

# Voices&Commentary



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## Iowa View

# Fund trails to boost health, economy

What single choice for improving the nation's infrastructure can create jobs, foster economic development, improve safety and health, reduce traffic congestion and air pollution and increase property values?

Iowa could provide all these benefits and more by increasing the proportion of transportation dollars we allocate for pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure. Instead — despite this year's influx of federal stimulus funds for transportation — the state is poised to reduce the already small level of trail-related funding.

Backing away from our commitment to active transportation now would be a mistake. Green infrastructure, including trails, can improve our economic and physical health. Investment in pedestrian and bicycle facilities is a cost-effective way to meet a portion of our transportation needs and help us weather the next hike in gas prices. At the same time, it helps address regional and global problems, — such as oil dependence, pollution, climate change and the



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obesity epidemic — that have been exacerbated by single-minded transportation policies.

Trail-related expenditures could uniquely benefit Iowa, which has a reputation nationally as a leader in trail development in addition to being known as a bicycling destination through RAGBRAI.

As stated in a Register article as far back as the early 1990s: "California has beaches, Colorado has mountains, the South has warm winters. Iowa needs some things that shout to the nation 'This is a great place to live!' The (amenities) have to be real. Trails are real."

Across the state, the network of trails is starting to create regional systems that can be practical, safe and convenient.

Many projects are under way, just waiting for small funding boosts to link the segments and improve the local connections to roads and city streets. The investments would serve our diverse population and attract new residents and visitors.

Only 3 percent of the federal economic-stimulus money for Iowa's transportation infrastructure is mandated for "enhancements." This is substantially less than the normal funding share required for this category of projects, which includes trails, on-street bicycle and pedestrian accommodations and highway beautification. The current funding level would cover only a small portion of the nearly \$100 million in pending trail projects. Meanwhile, this year's state budget proposal could completely eliminate the existing State Recreational Trails Fund. At \$2 million to \$3 million annually, that trails fund was already far from meeting the requests from cities and counties.

Given the high demand and the varied benefits, the Iowa

## Learn more

For information on the benefits of trails and nonmotorized transportation options, visit [www.inhf.org/policy/trails.htm](http://www.inhf.org/policy/trails.htm).

Department of Transportation needs to consider an investment in trails greater than the 3 percent requirement. And the Legislature needs to save the State Recreational Trails program.

The Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation has advocated for trails since its inception 30 years ago. We're proud to have helped initiate many of the state's trails and to witness their rapidly growing popularity as a means for Iowans of all ages, abilities and backgrounds to enjoy the outdoors and improve their physical and mental health.

Iowans' affection for trails is also smart policy. In a new report, "Active Transportation for America: The Case for Increased Federal Investment in Bicycling and Walking," the Rails-to-Trails

Conservancy and the Bikes Belong Coalition cite multiple studies demonstrating the benefits of bicycle and pedestrian facilities. The report also shows how excessive automobile dependency can hinder economic development and reduce public safety.

Nationally, about half of all trips occur within a 20-minute bike ride, and a quarter of trips are within a 20-minute walk. Americans use our cars to take most of these short trips. Taking even a small portion of these trips propelled by our own energy would yield significant individual and community benefits. But first we must make non-car travel more safe and convenient.

In growing numbers, Iowans and other Americans are clamoring for transportation options that are healthy, safe, clean and economically efficient. This is one of those times in history when great challenges converge with great opportunities. We can create inviting pathways to a better future. Let's not lose our sense of direction.

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# Devote efforts

