supporting healthier people, stronger economies, more resilient landscapes, and greater opportunities for all.

Trails are part of our everyday lives. They provide safe routes to commute to work or school, a place to exercise or find respite, and opportunities to connect with nature close to home. They invite exploration of new places, support vibrant local economies, and give people across Michigan, from small towns to big cities, a shared sense of belonging.

What We Heard:

- **Health & Wellness:** Embrace trails as preventative health infrastructure, reducing barriers to active living.
- **Stewardship & Conservation:** Protect and enhance the natural resources that define our state while expanding responsible access.
- **Economic Development:** Recognize trails as engines for tourism, small businesses, and talent attraction and retention.
- **Access & Opportunity:** Ensure trails are safe, inclusive, and within reach for every Michigander and visitor.

Key Takeaways:

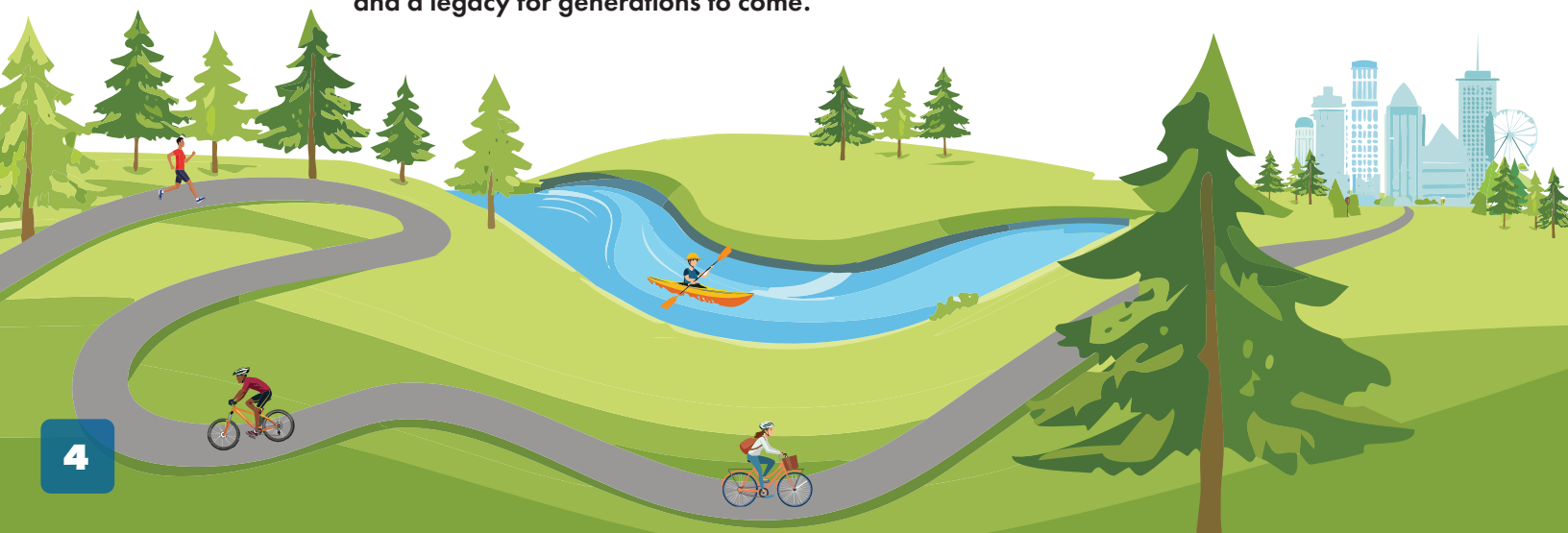
Trails are everyday infrastructure that enhance quality of life.

Communities want sustainable funding and maintenance solutions.

Safe, welcoming spaces and trail etiquette are critical for all users.

Collaboration is essential, no single sector can do this alone.

The MI Trails 2050 Plan is not an endpoint—it is a starting point. It provides a shared blueprint to guide decisions, funding, and partnerships for the next 25 years, ensuring that trails remain a defining strength of Michigan and a legacy for generations to come.



Intro to the Plan & Process

Step One

Listening Regional Summits & Online Engagement

The journey began by listening. Over six Regional Summits and an online engagement campaign, hundreds of community members, planners, and trail advocates shared what trails mean to them and what Michigan's future should look like. These conversations captured local stories, regional challenges, and big ideas, from connecting trail gaps and improving maintenance, to ensuring every resident, regardless of zip code or ability, can safely access the outdoors.



Step Two

Analyzing Identifying Themes & Priorities

From thousands of data points and community insights, clear themes emerged—each pointing to the deep connection between trails, people, and place.

Four statewide priorities define the path forward:

- **Health & Wellness**
Trails as everyday health infrastructure.
- **Stewardship & Conservation**
Protecting Michigan's lands and waters through sustainable design.
- **Economic Development**
Fueling small-town economies, tourism, and workforce attraction.
- **Access & Opportunity**
Ensuring trails are safe, inclusive, and welcoming for all.

This analysis distilled diverse regional feedback into a unifying, data-driven framework for the next 25 years.

Step Three

Planning Creating a Shared Vision for 2050

The final step transformed community voices and statewide data into action. The MI Trails 2050 Plan is a shared blueprint for a future where every Michigander can step outside and connect to a trail that leads to opportunity, health, and belonging. It identifies strategies for collaboration, funding, and design, empowering communities to bring the vision to life. This is not the end of the process, but the beginning of a movement toward a more connected, resilient, and active Michigan.

What We Mean by "Trails"

When we say **trails**, we mean more than a single type of path. Michigan's trail network includes many kinds of routes that connect people to the outdoors and to one another:

- **Trails** – Shared-use routes for walking, running, biking or rolling, found in both urban and rural settings.
- **Greenways** - Linear open spaces that link parks, neighborhoods, and natural areas—often along rivers, rail corridors, or utility lines.
- **Paths** - Local connectors and community routes that link homes, schools, and downtowns to larger trail systems.
- **Water Trails** - Designated paddling routes on rivers, lakes, and shorelines that provide access points, wayfinding, and safe exploration of Michigan's waterways.

Together, these systems form Michigan's connected network of outdoor access - linking people, places, and possibilities.



What We Heard:

Trails are essential to everyday quality of life.

Across every region, participants emphasized that trails are not just recreation—they are everyday infrastructure. Residents use trails to commute to work, walk their dogs, connect with neighbors, or find a moment of quiet in nature. In Marquette, one participant shared that trails “bring balance to our days and keep our community healthy year-round.” In Detroit, others spoke about how greenways “give kids and families safe spaces to be active close to home.” From rural gravel paths to urban corridors, trails are viewed as a core part of what makes Michigan livable.



Communities want equitable access and sustainable funding.

Equity and sustainability surfaced in nearly every summit. Participants noted that some neighborhoods, particularly in rural or lower-income areas, lack safe or connected trail access. In Gaylord, one stakeholder noted, “We have incredible trails nearby, but not everyone can get to them.” Others expressed concern about maintaining the trails we already have, urging stable funding for maintenance, accessibility improvements, and local staffing capacity. Common themes included the need for consistent state investment, flexible grant programs, and partnerships that ensure all Michiganders can benefit from the state’s trail network—regardless of geography or income.



Collaboration is key to achieving the vision.

Trail advocates, business leaders, planners, and public health professionals agreed: no single organization can build this vision alone. In Mt. Pleasant, attendees described the need for a “trail coalition that connects planners, health departments, and tourism bureaus,” while West Michigan participants highlighted the power of shared branding and joint marketing to strengthen local economies. Many called for stronger regional partnerships - between land conservancies, MDNR, tribes, and local trail councils - to align resources and accelerate progress. The message was clear: collaboration isn’t optional; it’s the foundation for success.

Statewide Themes:



Health & Wellness



Stewardship & Conservation



Economic Development



Access & Opportunity



Health & Wellness

Trails are medicine—free, accessible, and available every day.

Trails—whether on land or water—are essential to Michigan’s collective well-being. Communities emphasized that water trails provide unique avenues for physical activity, mental health benefits, and community connection.

What We Heard:

- Trails are safe, welcoming spaces for movement, connection, and play - however you travel.
- People want trails integrated with health systems and wellness programs.
- Social connection is as valuable as physical health.

Looking Forward:

- Partner with hospitals, insurers, and schools to prescribe and promote trail use.
- Prioritize under-served neighborhoods for equitable health access.
- Design trails for multi-generational use: from kids to seniors.





Stewardship & Conservation

If trails are the threads that connect us, stewardship is the fabric that holds Michigan together.

Every mile of trail is an invitation to experience our forests, waters, communities and landscapes. With that comes responsibility: to protect what makes Michigan extraordinary, even as we expand access.

What We Heard:

- Trails should be built sustainably, protecting sensitive lands and waters.
- Users want education on “leave no trace” and stewardship.
- Climate resilience is a growing concern—design trails for the future.

Looking Forward:

- Integrate conservation best practices in all new trail projects.
- Partner with land conservancies, tribes, and local trail advocates and users.
- Celebrate trails as gateways to conservation education.

What We Mean by “Stewardship”

Stewardship means caring for the places that care for us.

In the context of trails, stewardship is about building, maintaining, and using trails in ways that protect Michigan’s lands and waters for generations to come. It includes thoughtful design that minimizes environmental impact, regular maintenance that keeps trails safe and resilient, and a shared commitment among users to “leave no trace.” Every trail user, volunteer, and partner plays a role in sustaining the beauty and integrity of Michigan’s natural spaces.





Economic Development

Trails are not just paths through our communities— they are pathways to prosperity.

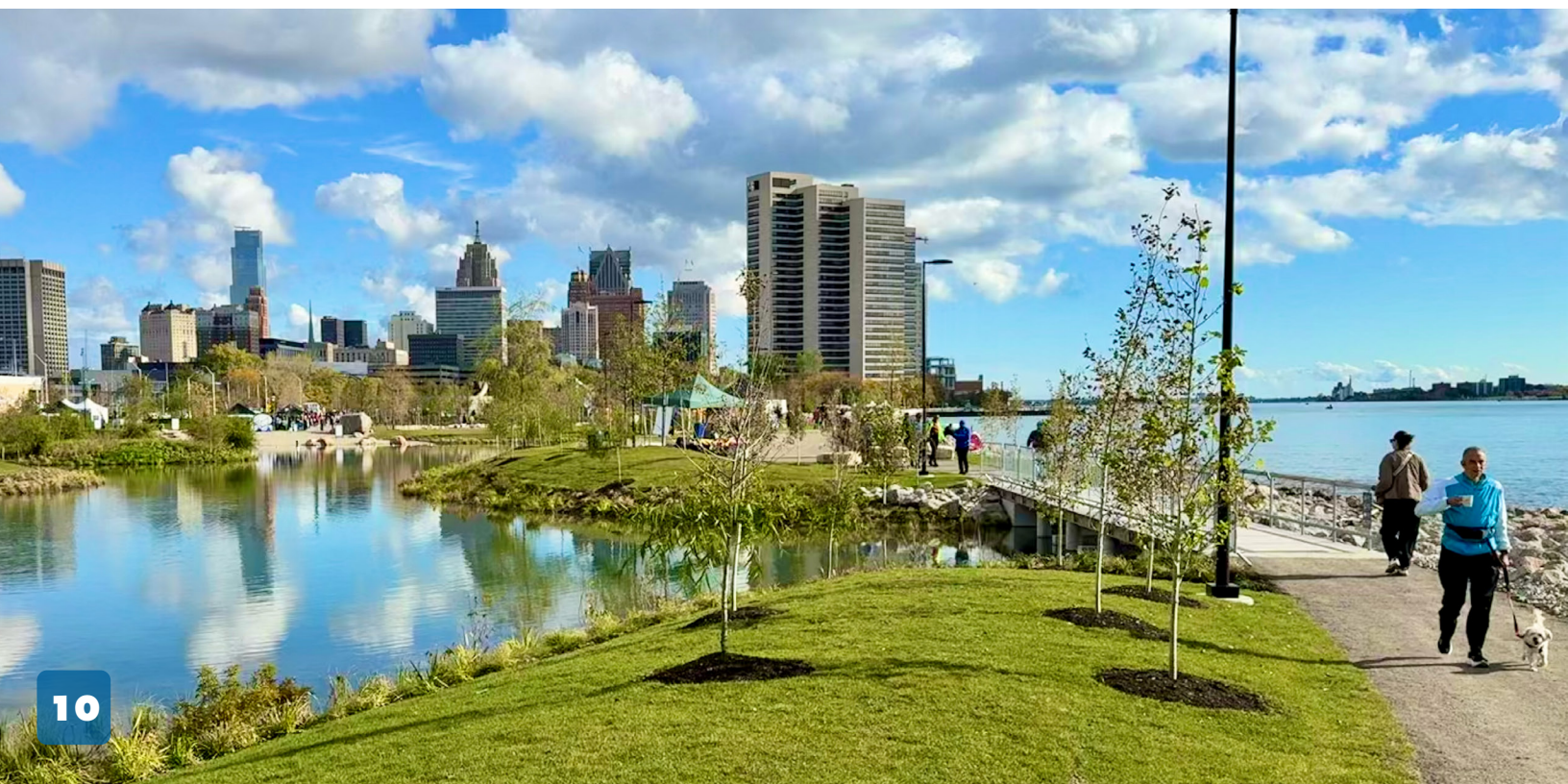
From small-town cafés and bike shops to downtown businesses and tourism economies, trails fuel growth. They attract visitors, support entrepreneurs, connect people to their community and to each other, and make Michigan an irresistible place to live and work.

What We Heard:

- Trails are key to attracting new residents and workforce talent.
- Businesses see direct impacts from nearby trail systems.
- Communities need help marketing and leveraging trail assets.

Looking Forward:

- Strengthen partnerships between trails, tourism, and business development groups.
- Invest in signature trails that draw national visitors.
- Support rural towns in using trails to revitalize downtowns.



Access & Opportunity

Trails belong to everyone, everywhere, every day.

They should welcome all ages, abilities, and backgrounds.

Access isn't just about location—it's about safety, inclusivity, and ensuring every Michigander can find their place on the trail.

What We Heard:

- Desire for ADA-compliant and universally designed trails.
- Trailheads should be connected to transit and neighborhoods.
- Civility matters—people want safe, respectful spaces.

Looking Forward:

- Prioritize under-served communities in new trail investments.
- Provide accessible amenities at trailheads (bathrooms, benches, maps).
- Launch statewide etiquette campaigns to promote civility.



Regional Visions



Central



Where trails connect university communities, river corridors, and small towns, supporting daily transportation, student life, regional identity, and access to nature.

Priorities: strengthen campus-downtown connections; expand river & water trail access; close key rural gaps.



“Trails are becoming part of Central Michigan’s identity, serving daily life while inviting people to explore the region.”

Northwest



Where trails link small towns to forests, vineyards and Lake Michigan, creating a model region for year-round outdoor recreation.

Priorities: strengthen corridor connections, invest in four-season amenities, build local maintenance capacity.



“Our trails aren’t just for visitors, they’re the heartbeat of our community.”

Northeast



Trails here are lifelines, connecting people, water, and resilient landscapes.

Priorities: expand trail-to-water connections, link rural towns, integrate climate resilience.



“In Northeast Michigan, trails connect our small towns and bring people together.”



Southeast



In Michigan's largest metro, trails are essential transportation and vital green space.

Priorities: equity-focused investments, Iron Belle connections, safety/civility campaigns.



"This summit showed how trails can advance equity, mobility, and quality of life, together."



Southwest



Trails are the threads weaving together lakeshore, farmland, and culture.

Priorities: close gaps in long-distance corridors, enhance wayfinding/marketing, connect to agritourism.



"Bringing diverse partners together helped us see how trails power both place and economy."

Upper Peninsula



Here, trails are highways to adventure, culture, and connection across vast wilderness.

Priorities: improve regional connectivity, invest in four-season infrastructure, highlight Indigenous voices.



"This summit affirmed that collaboration is our strongest trail-building tool."



Together, these summits turned local voices into a statewide blueprint.

MI Trails 2050: A Vision for Every Community

Imagine a Michigan where every person, in every community, can step outside their door and within minutes be on a trail.

A trail that connects them to their neighbors, their local businesses, their schools, their health, and the natural beauty that defines our state.

Our Four Pillars



Health & Wellness

Trails are medicine, supporting active living, mental health, and social connection.



Stewardship & Conservation

Protecting Michigan's lands and waters while expanding responsible access.



Economic Development

Trails fuel local businesses, drive tourism, and support talent attraction and retention. They also create trail-related jobs and inspire new businesses to start or relocate to trail-connected communities.



Access & Opportunity

Safe, inclusive, and welcoming trails for people of all ages, abilities, and backgrounds.

Impact At A Glance

13,400⁺ miles

of non-motorized trails statewide

\$26 Billion

70%
use trails
for health
and wellness

OUTDOOR RECREATION ECONOMY **IN MICHIGAN**

500⁺ voices



across every region

shaped the MI Trails 2050 vision

Powered by People Like You

Together, we can create a Michigan where every trail connects people, places, and possibilities.

Endorsements & Sign-ons

Thanks to the MI Trails 2050 sponsors... this effort wouldn't be possible without their financial support:



MICHIGAN ECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION

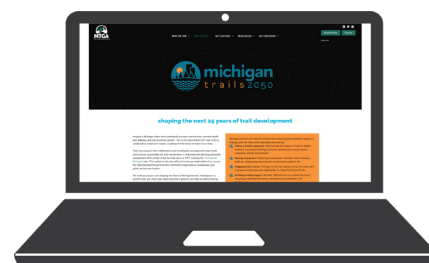


Printing and publication of the MI Trails 2050 plan were made possible through the support of ITC. We are grateful for their continued legacy of investing in trail projects and outdoor recreation across Michigan.

Appendix & Resources

Additional Resources Available Online

Scan the code to access the digital report, explore use recommendations, and find helpful resources to begin your 2050 journey.



The Trail Ahead

Michigan's trails are more than pathways, they are lifelines for our communities. They help us get to work or school, give us a place to exercise or recharge, and connect us to the outdoors and to one another. They are everyday infrastructure that makes life in Michigan healthier, more vibrant, and more connected.

The MI Trails 2050 Plan is a collective vision shaped by thousands of voices from across the state. It reminds us that trails are not just for recreation, but for resilience, opportunity, and quality of life. By investing in trails today, we are building a Michigan where every resident can safely and joyfully access the outdoors tomorrow.

The trail ahead will require collaboration, creativity, and commitment. Together, we can ensure that trails continue to define Michigan, not only as part of our landscape, but as part of who we are as Michiganders.

The trail ahead belongs to all of us.



MICHIGAN TRAILS & GREENWAYS ALLIANCE

For over 20 years, the **Michigan Trails & Greenways Alliance** has been your voice for Michigan's trails, leading collaboration, advocacy, and innovation to build a connected trail network that supports healthier people, stronger communities, and a more vibrant Michigan. MTGA believes trails are more than recreation, they are pathways to opportunity and quality of life.

MI Trails 2050 is just the beginning.

Join our movement and help shape the trail ahead at www.michigantrails.org

Michigan Trails & Greenways Alliance
503 Mall Court, Box 282
Lansing, MI 48912

info@michigantrails.org