

A Legacy of Trails Initiative

“Connecting without Cars”

**A Collaboration of a Multi-disciplinary Group to Support the
Creation of a Unified and Integrated Trail System in
Sarasota County and its Communities**

**Submitted to:
Gulf Coast Community Foundation
April 28, 2014**

**Prepared by:
The Legacy Trails Collaborative**

**Facilitated by:
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Connecting Communities: A Legacy of Trails

Introduction

Gulf Coast Community Foundation is implementing a community outcome oriented grant making strategy with the intent of encouraging collaboration among interested agencies to address issues identified in the 2013 environmental scan, After the Fall: The Gulf Coast's Next Innovation Economy. The foundation wants to begin this approach with a focus on the relationship between the natural environment and creating economic opportunity while improving the health and recreation opportunities within the community.

The desired outcomes include:

1. The selection of a community based initiative that will make good use of the region's valuable environmental resources in improving health and economic well being.
2. A unified coalition of committed community partners that will actively participate and lead the initiative.
3. A community plan and structure focused on success and sustainability.

The Legacy Trail is a significant asset and discussion in the community regarding extending the trail both north and south led to an invitation to key leaders to discuss a collaborative effort that would be transformative in nature and in line with the direction outlined in After the Fall. Bill Little was asked to facilitate a community based planning process with these leaders to achieve the outcomes described above. This report describes the results of the planning process and three priorities for moving forward.

The Legacy Trails Collaborative Members include:

Phil Ellis, Venice Area Beautification, Inc. (VABI)
Greg Vine, VABI
Danny Schult, City of North Port
Carolyn Brown, Sarasota County Parks and Recreation
John Ryan, Venice Chamber of Commerce
Kim Heuberger, Sarasota Parks and Recreation

Virginia Haley, Visit Sarasota County
John McCarthy, SCOPE
Scott Moranda, Sarasota County
Jim Harriot, Sarasota County Engineer
Bruce Dillon, Friends of Sarasota County Parks
Mike Gippert, Friends of the Legacy Trail
Steve Christian, Sarasota County Off-road Riders

A Legacy of Trails

Sarasota County has a legacy of trails that connects its communities and moves people and commerce. From the days prior to the Spanish exploration, Native Americans traveled game paths and trails as well as waterways to reach their destinations. Early settlers made use of these trails, created some of their own to move cattle and commerce, and eventually widening them to some of the roads we use today.

As demand for transportation increased with increasing populations and new communities, our roads became highways and highways became interstates. The Tamiami Trail became the connector, north and south within the county and to destinations beyond as has I-75. Railroads played a significant role in meeting the transportation needs within the county and beyond and these same railroad beds present the community the opportunity to reconnect in the ways of our predecessors, without cars.

The first phase of the Legacy Trail terminating at (or beginning from) the Venice Train Depot pays respect to its transportation heritage as well as to the circus train that rode its rails. And the Venetian Waterway Park is a legacy trail in its own right, leading the way with a community based initiative that serves a broader constituency, flanking on both sides of the scenic inland waterway that enhances water travel and made Venice an island. The symbolic connection of the Legacy Trail and the Venetian Waterway Park at the depot opens doors to rethinking connecting our communities, providing healthy recreational opportunities,

opening up numerous venues and vistas for exploration and discovery, and enhancing economic opportunity.

To the north, the City of Sarasota's Multi-use Recreational Trail (MURT) respects the heritage of the first Ringling Bridge that connected the barrier islands to the mainland. Today, the Ringling Bridge is an icon, and the MURT gives access to St. Armand's, Lido, and Longboat Keys to a variety of users and is the center of many recreational events.

Guiding the Way

A Vision for the Future

To begin any initiative, developing a vision of the future helps frame the effort, provides the opportunity and encouragement for others to share and engage in the effort, and becomes the foundation and the inspiration for a call to action. The discussions of the group led to the following vision that builds on our heritage of exploration and discovery and respect for community and place:

"A multi-use interconnecting system of paths, trails, and walkways accessible to all and promoting the discovery of our diverse communities, linking the built environment with our natural resources, enhancing our health, work and play, and allowing us to move freely, safely, and enjoyably."

Values

Leading any initiative is challenging and it can be particularly difficult when collaborating and partnering are essential to achieving long-term success. One way to engender and encourage a collaborative "environment" is to determine the shared values that the effort will adhere to in the conduct of its business. The members identified the following shared values as critical to success and respectful of community expectations:

***Community focused
Transparent
Inclusive
Open
Trustworthy***

***Accountable
Continuity
Non-judgmental
Innovative***

Guiding Principles

The group recognizes that as the initiative moves forward there will be difficult decisions to make among competing priorities. The following guiding principles will assist them in aligning decisions and actions to the initiative's Vision, Values and Mission.

- 1. Enhance Sarasota as a recreation destination for residents and visitors***
- 2. Increase opportunity for physical activity to improve health ("Make healthy fun")***
- 3. Be fair to all concerned***
- 4. Improve access to multiple modes of transportation***
- 5. Improve the quality-of-life for our residents***
- 6. Increase economic vitality***
- 7. Leverage investments to obtain the maximum benefit***

Understanding the Trends

This initiative will benefit from our heritage and from the natural and built environments that define our unique communities. Understanding the trends for the future will help conceptualize and support actions that will make best use of these trends while being sensitive to the potential impacts on some of our most precious assets, our

natural resources.

State and National Trends

1. Increase in the demand for a variety of diverse outdoor recreational opportunities and the expectation that all are available and accessible (biking, kayaking, hiking, backpacking, etc.) “What else do you have?”
2. Increase in the importance of a community’s recreational diversity in business relocation decisions
3. Increase in importance of a community’s recreational diversity in retiree decisions
4. Retirees are getting younger
5. Increase in the importance of ecotourism in economic development
6. Increase in competition among communities for ecotourism and sports tourism
7. Increase in medical tourism
8. Increase in the use of social media

Legacy Trail Trends

1. Increase in demand is pushing trail to capacity at times during the day and season (January to April)
2. Increase in demand by different recreational uses and different experience levels
3. Increase in the expectation for “spontaneous” recreation
4. Increase in the number of recreation focused businesses, e.g. bike shops, kayak dealers
5. Increase in the use of multipurpose bikes (motorized vehicles are not permitted in the trail)

Understanding the Community (Needs, Expectations, Opportunities)

Understanding community needs and expectations is very important in developing an initiative and in sustaining it for the long term. Similarly, understanding the opportunities the community presents that may align with the vision is fundamental to developing an innovative strategy to achieve the outcomes the community desires. The group discussed each of these dimensions; needs, expectations and opportunities, and the following themes emerged.

Theme 1: Connecting our communities by filling the gaps in the Legacy Trail

The Legacy Trail is extremely popular and it seems safe to say that current usage exceeds all expectations. Communities, north and south, want access to the trail. There is discussion regarding the North Port-Venice Connector and about extending the Legacy Trail to Sarasota. There is an interest in connecting to Benderson Park, linking two very important and popular recreational assets. Pinecraft, as a traditional bicycle community, will see an increase in mobility with the conversion of the rail corridor near their community. And linking Englewood may be possible through the use of a power line right of way.

Linking the Legacy Trail to the proposed Myakka River to Peace River Trail opens another dimension to connecting communities along with the incredible opportunity to experience up close the diverse natural environment between the two rivers. And creating possibilities of connecting to sister counties to our north, south and east opens opportunities for state grants specifically designated for cross state trails.

Many communities in Sarasota County are not near a current or future trail link and face considerable difficulty in reaching a trailhead/access point. Similarly, many users of the trails may want to take advantage of shopping, beaches, natural resources, entertainment, attractions, parks, schools, cultural events, and other activities but are reluctant to do so because of perceived risks of riding on the roadways. Narrow bridges, major through streets and major highways pose barriers that many are reluctant to cross. The county and the cities are aware of the need for improved bike lanes and other improvements to enhance safety and usability.

The transit system in Sarasota County is an important resource for bicyclists moving to distant parts of the county. As the number of bicyclists increases, expanding the capacity of the buses to accommodate more bicycles may become necessary.

The T. Mabry Carlton, Jr. Memorial Reserve (“Carlton Reserve”) represents a different kind of community and a different experience for the hiker and biker. There is increasing demand for off-road (mountain) bike trails and the Carlton Reserve may offer an opportunity to address that demand. Effective resource management is essential to

protect the environment and to balance bike use with hiking and camping that have similar increases in demand.

Theme 2: Wayfinding

Wayfinding emerged as a significant theme from many angles. The most obvious was the use of and need for maps to aid the user in finding trailheads, points of interest, restrooms, and water. Wayfinding is dependent on good signage, adequate road and trail markings, and labeling/branding for quick identification and information sharing.

Wayfinding also presents the perfect opportunity for taking advantage of technology for users while navigating the trail, but also offers opportunities to link them to points of interest off the trail including recreation, shops and restaurants. Web integration can bring the trail and its amenities to potential visitors throughout the world, adding the trail to a long list of reasons to visit Sarasota County and its cities.

Our county has a rich and storied natural and human history. Sharing this history with informational kiosks along the way will enhance the users experience and these kiosks can serve as a wayfinding venue for those who are not users of mobile phone technology. Creating marked and loop routes that integrate paper maps, mobile phone apps, trail markings, and road signage provides a platform to share local knowledge and information with users and reflects the openness and friendliness that draws visitors and new residents to our communities. Simplified wayfinding also contributes to a safer trail system. Knowing where you are and what is close by reduces uncertainty to new users. It also makes it much easier and faster for emergency response and reduces the risk of an inappropriate encounter.

Theme 3: Improving the existing trail system

Increasing access points: In the early days of the Legacy Trail, some residents, communities and businesses expressed concern about increased crime along the trail and many were not in favor of being able to access the trail from their community or business. After several years of experience, this fear has proven unfounded and there is interest in increasing access to the trail by businesses and communities. This brings a different set of challenges including policies on where to add access, the potential impact on the trail experience with too many access points, and the cost of building and maintaining additional access points.

Education: The heavy use of the trails and roadways by multiple users (bikers, walkers, skaters) points to the need to better educate users regarding safety and the rules of the road. Additionally, drivers are experiencing increased bicycle use of the roads and many are uncomfortable sharing the roads, partly because of the newness and partly because of the unfamiliarity of the rules for bicycles. Educating both bicyclists and motorists can enhance safety and improve accessibility for many.

Enforcement: Enforcing the rules of the trail is an increasing concern as more people use it. Courtesy patrols, periodic law enforcement presence, and the possibility of a “park ranger” program are ideas that surfaced during discussions.

Design: A trail is more than a ribbon of asphalt, concrete, shell or limestone. It is a linear park as well as a transportation corridor, requiring the same thoughtful design as a park or recreational facility. Maintaining consistent architectural and design standards are important and the convenient placement of water, restrooms, rest areas, and parking are essential. Both the Legacy Trail and the Venetian Waterway Park have good facilities on the trail and conveniently located in parks along the trail corridor. The increased use and the addition of other access points may necessitate additional, or upgraded, facilities in the future.

Business Opportunities: There are opportunities for bike rentals, restaurants, shopping, and recreational related businesses at key points along the trail and improvements in way finding opens the door for businesses away from the trail to benefit. As trail users, particularly bikers, access these businesses, the parking needs shift from “where do I park my car?” to “where can I safely leave my bike?” Making streets and roads safer for bicyclists and providing bike racks will do much to draw riders to our businesses.

Multi-use and Multi-users: The Legacy Trail and the Venetian Waterway Park trail draw a variety of users of all ages and physical ability. Walkers and bikers intermingle and on particularly busy days the combination of the two

may be risky. Mitigating this risk may be necessary in the future with a trail design that accommodates both by using the shoulders of the trail for walking, built with materials appropriate for that use.

Maintenance: Maintenance is an increasing concern, as the trail ages and the number of users increases beyond initial expectations. As the trail system expands, maintenance costs competes with investment in new construction. And the new construction adds to the maintenance burden. Maintaining this very important asset will be a challenge for the future and will require a thoughtful balance of old and new.

Theme 4: Leverage the trail system to create business opportunities

The trail and the recreational opportunities it creates can be an economic asset to the many communities along its way. Providing market, demographic and economic data to support potential investors' interest is essential for our chambers of commerce, economic development agencies, and our local governments to promote the trails' potential for a business venture. Researching other communities' experiences can provide insight into the businesses that are appropriate and successful.

Zoning and permitting may be an issue as potential businesses consider possible sites. There may be the opportunity to "leverage" zoning and permitting to create incentives and encourage business development at critical locations along or in the vicinity of the trail.

Businesses looking for a better economic opportunity, retirees and others who seek to relocate consider heavily what a community has to offer when making that decision. A diversity of recreational activities is becoming increasingly important in the decision to move and the integrated trail system as envisioned will add to the diversity and marketability of Sarasota County and its communities.

The interest of many individuals in diverse recreational experiences such as kayaking and biking offers the opportunity to cross market and cross promote these types of businesses, both in encouraging the investment opportunity and in supporting long term sustainability.

Theme 5: Enhance Sarasota as a tourist destination

Tourism, for much of the county's existence, has been an economic driver. The sub-tropical climate and beaches, the arts, boat races, baseball, the circus, and the uniqueness of our cities offer tourists a wide variety of activities to engage their passions. Running, swimming, rowing, BMX, birding, and kayaking are recent additions to the activities that draw significant numbers of visitors to our area.

The Legacy Trail and the Venetian Waterway Park are similarly becoming an attraction and the opportunity exists to leverage these trails, and potentially others, as an "activity" that links and connects visitors to our recreational resources whether at a beach, a preserve, or at a park, lunch at a local restaurant, or shopping at a favorite store. The Legacy Trail, and more so the integrated multi-use trail system of the future, is a significant and unique feature for our communities and the opportunity exists to promote the trail as an ecotourism asset offering access to a natural environment not usually experienced elsewhere.

Understanding our Community Assets and Resources

Sarasota County is blessed with a wealth of resources: talented people, innovative businesses, responsible governments, visionary foundations, and community minded civic and non-profit agencies and organizations. In addition, our natural resources help define our community and the built environment, both governmental and private support a sense of place that gives our cities and villages their own unique character. The work group recognizes that achieving the vision will require a unified community effort through leveraging and aligning the assets and resources toward common interests and the desired community outcomes.

Businesses are essential to an integrated trail system. On one hand, they provide the goods and services that users of the trail may seek and on the other, they can inform the process regarding customer and user expectations, challenges facing business development and expansion that may see the trail as an investment opportunity, and opportunities for innovation in meeting consumer demand. Below are a few of the business categories and business related organizations that may benefit as well as contribute:

Recreational related businesses
Fitness centers
Hospitality (restaurants, hotels, motels, resorts)
Recreational equipment manufacturers (Business case for them to invest)
Promoters – event promotion
Railroads
Developers
Health Care –Sarasota Memorial Hospital, Sarasota County Health Department, Doctors Hospital, Venice
Regional Medical Center
Chambers of Commerce
Economic Development
Tourist Development
Venice Area Beautification, Inc. (VABI)
The HuB

Community based civic and not for profit organizations contribute significantly to the vitality of a community. A few of the many that serve our community includes:

Civic clubs
Homeowners associations
Friends of Sarasota County Parks / Friends of the Legacy Trail
Council of Neighborhood Associations (CONA)
Volunteers
YMCA

Sarasota County is rich in **educational institutions**, from a leading school district to a diverse group of private and public colleges and universities, all providing talent and innovation to our community. A few our institutions are:

Sarasota County School District
Ringling College of Art and Design
State College of Florida
New College of Florida
Florida State University

Our **philanthropic institutions** and a generous community of donors contribute much to improving the quality of life in Sarasota County. Beyond the dollars, our foundations many times serve as conveners, innovators, collaborators and visionaries in addressing critical community issues and concerns. Responsible and responsive **governments** provide much of the infrastructure the community relies upon daily. Collaboration at all levels, city, county, state, and federal, provides much to improve our quality of life and creates opportunities to leverage other community resources to meet the needs and desires of a dynamic and engaged citizenry.

Our rich and vast natural resources, from the blues of our coastal waters to the greens of our parks, forests, and prairies, offer residents and visitors the opportunity for passive and active recreation. Public/private partnerships protect environmentally sensitive lands and these partnerships may serve as models for future expansion of the trail system. Our beaches, creeks and rivers, city and county parks, state parks, and publicly protected preserves provides us destinations as well as opportunities for connecting. Sharing assets, such as power line right of ways that traverse our natural lands, opens avenues for connecting these natural resources.

Organizing the Effort

Mission

Understanding the mission is essential for any collective undertaking, large or small. The group discussed the potential mission in light of the vision statement, the responsibilities, contributions, and roles of other organizations and derived the following mission statement:

“Unify community efforts to achieve an integrated, accessible county-wide trail system.”

Roles

Knowing that many in the community contribute to achieving the vision of an integrated trail, the following roles were identified:

Leader: to take the initiative

Convener, collaborator, and champion: to unify the effort

Innovator: to encourage new ideas and approaches and leverage non-traditional partnerships

Promoter: to build community support/ consensus; set Sarasota apart from others

Broker: to unify and leverage resources toward community priorities

Advisor/Advocate: to inform and advise on needs, benefits and strategies

Planner: to anticipate and unify strategy around future trends and needs

Educator: to share knowledge of opportunities and facilitate data collection (clearinghouse of information)

Coordinator: to lead on specific projects

Assessing Strengths and Weaknesses

Assessing the strengths and weaknesses of an organization is critical in any planning activity. At this early stage, there is no organizational experience to assess, only the informed opinion and experience of the participants. This activity was useful for the discussion of how to organize for action and is a foundation for future assessments of organizational capacity and capability.

Strengths

Connections and relationships

Enthusiasm and dedication

Strong community support

Existing infrastructure and miles of trails

Support of North Port, Sarasota County, City of Venice

Support of the Venice Area Beautification, Inc.

An improving economic environment and opportunity for business support

Increasing importance of the health/recreation intersection

Foundation encouragement to collaborate

Volunteers

Visitors' support

Strong Economic Development Corporation (EDC), Tourist Development Council (TDC), Chambers of Commerce

Talent pool

Weaknesses

No organizational structure/committee structure

Staffing to implement

Member time to devote to effort

Funding

Competing interests for limited funding

Awareness and buy-in by potential players/partners

Not all players here

No plan

Establishing Priorities

The vision of a multi-use countywide trail system encompasses more than the Legacy Trail. Completing the Legacy Trail from south to north is a critical element, as this will serve as the backbone of the system. Similar to the railroads, the Tamiami Trail, I-75, and the Intracoastal Waterway, the Legacy Trail will be a transforming element across our communities, providing alternative transportation opportunities to connect our natural, cultural, recreational and economic resources *without the use of cars* and at the same time providing healthy recreational and social engagement venues.

The group examined the community needs, expectations, and opportunities and the resulting themes, weighed them in light of the mission, capabilities and roles of this forming collaborative and established three priorities as their first areas of focus. These are:

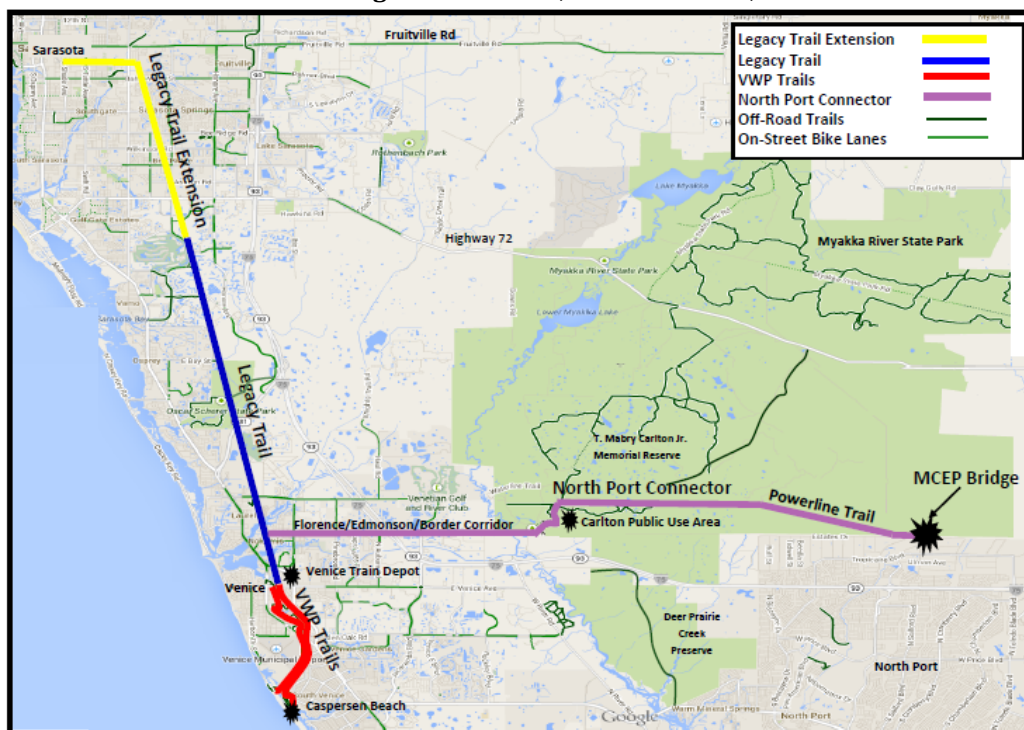
- Priority 1: North Port Connector
- Priority 2: North Legacy Trail Extension
- Priority 3: Wayfinding

These priorities align with the Vision and the Guiding Principles (p. 3) and will be transformational as they:

- Unify the effort to complete the Legacy Trail from north to south
- Begin a strategic focus on wayfinding as a critical element to improve usability and access, improve safety, and enhance marketability
- Provide the opportunity to leverage funding from several sources
- Provide the opportunity for linking the trail with sister counties in the south
- Provide links to existing trails and a foundation for linking to new trails
- Open access to our natural resources in the south
- Offers a vision that will encourage collaboration in a variety of areas.

The map below shows the current Legacy Trail (blue), the Venetian Waterway Park (red), the proposed north Legacy Trail extension (yellow), and the North Port Connector (purple).

“Connecting without Cars”, North to South, East to West



Priority 1: North Port Connector

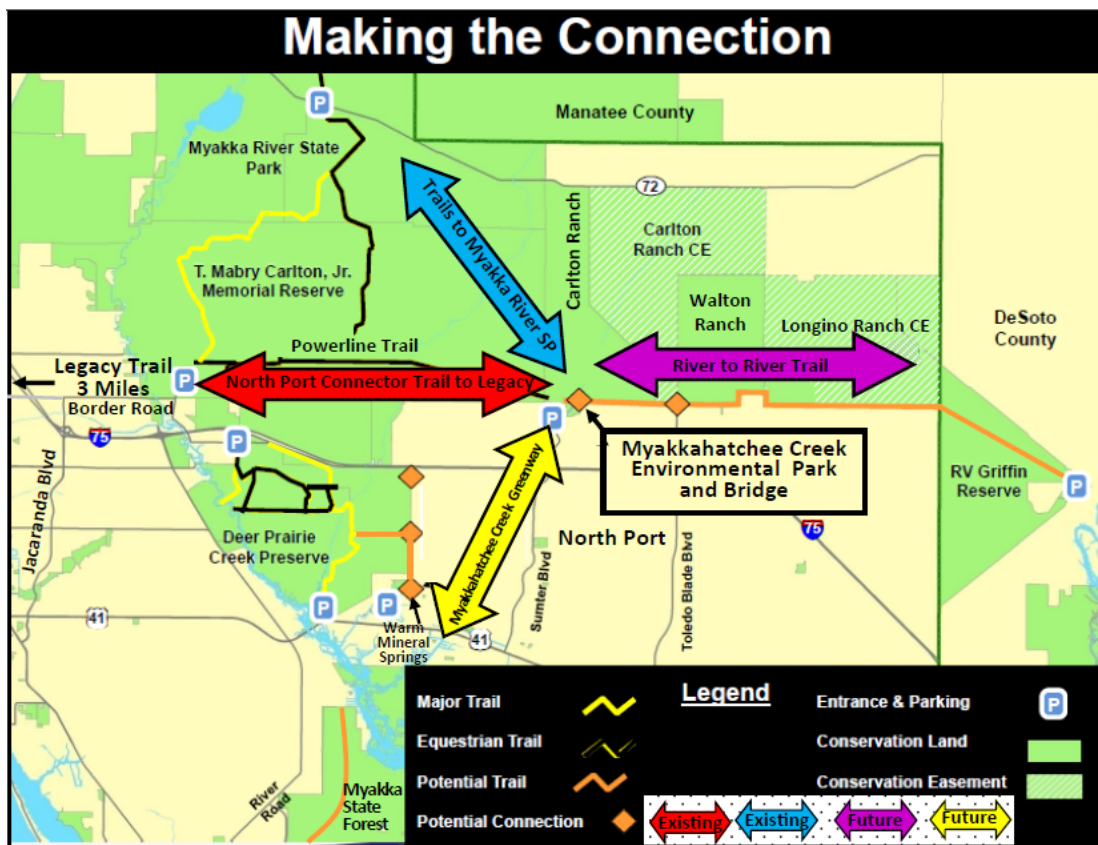
The Venice Train Depot is a symbolic first step in an integrated trail system through its linking of the Legacy Trail to the Venetian Waterway Park and opportunities abound to link other paths, walkways and trails throughout the county. To the south, the Venice to North Port Connector will expand the trail system to connect a wealth of resources within and surrounding the North Port community. And similarly, the connector will give North Port residents and visitors recreational access to the many resources a coastal community offers.

The proposed bridge, and its location at the Myakkahatchee Creek Environmental Park, will be a symbolic link between the two communities and to the natural resources available in all directions from that point. Residents and visitors in both communities will benefit from increased access to an expanded trail system and enjoy the opportunity to explore diverse natural experiences, whether taking a refreshing dip in the Gulf to Caspersen Beach or observing nature first hand along the Myakkahatchee Creek. Casual walkers, seasoned hikers, bikers, and horseback riders will find adventure.

Sarasota County owns and manages or co-manages several large conservation land areas between Venice and North Port and several other areas adjacent to North Port. These include the 24,565 acre Carlton Reserve, the 6,000 acre Deer Prairie Creek Preserve, the 4,000 acre Schewe Tract, the Churchill Tract (391 acres), the Jordyn Parcel (503 acres), the Carlton Ranch (4,735 acres) and the Walton Ranch (3760 acres). The only public access from North Port to any of these conservation lands is via Deer Prairie Creek Preserve's south entrance at US41. Additional access points into these areas from North Port would greatly enhance the recreational potential of these areas for bicyclists, pedestrians and equestrians. Connections through these areas would also create recreational corridors linking North Port to the rest of Sarasota County. Ultimately these connections could be part of a countywide trail system connecting the Legacy/ Venetian Waterway Park trail corridor with North Port and beyond.

A Keystone Bridge

The proposed bridge is a transformational project that will result in increased access to Sarasota County's environmental lands. The diagram below shows the significance of the bridge and the opportunities it will create.



The bridge will provide access to recreational corridors that will connect more of the County's residents and visitors to our environmental lands. Its design and completion will offer opportunities to improve existing recreational assets and set the stage for developing additional infrastructure in future years that will enhance the trail system in the North Port area. The proposed bridge crosses the R-36 drainage canal and is the first priority for connecting the City of North Port at its Myakkahatchee Creek Environmental Park (MCEP) to the Carlton Reserve and beyond to the Legacy Trail at Nokomis. The conceptual design anticipates use as a pedestrian, bicycle, and equestrian bridge and current plans call for a short connector trail to the MCEP.

North Port to Nokomis/Venice (red arrow): The route from the MCEP Bridge to the Legacy Trail will cross the Carlton Ranch, an Environmentally Sensitive Lands Protection Program (ESLPP) site, and the Carlton Reserve via the Power Line Trail. This section of the Power Line Trail to the Carlton Reserve Public Use area is 11.5 miles long. In addition to being part of the North Port Connector link to the Legacy Trail, the Power Line Trail also provides access to an existing network of trails in the Carlton Reserve. From the MCEP bridge, existing trails leading north to Myakka River State Park (**blue arrow**) are also accessible. As a result of the increased access that the MCEP bridge will provide, the Power Line Trail will see increased usage and need surface improvements.

From the Carlton Reserve, the route will continue for 8.5 miles along an on-road Border Road/Edmondson Road/Florence corridor to connect to the Legacy Trail in Nokomis. There are paved shoulders and bike lanes along much of this corridor. However, there are several gaps in the on-road cycling infrastructure along this corridor. Two projects to help fill these gaps have been identified and funded. A \$70,000 Sarasota County road improvement project to add a paved shoulder to a section of Border just west of Auburn Road is in the bid process. A \$1,700,000 project is underway in Nokomis to add sidewalks including along Florence Street from Albee Farm Road to the Legacy Trail. A one-mile section of Edmondson Road between Auburn Road and Pinebrook Road does not have a bike lane or paved shoulder. The addition of a bike lane to this section of Edmondson Road would greatly improve the safety and usability of this corridor. The section of Border Road, from the Carlton Reserve to Jacaranda Blvd, could be also be improved by adding "Share the Road" signage and upgrading the existing paved shoulder to a bike lane.

Walton Ranch and Beyond (purple arrow): A proposed trail, currently unfunded, heading east of the MCEP Bridge would lead to Sarasota County's Walton Ranch and then on to Desoto County's RV Griffin Reserve. The MCEP Bridge will provide midway access to the proposed 30 mile long River-to-River Trail from the Myakka River to the Peace River. Coordination with several ranch owners will be necessary.

Myakkahatchee Creek Greenway Recreational Trail (yellow arrow): North Port's Myakkahatchee Creek Greenway Concept plan includes a recreational trail along the creek. Beginning at the park, the trail proceeds south six miles to US 41. The phased implementation of this plan will provide trail access from North Port neighborhoods to MCEP and beyond.

Creating other Connections

The bridge and the three trails above serve as a core upon which other trails and access points will depend. A few possibilities for the future include:

Border Road to US 41: A bridge over the creek near the south parking area in Deer Prairie Creek Preserve would create a recreational corridor from Border Road to US 41.

Central North Port Access: A bridge to connect the west end of Price Blvd to Deer Prairie Creek Preserve would create a central access from North Port into the Preserve.

Warm Mineral Springs: With a connection from Warm Mineral Springs into Deer Prairie Creek Preserve, the springs could serve as a trail center.

Englewood: There are several options for linking the Englewood community to the trail system. These include using River Road, utilizing utility corridors, and also the Myakka State Forest.

Funding

The City of North Port has budgeted \$200,000 to the design, permitting and construction of the North Port Connector bridge during FY 2014. An additional \$200,000 will be provided by Sarasota County from Environmentally Sensitive Lands Protection Program (ESLPP) funds in the FY 2015 budget. Sarasota County will also use \$50,000 in the existing Carlton Ranch (an ESLPP site) Capital Improvement Program (CIP) for access improvements in FY 2014.

The Power Line Trail is in need of improvement from its current marginal surface to an 8-foot wide shell/rock surface. The estimated cost for labor and materials for this 11½-mile surface is \$300,000. Given the current state of this trail, it would be desirable to improve the trail concurrent with the construction of the MECP bridge.

Time Line: The goal for completing the bridge is January 2016 as is the Power Line Trail.

Community Partners/Stakeholders

- City of North Port
- City of Venice
- Sarasota County Government
- Southwest Florida Water Management District
- Peace River Manasota Regional Water Supply Authority
- FPL
- Friends of Sarasota County Parks
- Friends of the Legacy Trail
- Friends of the Carlton Reserve
- Bike clubs
- Equestrian clubs
- Florida Communities Trust (Florida Forever)
- VABI
- Sarasota County Off Road Riders (SCORR)
- Myakka River State Park
- Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO)
- County Bicycle/Pedestrian Trail Advisory Committee
- County Environmentally Sensitive Lands Oversight Committee
- City and County Parks Advisory Boards

Priority 2: Legacy Trail Extension to Sarasota

The Legacy Trail is a gift of significant historical and environmental land that promotes a sense of community among Sarasota County residents and provides a place for visitors and residents to recreate and enjoy. Uses include viewing wildlife in different habitats, relaxing in a mostly undeveloped environment, a travel corridor to other places in the County, discovering and studying local history and recreation such as walking, dog-walking, rollerblading, running, and bicycling. The Legacy Trail is a non-motorized, multiple-use, multi-generational community builder.

The Extension of the Legacy has many benefits to residents and visitors of Sarasota County. Economic, health and wellness and social benefits will be great as the extended Legacy Trail connects downtown Sarasota and Venice. The extension will create thirty miles (Legacy Trail - twenty miles and Venetian Waterway Park –ten miles) of connected non-motorized trail with access to many of our historical sites, businesses and recreation sites. The Venetian Waterway Park, the Legacy Trail and the connecting east-west trails will offer unique experiences to Sarasota County residents and visitors.

The proposed extension reaches Payne Park, as shown in the map below, providing access to downtown Sarasota, the waterfront parks and restaurants along US 41, and the Sarasota MURT. With updated wayfinding and improvements in bike lanes and markings, it will be possible to go from North Port to Longboat Key.

Proposed Legacy Trail Extension



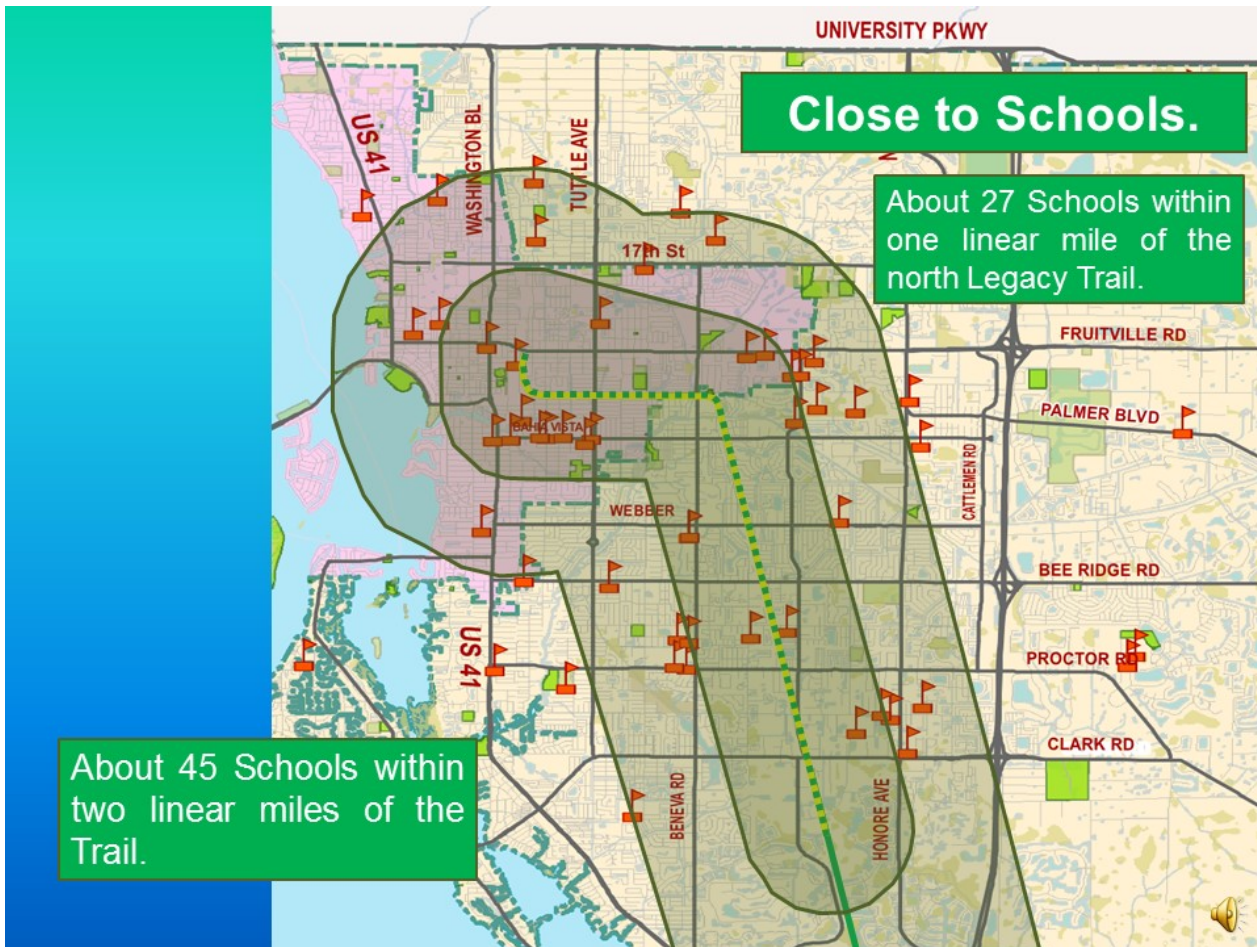
There are many community attractions, schools and parks that can be connected with east-west routes using the present and extended Legacy Trail. Pinecraft residents, as a bicycle based community, have come forth in support of the extension. They will greatly benefit from connection to downtown Sarasota, the Ringling Bridge, St. Armand's, Lido and Longboat Keys. Among the east attractions are Benderson Park and Rothenbach Park.

Another example along the existing Legacy Trail is Bay Street, which runs approximately two miles from Osprey Junction Trailhead to US41 and the historic village of Osprey. The westernmost section of Bay Street includes a wide paved shoulder. In some areas this pavement is overgrown with grass, or covered in sand and gravel. East of the intersection with Old Venice Road the road has minimal paved shoulder; however the right of way in this area appears wide enough to easily support a trail. The east end of Bay Street adjacent to Park Trace Subdivision includes sidewalks separated from the road. At the eastern terminus, a paved spur trail connects to the Legacy Trail. To travel from one end to another, a cyclist experiences various road conditions, automobile traffic issues and safety concerns.

As the primary route that connects the Legacy Trail with the community of Osprey, and with waterfront destinations such as Historic Spanish Point, Bay Preserve and the Spanish Point Marina, Bay Street represents an example of an opportunity to optimize existing investments and assets by filling gaps in the system. Extending south from Bay Street, Old Venice Road has a variety of on-road bike lane and sidewalk conditions and provides a direct link to Blackburn Point Road and Casey Key. Like Bay Street, many connectors around the County include gaps or fragments that if brought together can provide the network that reaches out from the main trail to the community. Other examples include Laurel Road and the Florence-Edmondson-Border Road corridor. On any given example the work may include maintenance on existing infrastructure, addition of on-road bike lanes, a parallel trail, or other strategy. With a safe, dedicated trail and quality wayfinding, more families, cyclists and others can enjoy access to the trail system. Retrofitting any one of these connectors will showcase the value of such investment in providing the connecting arms that reach out from the trail to embrace our communities.

A significant benefit of the Legacy Trail extension is the creation of safe and motor vehicle free routes to school. Twenty-seven schools are within one linear mile of the proposed extension and 45 schools are within two linear miles (See map below). Non-motorized multiple use trails provide significant educational opportunities for our children providing hands-on experiences with our historical and natural resources. Physical exercise is important to the learning environment and the trail offers safe and fun venues and can help in addressing a growing problem of childhood obesity.

Schools Near the Proposed Legacy Trail Extension



Trail Extension Feasibility Study

In June 2013, the Friends of The Legacy Trail nominated the Legacy Trail extension from its current northern terminus to the City of Sarasota (an eight-mile corridor). On August 28, 2013, the Sarasota Board of County Commissioners, in response to the nomination, authorized \$75,000 for a feasibility study and requiring matching funds and any additional costs to come from the private sector and community contributions.

The purpose of the study is to determine the feasibility of leasing or purchasing the rail right of way from the CSX railroad. The study will take about 5 months to complete and is an important first step in extending the trail northward. The extension of the Legacy Trail is good for business, good for community building and it is imperative that the study be completed as soon as possible. The Legacy Trail Extension and the east-west connectors are truly transformational for Sarasota County citizens and visitors.

The community support is very encouraging. In addition to financial contributions, the extension has received resolutions and letters of support from the Sarasota School Board, City of Sarasota, Venice Area Chamber of

Commerce, Osprey-Nokomis Chamber of Commerce, Sarasota County Council of Neighborhood Associations, Pinecraft Community, and Oakwood Manor Community.

Funding

The estimated cost of the proposed study is \$165,000. Thus far, the Friends of the Legacy Trail and its supporters have raised \$37,800 in addition to the \$75,000 pledged by the county. Of this, \$20,000 has come from individual donors and \$16,000 from two fundraising events. The remaining amount needed is \$42,200.

Timeline: The objective is to complete the feasibility study and present it to the Board of County Commissioners by January 2015.

Community Partners/Stakeholders

Sarasota County	Coastal Cruisers Bicycle Club
Sarasota County School District	The HuB
Friends of the Legacy Trail	Pinecraft
Captain Eddie's Restaurant	Oakwood Manor
Gulf Coast Gives (GCCF)	Venice YMCA
Council of Neighborhood Associations (CONA)	Venice Area Chamber of Commerce
Sarasota Manatee Bicycle Club	Nokomis Area Chamber of Commerce

Priority 3: Wayfinding

In order to transform the use of trails, parks and preserves a new approach is needed to welcome and safely guide people as they explore both the trails and the community. The ever-growing popularity of trails creates the demand for a comprehensive community-wide wayfinding system. With the increasing inventory of trails, bike lanes, parks and preserves, the existing wayfinding tools are fragmented and limited. While the primary linear trails such as the Legacy Trail, the Venetian Waterway Park and Sarasota's MURT have aids to navigation, there is a lack of signage and mapping to show all of the existing and potential trail connections. Similarly, parks and preserves also provide modest wayfinding tools provided on a site-by-site basis.

Roadway bike lanes are designated with DOT approved signage and pavement markings; however, no physical wayfinding tools exist to link the various segments of bike lanes together, or to connect them with other trails. In addition, there is a lack of signage informing trail users of scenic areas and other destinations such as a local library. The network of trails currently lacks a comprehensive map with "spine" corridor, "ribbon" laterals and "local knowledge" loops.

Another opportunity for improvement is an integrated system that connects trails users to a variety of services, such as refreshments, bike repair, or retail shops. Business partnerships such as these are likely to increase the economic impact of the trail system, a phenomenon observed in other communities. Lacking adequate wayfinding tools, the nearby local services, amenities and attractions are out of sight and out of mind. The changing expectations among many trail users point the way to integrating technological solutions with more traditional signs, road and trail markings, and kiosks to help people *find their way* around the trail system.

In order to optimize all of the trail connections we have now and the ones that will be designated or developed in the future, a comprehensive wayfinding program is essential. A well-designed wayfinding system helps people connect from their neighborhood to community assets throughout the region. Integrated signage and easy to understand maps enhance the safety and enjoyment of trail users.

To coordinate several trail jurisdictions and types, a branding component must provide both continuity and flexibility to recognize the various existing styles, themes and investments. An integrated wayfinding system that draws attention to scenic natural areas, historic sites and other points of interest will enhance opportunities for enjoyment, learning and discovery. Providing safe navigation opens the door for increased participation for commuting, recreation and wellness.

One of the most exciting wayfinding opportunities incorporates technological aids to navigation and information. Web integration of the various trail components, whether municipally owned, county owned or privately owned, can be achieved through an interactive website. Social media can harness the desire to share people's stories and experiences – inspiring others to get involved. Tags and QR codes provide an opportunity to minimize sign-pollution while providing an abundance of information to smart phone users. Use of the emerging GPS technology in smart phones can provide convenient site-specific information on our natural history, historic sites, recreational opportunities and services and amenities.

Once the physical attributes of trail navigation are in place, and maps and content are developed, the next opportunity is the creation of one or more *trail applications* for smart phone use. Imagine having all of the information you need to fully access and enjoy the trail system in the palm of your hand! Using technology, the wayfinding system can be updated and enhanced as the system of trails evolves and expands.

The first step in the development of a transformational wayfinding system is to develop a Community Wayfinding Plan. This component is essential in developing trail guidance opportunities, refining the look and feel of signage and maps, and establishing priorities for implementing various wayfinding components. The plan would also seek input on the features most needed within the technological applications, so that investments in technology reflect the expressed needs of existing and future users.

The Sarasota County area is uniquely equipped to develop innovative wayfinding tools and technologies with local assets such as *The HuB* and the *Ringling College of Art and Design*. Other potential partners include *Visit Sarasota County*, the *Conservation Foundation*, and local chambers of commerce. By taking a comprehensive approach to the planning and implementation of an innovative wayfinding system, the investment in the community's trails is optimized. Simultaneously the system opens up the trails to the entire community – shifting the paradigm toward more convenient, practical and enjoyable trail use while leveraging existing investments such as parks, preserves and other community assets. And the wayfinding system will meet the needs of all, from those that depend on paper maps to those engaged in the latest technology.

Funding: The estimated cost of the wayfinding plan is \$60,000, based on a similar study conducted by the City of Albany, New York. Following the completion of the study and acceptance by key stakeholders, the next priority is the development of the web and mobile applications that will be the foundation for our technology integration. The estimated cost of second phase is \$50,000.

Time Line: The goal for completing the wayfinding analysis is March 2015. The goal for completing the web and mobile applications is June 2015.

Community Partners/Stakeholders:

Sarasota County
City of North Port
City of Sarasota
City of Venice
Town of Longboat Key
Ringling College of Art and Design

Visit Sarasota County
Economic Development Corporations
Chambers of Commerce
The HuB
Conservation Foundation of the Gulf Coast

Leveraging Funding

Considering these three priorities together is a first step in achieving the vision of a unified trail system. The initial focus on connecting trails north to south and facilitating safe and enjoyable usage through effective wayfinding becomes a foundation for the many opportunities that will follow. Leveraging funds to create this unified approach makes best use of limited resources and can model the way for others to invest in a long term strategy versus a project by project approach that may not yield the integration and the collaboration that is needed and desired.

Priority	Estimated Costs	Funds Available	Funds Needed
North Port Connector	\$750,000	\$450,000	\$300,000
Legacy Trail Extension	\$165,000	\$112,800	\$52,200
Wayfinding	\$110,000	\$0	\$110,000
Total	\$1,025,000	\$562,800	\$462,200

Moving Forward

The members of the collaborative are grateful for the Gulf Coast Community Foundation facilitating the discussion of our areas' recreational trails and the potential for creating an integrated system that will benefit the community in multiple ways. In a short period of time, the group has aligned to a collective vision and is committed to moving forward. The collaborative spirit of our community offers opportunity for success and the group will begin engaging other stakeholders and inviting them to participate in and to support this effort. Potential stakeholders include the other cities, TDC, EDC, homeowners associations, Chambers of Commerce, bike clubs, the YMCA and other health and fitness organizations.

The collaborative, as we see it, will be an informal organization, connecting and unifying individuals and organizations to achieve the vision. As with any new initiative, we expect there will be challenges to overcome. Other communities have developed integrated strategies and we will identify and learn from the many best practices within the state and nationally. Initial research identified several examples including, Anchorage, Alaska, Lee County and Orange County in Florida, Albany, New York, Kane County, IL, Austin, TX, Lemont, IL, and Victoria, BC.

Map Credits:

Connecting without Cars": Steve Christian (modification Sarasota County map)

Making Connection: Steve Christian (modification Sarasota County map)

Proposed Legacy Trail Extension: Joel Calabrese, Friends of the Legacy Trail

Schools Near the Proposed Legacy Trail Extension: Joel Calabrese, Friends of the Legacy Trail