



The Town to Trail Connection

The town-to-trail connection is more than just providing recreational amenities to residents and visitors – it's also about building a community culture that's grounded in its natural environment. The Northern Forest Center spoke with three experts in November 2021 about their experience integrating recreation into community.

Lee Dassler leads [Western Foothills Land Trust](#) in Norway, Maine, which aims to connect one of its properties directly to the quaint Norway downtown. In addition to that physical connection, the land trust offers 70 pairs of skis and boots for town residents and hosts community-centered races and festivals on its Nordic ski trails throughout the winter – cultivating personal connection between community members and the land.

Jason Hunter, with [Coös Cycling Club](#), Hub North, and Big Day Brewing in Gorham, New Hampshire, helped build 22 miles of multi-use, non-motorized trails in Gorham that now connect directly to the downtown brewery. The club maintains a fleet of 15 mountain bikes for use by local kids and supports the local high school mountain biking team.

Joe Fox – then recreation director for St. Johnsbury Academy and the [Town of St. Johnsbury](#), now the Center's Outdoor Recreation manager – shared the town's plans to take advantage of being at the terminus of the 93-mile, multi-purpose Lamoille Valley Rail Trail.

“Getting people in the forest, getting people in the woods, up on mountains is the best way to have them realize how important it is to our human souls to get outside and ground ourselves in nature.”

**Lee Dassler, Development Director,
Western Foothills Land Trust**



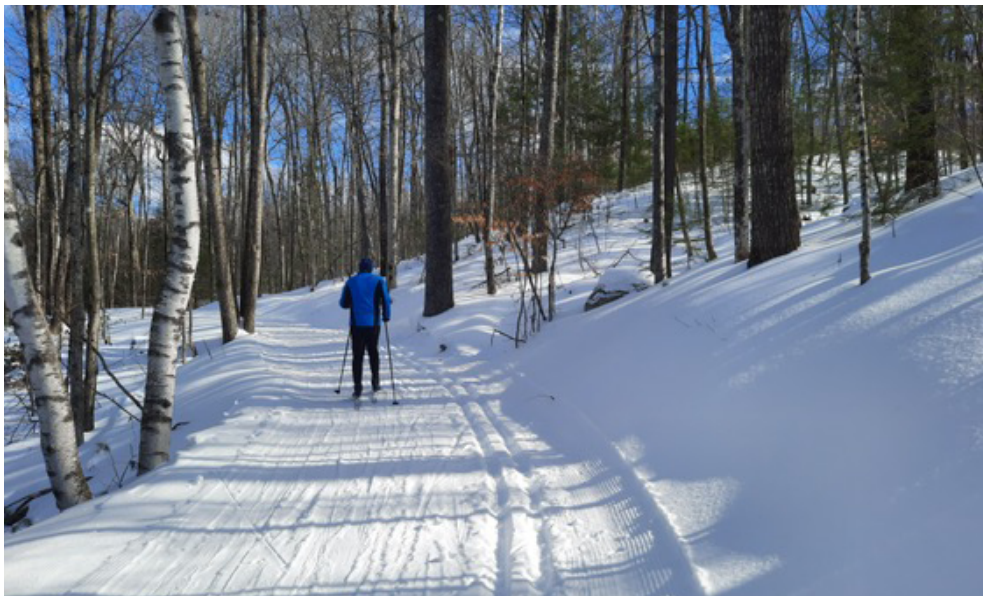
To establish a solid town to trail connection, these leaders recommend:

- Providing opportunities for residents to get involved – for example, through trail building or visioning sessions.
- Creating amenities that ensure safety while enhancing the experience for users, e.g., wayfinding signage, easy parking, year-round bathroom facilities, repair stations, etc.
- Minimizing the likelihood of user conflicts by installing proper signage and separating trail uses where possible.
- Educating kids about land stewardship from a young age.

These leaders also emphasized the importance of:

- **Building a culture of trust** so that residents recognize the opportunity that recreation provides to their town and champion and contribute to the progress of the project.
- **Partnering with local organizations** that can contribute resources, skills, and time that may be outside of the trail or lead organization's scope.
- **Recognizing that building a town-to-trail connection is an iterative process** that will take time and resources and will likely hit hurdles along the way.
- **Talking with leaders** in other towns for insights and recommendations.

Establishing town-to-trail connections doesn't happen overnight. It requires substantial resources and active participation by many residents and community leaders. It begins with setting a bold vision, then building strong relationships, thinking outside of the box, and committing to a process that will likely span years.



The Community Learning Briefs summarize the Northern Forest Center's 2021-2023 "Building the New Forest Future" webinar series. The Town to Trail Connection webinar and others in this series are available [here](#). This project has been supported in part by USDA Rural Development.