

COUNTY PARKS DEPARTMENTS: ENDURING THE TRIALS OF ADDING BIKE, HIKE TRAILS

by **Charlie Ban**
senior writer

Trail systems routinely rank as one of the top amenities in surveys about the quality of life in different communities, but while they may seem a world apart from the congested roadways and for all their bucolic tranquility, trails are anything but simple.

Rush hour on the roads? Some cyclists pedal furiously to make it home before the trail closes at sunset. Road rage between drivers of a sedan and an SUV? Imagine a walker passing too close to an electric bike cyclist, particularly if that walker is listening to headphones and has no idea anyone is approaching. Even the development of trail systems is complicated by trying to fit them into an existing built environment.

Trail traffic patterns have recently changed. Jonathan Vlaming, associate superintendent for the Three Rivers Park District, a special taxing district in Hennepin County, Minn., noticed it after the pandemic reshuffled work locations for many residents. Vlaming is a member of the NACo and National Association of County Parks and Recreation Officers (NACPRO) boards of directors.

“The actual trips for transportation purposes on our trail networks have decreased in length,” he said. “People aren’t biking downtown as much anymore, however, they’re still biking and they’re still using the trails for transportation purposes. It’s just that now, if they’re working from home, they’re going out to lunch, they’re biking to a park, they are biking to friends’ houses. All the other aspects of transportation other than commuting have seen significant jumps.”

In 2004, the district’s studies showed that 5% of trail use was for transportation purposes, a number that has increased to 33% in recent years.

“We also found out that people are willing to take a longer more circuitous route if it’s pleasant,” Vlaming said. “It’s not just about getting from point A to point B. It’s the journey in between A and B, they want to hit up population centers, they want to hit up retail service centers, government centers, amenities, parks and pubs.”

One challenge inherent in trail networks is the patchwork of localities which they cross, particularly because those trails include paths separate from roadways, side paths, sidewalks, bike



Cyclists use a trail in East Baton Rouge Parish, La. Photo courtesy of Recreation and Parks Commission for East Baton Rouge Parish

lanes and shared road lanes. Because most trails are located on parkland, they fall under the jurisdiction of park districts or like Vlaming’s organization, a special taxing district. That organization limits the sharing of equipment and expertise that is typically the realm of county public works departments.

Recognizing the high use of trails in a very dense urban county, Arlington

County, Va.’s Parks and Recreation Department purchased snow removal equipment and sends three-person crews out to clear trails simultaneously with the county’s public works department getting to work on main roads.

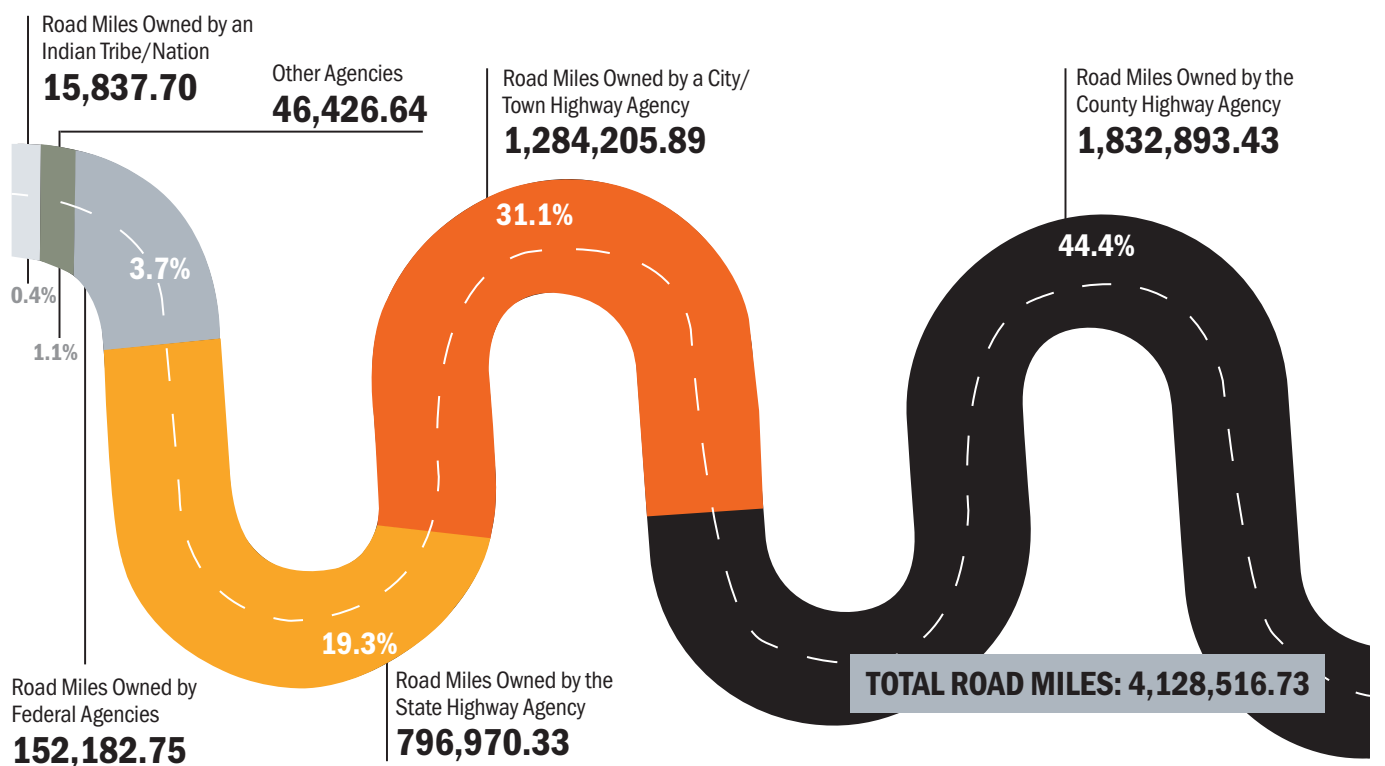
Nearly half of the trails in Lake County, Ill. are located in the county’s Forest Preserve, which grew in parallel with the county, so most residential areas are

well connected. Those trails, however, are closed to the public after dark because they lack lighting.

“We don’t have the resources to have lighted trails throughout our entire system and of course, lighted trails are not that great for wildlife,” said Rebekah Snyder, director of Community Engage-

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County Roadway Statistics



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ment and Partnerships for the forest preserve.

The accelerating adoption of electric and motor-aided bicycles has added a wrinkle to regulations guiding trail use. The addition or clarification of speed limits on trails regarding e-bikes opens up the question of enforcement and highlights the potential for conflict with non-e-bike users. King County, Wash. recently allowed e-bikes and scooters on its trails, joining several other counties.

“I know that regulating e-bike use has been kind of a headache, but in the end, it’s expanding the number of people who are on the trails, which means reducing the people on the roads, which in the end, makes people pretty happy,” Vlaming said.

Trails as an afterthought

After several pedestrian and cyclist deaths, the Federal Highway Administration identified Baton Rouge, La. as a “focus city.” In the 2000s, East Baton Rouge Parish began developing a bike and pedestrian master plan, led by the Recreation and Parks Commission for East Baton Rouge Parish, where Reed Richard is assistant superintendent for system planning.



“We don’t have any defunct railroads, so we’ve had to concentrate our trails on drainage easements and creeks,” he said.

It’s a compromise to the heavy auto-oriented development that led the way through the second half of the 20th century, which has resulted in unconnected subdivisions.

“It’s incremental progress, very slow,” he said.

The trail plan had a breakthrough when a housing developer signed on for easements that will allow for several miles of trail construction.

Richard lamented that movement toward trail adoption has run into entrenched attitudes of residents who don’t see a need for them.

“We don’t have a lot of infusion of people coming in long term, like North Carolina or Florida,” he said. “You have

‘It’s not about just getting from point A to point B. It’s the journey between A and B.’

people who are just stuck in their old ways, whereas if we had people moving here to work for a Fortune 500 company, they’d probably add some new opinions and build political momentum for change.”

Instead, as home to Louisiana State University, among other colleges, East Baton Rouge Parish’s newcomers are generally four-year rentals who would benefit from the trails but don’t have the political will to fight for them.

The next realistic target for Richard will be to attain some north-south trail that connects a loop near several hospitals to the northern part of the parish. Like any-

thing, it will require compromise.

“Some of that will be on the road, but that’s what you have to do sometimes,” he said. “You can do that the right way, with wayfinding and going on streets that have the right speed limit or lend themselves to maybe a road diet (of design to reduce driving speeds) or if nothing else, just sharrow markers (alerting drivers to look out for cyclists) but again, that also requires that cultural shift,” for drivers to recognize the need to share the road.”

HEAVY TRUCKS CAUSE HEAVY CONCERNS FOR COUNTIES

by **Charlie Ban**
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With a road network that brings trucks carrying nearly 80,000 pounds of gravel and sand through downtown Cleburne, Texas, Johnson County roads and bridges are feeling the impact of heavy trucks on a daily basis.

Johnson County Commissioner Rick Bailey spent 35 years in the trucking industry prior to running for office, and he offers two perspectives on the issue backed by his experience, but there’s no reason to save the surprise — he doesn’t approve of proposals to increase the weight limit on trucks.

“It’s such an inconvenience to the driving public who live down these roads because now they have to find an alternate road to get home,” not to mention access for emergency responders who need access to bridges that have been taken out of commission due to safety concerns.

That wear and tear, along with a confluence of market forces and inflation, makes managing the budget for his precinct’s roads and bridges a considerable challenge.

Listen as he tells the County News Podcast all about the issues surrounding heavy truck proposals and what they would mean for county roads and bridges, many of which were designed and built when the trucking industry was much different.



Johnson County, Texas Commissioner Rick Bailey

FUNDING RESOURCES FOR BUILDING ROADS, BRIDGES

USDOT
Counties can apply for competitive grants through the Multimodal Project Discretionary Grant Opportunity (MPDG), which includes the Rural Surface Transportation Grant Program, Mega grants and INFRA grants. In FY 2025 and FY 2026, counties are eligible for \$5.2 billion in competitive transportation grants. <https://www.transportation.gov/grants/mpdg-program>

Safe Streets and Roads for All (SS4A)
This discretionary program is funded by the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) and provides grants to local, regional, and Tribal initiatives to prevent serious injuries and roadway deaths. <https://www.transportation.gov/grants/SS4A>

Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP)
This reimbursable federal aid program supports non-traditional transportation-related community projects. Projects are selected based on a competitive process that considers the project’s expected benefits, feasibility, and consistency with agency plans. <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/vets/programs/tap>

Federal Highway Administration (FHWA)
Provides funding, technical assistance, and other resources to local, Tribal, and State agencies for the construction, maintenance, and preservation of bridges, highways, and tunnels. The FHWA also offers the Bridge Investment Program (BIP). <https://highways.dot.gov/>

FHWA Rural Programs
The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) supports rural communities with the construction, maintenance, and preservation of highways, bridges, and tunnels. FHWA offers funding, technical assistance, and other resources to State, Tribal, and local agencies to advance safe, efficient, and reliable transportation on all rural roads. [https://highways.dot.gov/rural#:~:text=The%20Federal%20Highway%20Administration%20\(FHWA, freight%2C%20and%20infrastructure%20asset%20decisions](https://highways.dot.gov/rural#:~:text=The%20Federal%20Highway%20Administration%20(FHWA, freight%2C%20and%20infrastructure%20asset%20decisions)

Bridge Improvement Program
The Bridge Improvement Program provides funding for bridge replacement, rehabilitation, preservation, and protection projects that reduce the number of bridges in poor condition, or in fair condition at risk of declining into poor condition. <https://www.transportation.gov/rural/grant-toolkit/bridge-investment-program#:~:text=>

You can listen at www.naco.org/podcast or by scanning the QR code.

