

The Circuit Trails

Southeastern Pennsylvania and southern New Jersey

QUICK FACTS

Project Type
Off-road trails

Location
Southeastern Pennsylvania and southern New Jersey

Usage
Up to 1 million pedestrians and bicyclists annually on the Philadelphia portion of the Schuylkill River Trail, a key Circuit route

Length
Planned 750 miles (1,200 km); 300 miles (483 km) currently complete


Year Constructed
Ongoing, formal effort to expand and connect Circuit Trails launched in 2012

Project Cost
Varies, depending on trail alignments, location, and necessary infrastructure

Funding
Private foundation—William Penn Foundation; federal, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and local transportation funds; private companies; donations

Organizational Leads
Circuit Trails Coalition, William Penn Foundation, Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission

Maintenance and Upkeep
Various state, county, and municipal governments, and trail development and volunteer organizations



The Schuylkill Banks Boardwalk is a 2,000-foot-long (610 m) section of the Circuit Trails network that extends roughly 50 feet (15 m) from the Schuylkill Riverbank in Center City, Philadelphia. *(Rails-to-Trails Conservancy)*

THE CIRCUIT is a growing regional trail network that connects destinations across Greater Philadelphia. Consisting of paths that link city centers, transit hubs, parks, and recreational destinations, the Circuit allows pedestrians and bicyclists to travel among urban, suburban, and rural destinations without having to use a motor vehicle.

With 300 miles (483 km) in place and ongoing progress toward the goal of reaching 750 miles (1,200 km) of trails before 2040, the Circuit is emerging as a key component of the overall transportation system in Greater Philadelphia. The real estate community has taken notice. Developers building near the Circuit have noted trail access as a key amenity for residential and commercial properties, and homeowners close to Circuit trails are experiencing increased property values.

Project Background

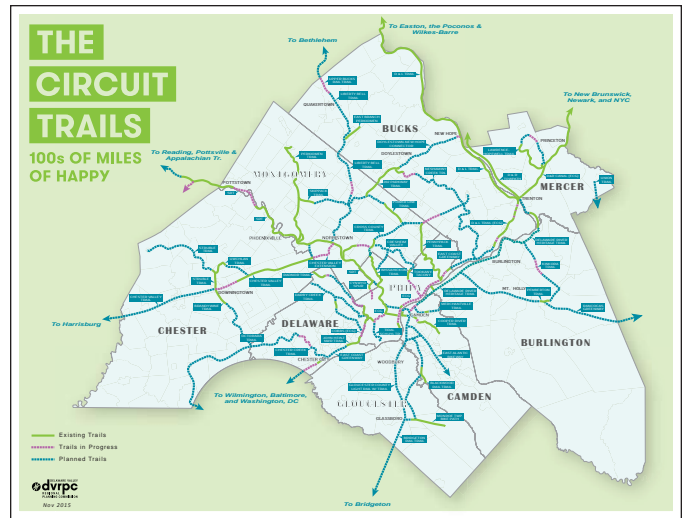
Bicycling in Philadelphia. The Circuit, Greater Philadelphia's regional trail network, connects towns and cities across the area, providing pedestrians and bicyclists with car-free routes among diverse destinations, including downtown Philadelphia; Camden, New Jersey; and the Valley Forge National Historical Park. Along the way, trail users can access public transportation services, employment centers, open space, and various town centers. At present, 300 miles (483 km) of the network are in place, with a total of 750 miles (1,200 km) planned.

The Circuit expands on over a quarter-century of successful, yet piecemeal, trail development in the region and channels local support for improved active transportation infrastructure.

In 2015, Michael Nutter, former mayor of Philadelphia, summed up the effects of the popularity of bicycling in the city, noting, "Of the top ten big cities of America, Philadelphia has the highest percentage of bicycle commuters per capita. . . . Bicycling is a fundamental aspect of a city's mobility, economic development, public health, and environmental sustainability."

The U.S. Census shows that bicycle commuting in the Philadelphia region increased 151 percent from 2000 to 2009, and in 2014, 1.9 percent of Philadelphia commuters traveled by bike—a rate 1.75 times that of New York City and over three times higher than that of the United States as a whole.

Connecting regional trails. Due in large part to the high rate of bicycling in Philadelphia and the ongoing construction of paths like the Schuylkill River Trail, which sees up to 1 million users annually, leaders from the William Penn Foundation, a private philanthropic organization, and transportation and environmental advocates from the Bicycle Coalition of Greater Philadelphia and the Pennsylvania Environmental Council began to convene those involved with local trail planning, building, and programming in



As of 2015, 300 miles (483 km) of the planned 750-mile (1,200 km) Circuit Trails network were in place, with many more in development. (Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission)

2010. This effort led to the formal creation of the Circuit Coalition in 2012, a group tasked with connecting the region's disjointed trails across nine local counties.

The Circuit Coalition includes more than 40 partner organizations, ranging from nonprofit advocacy groups, private foundations, and state, county, and local governments. The coalition engages in a wide array of activities, including advocating for trail funding, managing trail construction projects, and working with private developers and other companies to see trails incorporated into their developments.

Funding for the Circuit comes from a variety of sources. The William Penn Foundation has financed many of the efforts of the Circuit Coalition and has made a significant financial contribution



The Circuit Trails connect pedestrians and bicyclists to local parks, including Cooper River Park in Pennsauken, New Jersey. (*Rails-to-Trails Conservancy*)

to the planning, design, and construction of individual trail segments. Government transportation funds (federal, state, county, and local) also have funded Circuit trails, while nonprofit groups and donations from area residents and private companies—including real estate development firms with properties on or near the Circuit—have funded trail infrastructure as well.

Since the effort to connect the Circuit was launched, over 50 miles (80 km) of new trails have opened, with many more in development. Over 25 percent of the Philadelphia region lives within one mile (1.6 km) of a completed Circuit trail. Finishing the network will raise that figure to 50 percent.

The Circuit enjoys broad support. A 2015 survey conducted by the Bicycle Coalition of Greater Philadelphia found that 85 percent of area residents supported building more trails in their counties and 60 percent of respondents said they would like to have access to a trail within ten minutes of their homes.

Development, Quality of Life, and Economic Impacts

Investments in the Circuit have led to significant positive economic impacts for developers, local residents, and area municipal governments. When the Circuit was launched in 2012, Mayor Nutter explained how trail development can spur economic activity, stating, “Connecting the Circuit of trails in our region makes the Greater Philadelphia region a stronger, smarter, and more sustainable urban and suburban environment that attracts new companies and employers who choose to base their operations here.”

Across the region, the statistics speak for themselves. The Rails-to-Trails Conservancy found that the Schuylkill River Trail, a popular Circuit route, generated \$7.3 million in direct economic

impact along its route in 2009, and the Delaware & Lehigh Trail, a 165-mile (265 km) rail-trail through eastern Pennsylvania, was found to have generated an annual economic impact exceeding \$19 million in 2012. In addition, Rutgers University found that active transportation-related events, businesses, and infrastructure, including the Circuit, were estimated to have contributed \$498 million to the New Jersey economy in 2011.

Local residents are benefiting from higher property values along a number of Circuit routes. For example, a 2011 study by the GreenSpace Alliance and the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission found that properties within a quarter-mile (0.4 km) of the Radnor Trail, a 2.4-mile (3.9 km) trail in Radnor Township, Pennsylvania, were valued on average \$69,000 higher than other area properties further away. Real estate listings in Radnor frequently mention trail access in their advertisements, and for-sale signs often appear on the trail side of properties.

Residential developers have built properties with features that support use of Circuit trails, including the Station at Manayunk, a 149-unit apartment complex on a former brownfield adjacent to the Manayunk Canal Towpath. Developed by J.G. Petrucci, the project was completed in 2014 and features an on-site bike repair shop, a resident bike-share program, and a bicycle wheeling ramp down to the trail, allowing residents to commute by bike to Center City, Philadelphia.

In Philadelphia, Brandywine Realty Trust is developing trail-side properties, including the FMC Tower, a 49-story, 730-foot-tall (222 m) mixed-use skyscraper scheduled to be completed in 2016. Access to the Schuylkill River Trail is touted in advertisements for the tower. Gerard H. Sweeney, Brandywine's president and chief executive officer, expressed his company's support for connecting regional trails in a 2013 letter to the city of Philadelphia, stating, "When fully complete, the Circuit will help connect people to jobs, recreational opportunities, public transportation, and other neighborhoods, and will serve as a gateway to open green space."

Area private companies have invested directly in Circuit trails. Bristol-Myers Squibb, which has a major facility in Lawrenceville, New Jersey, has provided more than \$2.5 million for the development and construction of the 22-mile (35 km) Lawrence-Hopewell Trail, a portion of the Circuit close to Princeton, New Jersey. Educational Testing Services, also located along the route, gave additional financial support, and Brandywine Realty Trust built a segment of the Lawrence-Hopewell Trail running through the Princeton Pike Corporate Center at its own expense.

The trails of the Circuit also contribute to the health of Greater Philadelphia. A 2011 study by the GreenSpace Alliance and the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission found that residents' use of southeastern Pennsylvania's parks and trails, including the Circuit, avoids \$199 million per year in direct medical costs and \$596 million in indirect costs.

The continuing success of the Circuit shows how connected trails can have regional benefits beyond recreation. Across Greater Philadelphia, residents are using trails to get to work, to reach public transportation, and to exercise. The Circuit has also increased local property values and encouraged residential and commercial development along its many routes. As the network continues to expand, there will be further opportunities to invest in private development projects that both benefit from and support active transportation assets across the region.



Top: The Schuylkill Banks Boardwalk, part of the Circuit Trails network, allows pedestrians and bicyclists to commute, exercise, or relax over the Schuylkill River in Philadelphia. (Rails-to-Trails Conservancy)

Bottom: The Circuit Trails network features a mix of local and regional trails, including the Delaware River Heritage Trail. (Rails-to-Trails Conservancy)