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Air Line State Park Trail  
Region Master Plan

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



# Executive Summary

# MESSAGE FROM THE ALSPT COMMITTEE CHAIR



**As I close out my thirty-five-year planning career, this project has been a gift, professionally and personally. It has offered the chance to work with an amazing team of people, rediscover the residents, visitors and towns in eastern Connecticut once again.**

At the outset of this planning project, the enthusiasm and dedication of the individuals affiliated with the Air Line State Park Trail, the twelve towns of the Air Line State Park Region and staff at CT DEEP were the perfect ingredients to create momentum toward an informed and engaged process. This plan would not have been possible without the generous monetary and administrative support of CT DEEP and CT RC&D. Through their funding, a dynamic team of individuals and organizations united toward a common goal; to build a plan for the future of the Air Line State Park Trail and the ALSPT Region.

This past Mother's Day, my son and I once again cycled the trail from Hebron to Willimantic where we had Willi-Brew lunch and a pint. While we've traveled the trail for decades, this trip was a special one. With the close of this project at hand, I made a point of stopping and talking to various and diverse individuals and groups, using a ruse of asking for their input on logo designs for ALSPT Region apparel.

The friendliness of the fellow cyclists, hikers and the walkers, picnickers, horseback riders was once again as inspiring as the many workshops and meeting conversations with the dynamic and dedicated ALSPT stakeholders. I received lots of

feedback, almost all of it positive as everyone wants the best for the trail and the towns of the trail too. All in all, everyone noted there was a lot more work to do and they were excited for the future of the trail.

It's been a privilege to work with a dedicated group of stakeholders and professional consultants. As I close out my thirty-five-year planning career, this project has been a gift, professionally and personally. It has offered the chance to work with an amazing team of people, rediscover the residents, visitors and towns in eastern Connecticut once again. Eastern Connecticut and the ALSPT Region are truly special and undiscovered territory of wonderful opportunities for Connecticut. I wish everyone who worked so diligently on this plan the best of luck as they continue to build out the trail and hidden economic prospects of the region.

**JEANNE DAVIES**

**CT RC&D Executive Director (Retired)  
2023 Forward - ALSPT Region Volunteer**

# OVERVIEW

This executive summary reviews highlights of analysis, discussion and recommendations within the Air Line State Park Region Master Plan (ALSPT Region Master Plan).

Detailed discussion, research, analysis, and recommendations are provided in the ALSPT Region Master Plan. The plan is wide-ranging in its evaluation of the ALSPT, its relationship to the towns and the overall goal of uniting the twelve towns as a region to implement recommendations and achieve the overall goals.

Through the planning process, varied subject areas, such as infrastructure, marketing, business development and conservation were highlighted by the members of the ALSPT Region Stakeholder Committee. Contributing insights from committee members and public originated from their specific ongoing contribution to the ALSPT Region trail system. The goals of this plan was to unify the varied interests into a larger regional vision for the towns and the ALSPT.

There are many moving pieces in this jigsaw puzzle of trail planning. To optimize the ALSPT Region's future, piecing together unique and separate interests or concerns requires collaboration. Through partnership and a new regional structure, ALSPT Region, the member towns, CT DEEP and stakeholders can improve cost efficiencies while also achieving unrealized economic potential inherent in the trail systems and region.



**The ALSPT Region Master Plan » Building a marketable, economically viable, dynamic conservation based multi-use trail experience for the trail user and visitors to the region.**

# GEOGRAPHY

The Air Line State Park Trail Region comprises the twelve towns that host the Air Line State Park Trail corridor spanning the width of eastern Connecticut, from Portland to Thompson. Connecticut, a roughly rectangular shape, extends approximately 90 miles, east to west and 55 miles, north to south. With a 2022 population of 3,626,205, Connecticut ranks 29th nationally in total population and 4th in population density. Eastern Connecticut is distinctive for its land area dedicated to agriculture, small historic villages, compact historic urbanized areas, open space, forests, and a cultural heritage that still personifies rural Connecticut within a vast landscape.

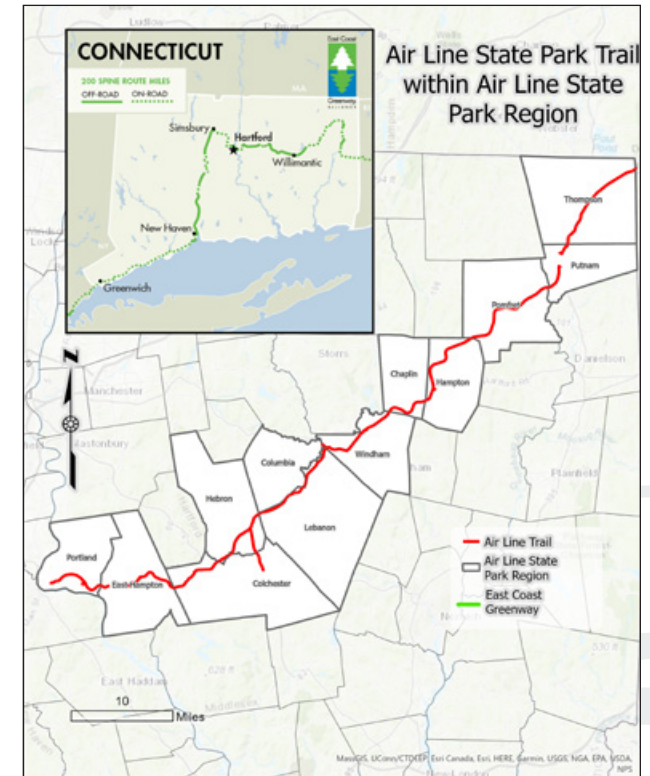
The Air Line State Park Trail (ALSPT) experience coincides with a freshness of immersion into nature. Within the 408 square mile Air Line State Park Trail Region and Portland Extension, the 64-mile-long multi-use Air Line State Park Trail winds through hills and valleys of eastern Connecticut's pristine rural scenery.

The existing trail and the proposed trail section from Portland to East Hampton travels the Arrigoni Bridge on the Connecticut River in Portland to the northeastern corner of Thompson, where it intersects with the Tri-State Marker of the border of Connecticut,

Massachusetts, and Rhode Island. A portion of the trail is designated as a National Recreation Trail. The northern mid-section is part of the East Coast Greenway. Over one half of the trail and towns correspond geographically with "The Last Green Valley," a nationally designated corridor/area.

The ALSPT Region is positively influenced by neighboring areas such as the Hop River State Park Trail, Mansfield and the Storrs Campus of the University of Connecticut, the tourism of the lower CT River Valley and the Eightmile River Watershed.

This Air Line State Park Region Master Plan, inspired through the creative discussion by the original group of 45 trail and town stakeholders, is the compilation of three years focused research. Interviews with numerous stakeholders and public meetings provided input during the planning process at each stage, including an inventory of natural resources on and near the trail. The planning process involved over 130 ALSPT Region stakeholders in a synergistic exploration of the issues, concerns, and possibilities. The discussion and suggestions center on improving new and continued positive experiences for the trail user and leveraging the proximity to the trail to economic advantage for the ALSPT Region towns.

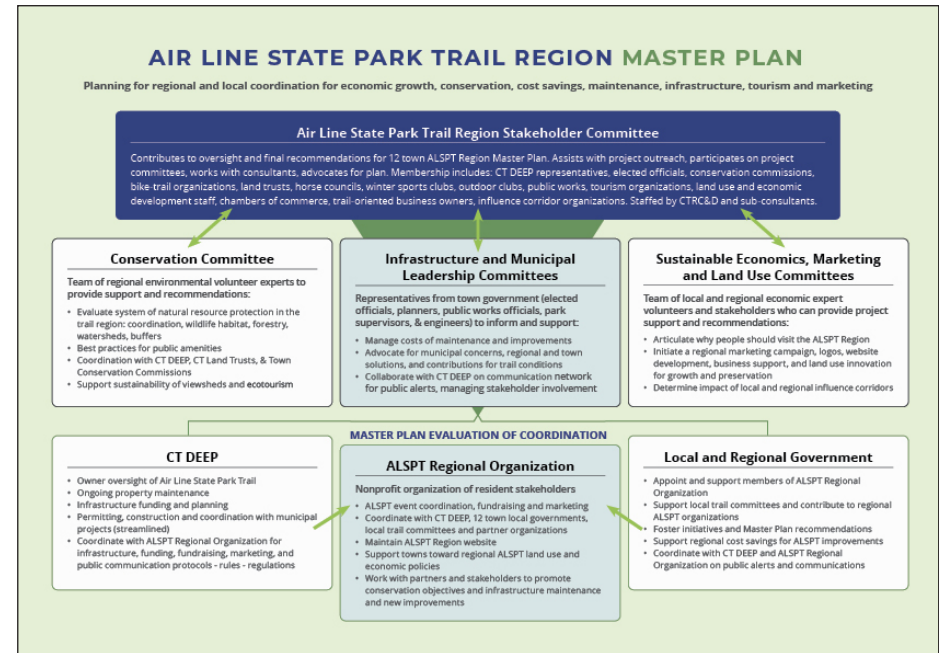


[VIEW OVERVIEW MAP](#)

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This master plan began as a request from the twelve towns of the Air Line State Park Trail Region to the Environmental Review Team (ERT) Program of the Connecticut Resource Conservation and Development Area (CT RC&D).

- CT RC&D provided matching funds, a professional planner, and applied on behalf of this twelve-town collective for a Recreation Trails Grant from the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (CT DEEP).
- CT DEEP generously awarded a grant to CT RC&D in 2019 to research and write the Air Line State Park Trail Region Master Plan.
- CT DEEP staff and scientists gave their valuable time to the research and support of this master plan.
- The twelve towns, through their elected officials and staff, provided invaluable insights and time to support research, public outreach, and contribution to information workshops.
- Trail committees from many of the twelve towns provided much needed viewpoints and understanding of trail conditions and the viewpoint of trail users.
- Representatives from influence areas provided much needed knowledge of the work being accomplished in their area and how the work could positively impact the ALSPT Region.
- The 130 member ALSPT Region Stakeholder Committee were the backbone of the planning process. They worked for over three years with the consulting staff to bring this plan to completion.



[VIEW ALSPT STAKEHOLDERS](#)

**The 130 member ALSPT Region Stakeholder Committee were the backbone of the planning process. They worked for over three years with the consulting staff to bring this plan to completion.**



At the outset, CT RC&D and the ALSPT Region Stakeholder Committee chose a slightly different path from selecting one consultant to hire several professional consultants led and managed by CT RC&D with planning oversight provided by CT RC&D. The goal was to bring numerous viewpoints and insights together to promote a grassroots perspective and vision for the ALSPT Region, future infrastructure, maintenance and regional marking of the trail. The consulting team included those shown here.

### **CT DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION (CT DEEP)**

- Kim Bradley, Trails & Greenways Program Coordinator
- David Buckley – Park and Forest Supervisor
- Joe Cassone - Fisheries Biologist
- Laurie Giannotti, Trails & Greenways Program Coordinator (retired)
- Matthew Gocłowski -Fisheries Biologist
- Brian Hess - Wildlife Division Supervisor
- Ann Kilpatrick- Wildlife Biologist
- Michael Lambert, Chief of Bureau of Outdoor Recreation
- Nathan Piche - Forester
- Matthew Quinn – Park and Forest Supervisor
- Tom Tyler – Director of State Parks

### **CONTRIBUTING CONSULTANTS**

- Chris Allan, Soil Scientist
- Kim Bradley - UConn Extension – Trail Coordination
- Laura Brown – UConn Extension – Economics
- Lois Bruinooge - The Last Green Valley
- Aaron Budris – Naugatuck Valley Council of Government
- Kevin Grindle, ASLA, PLA – Barton & Loguidice
- Hank Gruner, Herpetologist
- Pete Hary – Quinn and Hary Marketing
- Kevin Hively – Ninigret Partners
- Fran Kefalas – The Last Green Valley
- Kip Kolesinkas, Soil Scientist
- Todd Mervosh, Invasive Species
- Dan Mullins, Executive Director, ECCD
- Ed Pawlak, Soil Scientist, Connecticut Ecosystems, LLC
- Amy Petrone, AICP, CZEO, Professional Planning Services
- Jean Pillo, Watershed Conservation Manager, ECCD
- Charlotte Pyle, PhD, Ecologist
- David Quinn – Quinn and Hary Marketing
- Dennis Quinn, Herpetologist
- Andy Rzeznikiewicz, Ornithology, CT Audubon/Pomfret
- Kelly Star, Natural Resource Specialist, CRCCD
- Randolph Steinen, PhD, Geologist
- Emily Wilson – UConn Extension – CLEAR – GIS
- Mark Zessin, P.E. – Barton & Loguidice

### **CONNECTICUT RESOURCE CONSERVATION & DEVELOPMENT**

- Jeanne Davies, AICP: Executive Director/ Plan Development
- Chris Roberts: Mapping and Economic/Land Use Research
- Jane Flynn: Financial Administration
- Andrea Peres: Project Kickoff- Outreach Assistant
- Stan Malcolm: Volunteer Contributing Photographer (Performance Vision)
- Kelly Collar: Mad River Creative – Report Final Design & Website Management
- Rob Lloyd: TechNet Computing - Technical Support & Management
- Hannah Hurwitz: Logo Design/ Social Media Coordination



# VISION



The Air Line State Park Trail (ALSPT) is the region’s recreational gateway corridor, traversing the breadth of eastern Connecticut. Along with its partner, the Hop River Trail that runs from Manchester to the junction with the ALSPT in Willimantic center, the ALSPT epitomizes the eastern Connecticut regional experience, especially for the trail user. It winds through the region’s villages with their small businesses and coffee shops, the vineyards, the farms, the diverse and dynamic Willimantic center, the

country backroads, state forests and parks, and the hospitable low-key residences of eastern Connecticut. It is an unrealized asset to the state with its opportunity to showcase the quieter side of Connecticut.

This master plan was designed to gather the most current information and insights from numerous sources and organizations who influence the trail’s future. The goal is to promote a functioning well maintained multi-use trail of over 64 miles.

## The plan identifies these opportunities for the twelve towns of the Air Line State Park Trail Region and CT DEEP:

- Recommendations toward systematic maintenance coordination with CT DEEP.
- Collaboration on maintenance, safety systems, service amenities, a schedule of infrastructure improvements to complete the trail, and
- Recommendations for how to build economic and tourism growth through a sustainable conservation-based trail corridor in collaboration with the state, local wayfinding, website and social media marketing and land use policy that supports the viewshed and conservation resources of the trail.

# HISTORY



As the twelve towns and the CT DEEP look toward the future for the Air Line State Park Trail, the trail experience is inspired by its history as a railroad. The name of the rail line and the trail is derived from drawing a straight line through the air between Boston and New York City, hence Air Line Railroad or Air Line Trail. Similar to the effort to build out this multi-use trail, the rail line construction from the 1840s to the 1870s involved challenging terrain, bridges, voluminous cuts and fills to ensure a flat grade for a train’s journey from Boston to New York City.



# TYOLOGY

As a multi-use rail trail and linear state park, segments have been completed over decades. The trail has been described as various sections which vary in conditions or affinity. Within each of these trail sections, trail bed conditions vary from passable for hikers or horseback riders, compacted stone dust for multiple uses included bicyclists with hybrid tires and bicyclists with aggressive tread tires for mountain biking.

## TRAIL CHARACTERISTICS

Understanding the typology of the ALSPT characteristics provides a benchmark for discussion on the optimal location for various surfaces, designed for anticipated trail use.

Where the Air Line State Park Trail travels through rural areas, there is less opportunity to access services, safety connections, emergency services, cell service, food, water and amenities. Road suitability for biking on state roadways, between town centers/services and the trail, is an important component to be addressed for the region.

## TRAIL USER TYPOLOGY

The population of ALSPT visitors is as diverse as the conditions offered by the ALSPT trail, whether the visitor is a novice or expert cyclist, a mountain bike cyclist, a hiker, a runner, an equestrian,

snowshoer, a long-distance walker or a cross-country skier. These typologies provide the following guidance for constructing the trail to meet standards for safety, accessibility, and reliability for maintenance over the long term.

## DATA COLLECTION AND FIELD INVESTIGATION

The planning process was fortunate to have a great team of firms and individuals dedicated to the future of the trail. The data collection and field research involved four separate engagement subsets that would inform the full findings and recommendations of the Air Line State Park Trail Region Master Plan. Integration of the four subsets of research between the four research teams was managed by the project planner with support from the consulting team and CT DEEP.

The process involved numerous interviews with each of the towns, the CT DEEP, stakeholders, trail committees, virtual roundtables, field and site tours of the trail towns and influence areas. More detailed data from plan research is located within the appendices. Based on a reader's subject matter interest, there is more in-depth, town by town analysis of conservation and infrastructure in the appendices as well.

**Trail & Connections to Adjacent Trails — Trail Characteristics** FIGURE 2A

	ASPHALT PATH	RE-ADAPTED ROADWAY	CONCRETE PATH	BOARDWALK	CRUSHED GRAVEL	NATURAL SURFACES	MOUNTAIN BIKE TRAIL	FOOT TRAIL
<b>SURFACE</b>	10+ ft asphalt path	Either 8 ft road side bike path (sidewalk possible) or gravel roadbed	5-10 ft wide path (Pavement Heritage Trail gross above is 8 ft wide)	5-8 ft wide wood, composite or concrete boards	5-12% crushed limestone or similar stone dust compacted	3-4 ft natural graded surface	Ungraded natural surface for both trail hiking and mountain bikes	3-4 ft natural surface: graded or ungraded
<b>AVERAGE COST</b>	\$150-\$200K per linear mile	Low cost for markings - shared road pavement or recycled roadbed	\$55/ing ft estimated	\$40/ing ft	\$50/ing ft	\$5/ing ft	Under \$5/ing ft depending on construction	Under \$5/ing ft
<b>NOTES</b>	Most durable option for bicycling but relatively incompatible for horse riding and similar activities	Not to be used for road grades exceeding 10% for long stretches - avoid excessive grades	Durable option - intensive construction process	Good for location with designated critical resources (property with drainage crossings, habitats)	Crushed stone paths built to ADA accessibility guidelines - unless treated properly with drainage system, will erode	Defer to specialist with experience with trail building guidelines for maintenance and reducing erosion	Defer to specialist with experience with trail building guidelines for maintenance and reducing erosion	Defer to specialist such as conservation districts or other trail builders to avoid erosion and damage
<b>USE</b>	High traffic, high use trails that are part of a multi-modal transportation network - ideal for urban settings	Urban settings or where bike racks can be used for connections to transit or other modes of transport	Heavy use, helpful in areas prone to erosion for stabilization of slope	Minimal length applications for bridges and trail areas with sensitive resources	Rails to trails for long distance rural travel and minimal grade-distribution on steep terrain	Applicability for access paths to ALSPT trail from neighboring partner municipalities	Applicability for special mountain bike areas adjacent to ALSPT	Access from ALSPT to trail business locations or other areas and "cutovers"

[VIEW TRAIL CHARACTERISTICS](#)



[VIEW TRAIL USE](#)

FIGURE 2D:  
Four Engagement Subsets for the Air Line State Park Trail Region



**CONSERVATION**

- Identify community and state conservation goals for the trail system, adjoining forests, open space
- Analysis of conservation based infrastructure required for trail maintenance and new builds.
- Inventory of archaeology, access, watershed, farming, fisheries, forest continuity, wildlife, herpetology, pollinator pathways, and invasive species



**INFRASTRUCTURE**

- Survey of trail conditions, road suitability and connections to town centers and services
- Analysis for stormwater management, watershed protection, ADA accessibility, and parking
- Research on optimal locations for restrooms, drinking water, cell service and wayfinding



**ECONOMICS AND LAND USE**

- Research and analysis of demographics, business sectors, workforce, tourism data
- Review of land use policies, zoning, and regional and state policies
- Evaluation of similar economic based trail corridor plans, success and challenges



**LEADERSHIP & GOVERNANCE**

- Review of municipal capabilities to support regional leadership of twelve town alliance
- Interview with trail committees and partner organizations to assess commitment to an alliance
- Outline CT DEEP guidance and relationship with towns and partner organizations

**VIEW ENGAGEMENT SUBSETS**



**PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT SUMMARY**

The Air Line State Park Trail Region Stakeholder Committee initially had 24 active participants. As the pandemic hindered the ability to build public input through in-person workshops, additional participants and stakeholders were sought out through direct emailing or coordination through town contacts.

The initial Air Line State Park Trail Stakeholder Committee expanded to a stakeholder group with over

130 participants informing the planning process. This group was regularly updated by email with new developments and research. By 2021, additional outdoor meetings were conducted at specific site locations to talk about conservation resources, partner organizations connections, management issues and infrastructure/maintenance planning.

# CONSERVATION

Of the many multi-use trails in Connecticut, the Air Line State Park Trail is an exceptionally unique corridor. While the trail's primary feature is its designation as a state park, a linear one that currently extends from East Hampton to Thompson, it also serves as a rural recreation corridor and transportation system owned, maintained, and improved by the CT DEEP. CT DEEP received cooperative support by other organizations and/or local municipalities. It connects and joins other trail systems in Connecticut, such as the Hop River State Park Trail, the Colchester Spur Trail, the Nipmuck, Goodwin and Natchaug hiking trails and various multi-use trails in Massachusetts and Rhode Island.

Within this trail-oriented transportation system, there is a vast acreage of land that requires at-

tention to natural resources and wildlife management. From state forests and parks, land trusts property to municipal open space and nonprofit outdoor centers that branch off from this multi-use recreation corridor, natural resource systems and wildlife are monitored by various organizations, including the CT DEEP. Many infrastructure and maintenance activities require permitting and coordination with CT DEEP Wildlife Division.

The economics of proactive conservation on the trail and nearby property is fundamental to the tourism and marketing of the ALSPT Region. The trail provides a transformational continuity of riding, walking, hiking for miles and miles through an expansive rural landscape, endowed with diversity of topography, geomorphology, vegetation, forests, and wildlife.

As a destination attraction for eastern Connecticut, trail-oriented conservation activities on or near the trail accentuates its eco-tourism economy. The CT DEEP, as the owner and maintainer of the Air Line State Park Trail system, currently has very limited staff and resources to manage increased daily usage of the trail system and the potential impact on natural resources, water quality and habitat that would result. Like other trail systems in the state and nationwide, there is an ongoing need for collaboration with towns and trail committees, coordination with conservation organizations, adaptability to change, and flexibility to build a synergistic management of the trail system.

**The Air Line State Park Trail connects and joins other trail systems in Connecticut, such as the Hop River State Park Trail, the Colchester Spur Trail, the Nipmuck, Goodwin and Natchaug hiking trails, and various multi-use trails in Massachusetts and Rhode Island.**



# INFRASTRUCTURE

The focus on creating and acting upon strategies for infrastructure improvements and routine maintenance are necessary to assure park visitors have a lasting and positive impression of this state park and the ALSPT Region. The ALSPT Region Stakeholder Committee and project team have worked with the towns and CT DEEP to define appropriate criteria for determining near-term opportunities for improving continuity of the trail as well as connections to town services critical to the trail user experience.

With a state park trail system that extends 53 miles, with another 15 miles for the Colchester Spur and the Portland Extension, routine trail maintenance and long-term infrastructure improvements require a synchronized and cost-effective plan. Through research of similar trail systems nationwide, the important finding is that no single organization can succeed in managing a linear trail system of this magnitude. Numerous partners – state, regions, towns, and federal agencies with access to funding – can create an ongoing communication and maintenance network to ensure long-term reliability, funding to towns who assist in maintenance of the ALSPT, and enhanced trail safety.

Connecticut state park and forest preserves have over one hundred years of long practice in



management and maintenance. The configuration and access of these parks and forests allow for planned closure for the public as needed for maintenance or emergency repairs. Connecticut's multi-use trail parks require special planning and maintenance management procedures as their boundaries are porous and quickly accessible despite posted closures. The ALSPT is easily accessed and traveled for a variety of activities daily and year-round. Multi-use trails are tourism and park-like designations that require specialized maintenance and management as reliable safe travel ways with road crossings, parking areas, signage and drainage infrastructure based on ongoing public use.

The ALSPT Region, partnering with CT DEEP ideally would create a yearly or bi-yearly communications roundtable to address management and maintenance by CT DEEP, municipal partners and stakeholder groups. This process would greatly improve the long-term success and continued advancement of the Air Line State Park Trail and its viability as a tourism region.

Ongoing issues of infrastructure and maintenance activities and concerns outlined have been evaluated through numerous interviews with towns, trail committees and the CT DEEP. These sections are a brief synopsis of the full analysis presented in the ALSPT Region Master Plan.

## PARKING

Due to the ALSPT's increasing popularity and high frequency of use, parking locations require a higher level of maintenance and oversight by the CTDEEP and CTDOT on state routes and collaboration with municipal staff. Connecticut's website identifies at least 32 parking areas along the ALSPT park's advertised corridor. This large volume of parking options provides opportunities and also challenges to ALSPT access. Many of

these locations have been a primary focus during numerous interviews with CT DEEP park staff, town representatives and project stakeholder. They also represent a significant focus area for proposed ALSPT improvements within this chapter's recommendations. With numerous official parking areas, there is an opportunity to interact positively with the public for amenities, information and public outreach.



## ROADWAY INTERSECTIONS

The Air Line State Park Trail Region contains approximately 62 roadway intersections, and this number is expected to increase as Portland's trail extends west to the Connecticut River and Putnam closes the gaps in the park through the downtown business district. These intersections are fairly evenly distributed throughout the ALSPT corridor and have been the focus of numerous conversations with CT DEEP Parks Division, town public works and elected officials, Council

of Government representatives and project stakeholders. They are a significant focus area for proposed ALSPT improvement recommendations. Local and state resources are committed to making ongoing intersection improvements through seasonal maintenance programs and longer-term infrastructure improvements, but there is significant work and coordination with CT DEEP to be accomplished toward reliable infrastructure that is easier and cost effective to maintain.

## CELL PHONE SERVICE

Cell phone service on the trail is not reliable in many locations. This can create a safety issue for visitors who rely on their phone for location, directions, and information about the trail. As part

of a next-step action in the building of amenities, work with service providers to survey signal strength over the length of the trail and identify solutions.



## SEASONAL MAINTENANCE OF VEGETATION

Seasonal maintenance is performed to create a horizontal and vertical “clear zone” that is maintained in order to provide a user friendly and inviting experience for trail users as well as safe and secure access for emergency response personnel. This work is routinely undertaken by municipal public works/highway departments,

recreation departments and through volunteer efforts. Through the recommended bi-annual meetings between the ALSPT Region, town staff and CT DEEP, mutual-aid arrangements between town, trail stakeholders and CT DEEP can be discussed and coordinated for the year to manage vegetation, including invasive species.



## DRAINAGE IMPROVEMENTS

The park’s trail system relies heavily on drainage infrastructure installed during the railroad’s original construction in the 1800s, and many of the remaining features are in remarkably good condition. That said, the corridor has seen a significant impact on drainage systems caused by an increase in built development since the railroad’s original construction. The growth in structures

and roadways has led to a significant increase in impervious coverage. The current developed landscape results in a decrease in pervious areas that allow stormwater to recharge into the ground. Negative impacts from increased runoff can be seen throughout the corridor, from continual erosion, minor and major flooding, soil erosion and washouts on the trail and near bridge abutments.

## EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

While the trail system is owned and managed by CT DEEP, emergency first response to situations on the trail is generally tied to each of the twelve town’s emergency management. There are mutual aid agreements between towns to provide additional support to each other. CT DEEP can further coordinate and plan with towns for these types of situations and whether additional options should be explored to optimize safety and response to emergencies on the trail. Work closely with the CT Department of Emergency Management and Homeland Security Region for funding of this initiative.

## RESTROOMS AND POTABLE WATER

Restrooms and drinking water are a required amenity on the ALSPT, ideally situated at each official parking lot managed by either CT DEEP or a town. There are possibilities for permanent or temporary, portable restrooms and advantages and disadvantages to each option. Seasonally, CT DEEP contracts to situate portable restrooms at strategic locations in state parks. The ALSPT trail optimal locations are near parking areas on highly traveled state roads. This requires a strategy toward structure, placement and monitoring, whether the rest room and potable facilities are portable or permanent.

## LAND USE & ZONING

Land use adjacent to the trail has the potential to enhance or detract from that trail experience. This chapter provides guidance for land use officials in towns and regions to explore options for preserving the scenic viewshed, enhancing the gateway from the trail head to a village center, or working with businesses to connect with the trail and trail users in a visually positive way. Through an overview of existing zoning districts near the ALSPT in each town, land use planning in each town and for each zoning district can be modified to promote trail connections or buffers.



Each community along the trail has its own set of zoning regulations and maps. Here are general descriptions of

the zoning districts and land uses along the trail from the western most town of Portland to the eastern most town of Thompson. Six categories of land use- zoning subsets were created to help describe common zoning practices along the length of the trail. Using these categories, recommendations are provided to assist towns with consideration of reviewing current plans and regulations to optimize trail- adjacent use compatibility.

## ECONOMICS OF THE ALSPT REGION

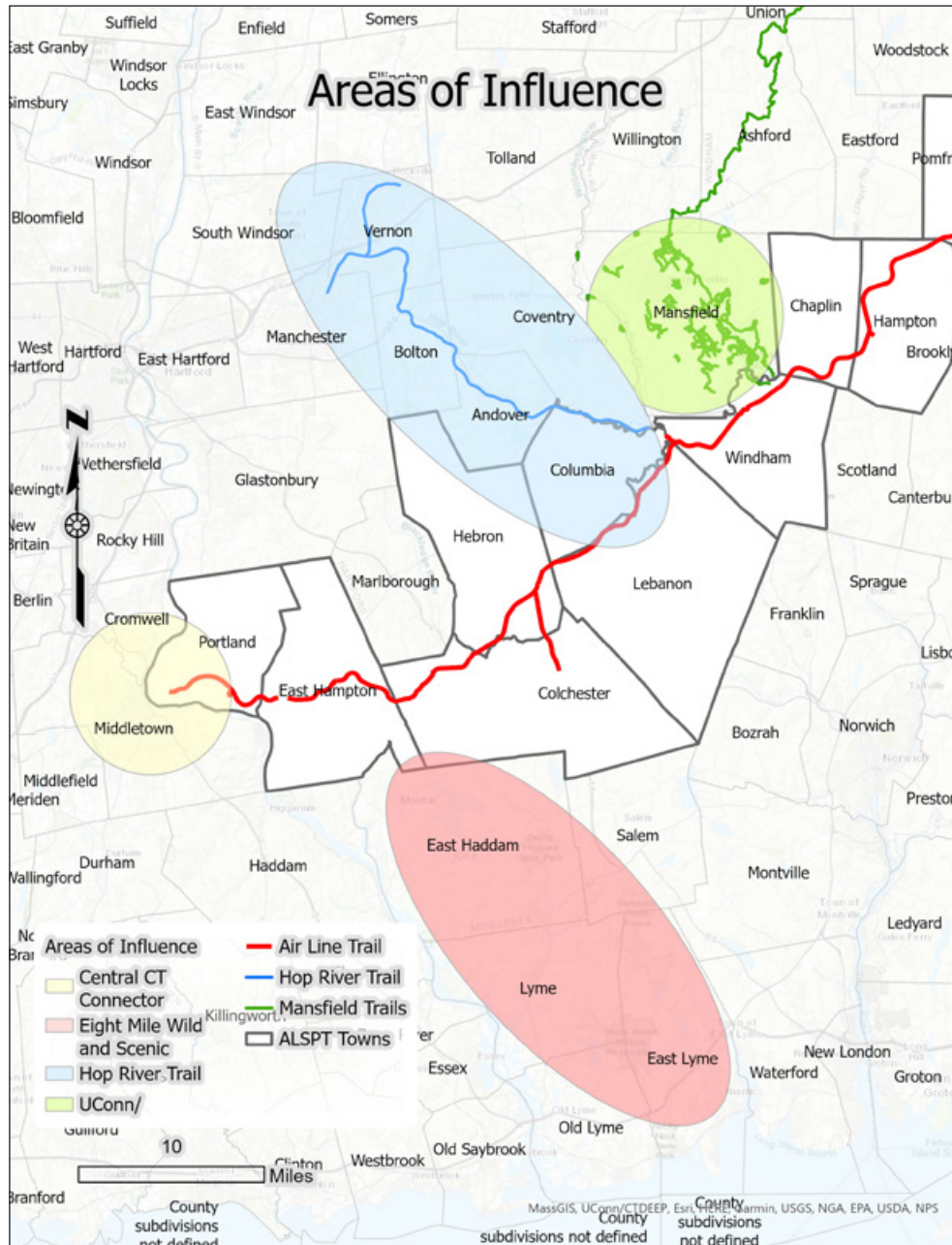
Beyond small business development, wealth construction and economic prosperity, trails contribute to the local economy in a variety of ways through their economic impact, health and quality of life improvements, community health and safety improvements land conservation. Trails have been found to increase valuations & prices and decrease the time on the market for properties located close to them, as shown in the following examples throughout the country:

Based on the Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan utilization estimates, there is a potential pool of more than 900,000 riders who could use the ALSPT. This is assuming that adjacent counties represent a pool of bicyclists that is as large as 639,000 bicyclists or as few as 166,000, a pool of multi-use trail users as large as 197,000 and a pool of mountain bikers as large as 172,000. Similarly, the data implies that the total pool in host communities (those communities through which the Trail runs) is 24,000, with 5,000 frequent users, 7,500 trail users (with more than 800 frequent users) and 6,600 mountain bikers (with more than 600 frequent users).



The ALSPT already plays a significant role in many of the communities' local economies. Nearly every Plan of Conservation & Development (POCD) of the communities along the Trail explicitly mentions the ALSPT as a key asset. Several communities also mention expanded tourism as a key economic development initiative in their POCDs and a few communities explicitly mention the ALSPT as a development asset for recruiting talent and businesses.

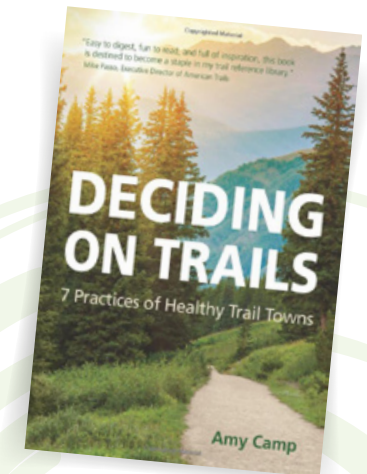
A motivational strategy for the ALSPT Region is creating an economic growth plan around the concept of Trail Towns. Trail Towns is a marketing method which originated in multi-use trail towns in Pennsylvania to promote local economies



and their proximity to the trail. This region provides a booklet and support to help other regions create their own Trail Town marketing plan.

The ALSPT Region can also tap into some economic influence and opportunities beyond the boundaries of the ALSPT Region to increase the number of users on the trail and to improve the economies of the towns along the ALSPT. Marketing and economic growth for Connecticut transcends geographic boundaries. There are many influence regions within the state that align and yet also compete for economic and tourism relevance.

Nationally, there are numerous programs and support to towns to build economic connections to trails. The Trail Towns Program is one such program and through research for this plan, "Deciding on Trails" is also an excellent segue into education on how the twelve towns of the ALSPT Region can become trail towns.





# MARKETING AND BRANDING

Through this planning process, the ALSPT Region has started to define itself through several pilot projects. The twelve towns and trail committees have contributed to content to build an ALSPT Region website to define the tourism geography of the region, the relationship to the trail and the activities, events and sightseeing inherent in the region's lexicon. Coordination of signage and branding continues as numerous partner organizations and towns seek grant funding to build information signs. The critical goal defined by this plan is to unite the towns and organizations of the region into one identifiable branding scheme to convey a regional brand that complements the ALSPT logo designed by CT DEEP and messaging from CT VISIT.

In marketing the trail, the ALSPT Region will need to stage marketing to match trail conditions as the region and CT DEEP simultaneously work to improve continuity in the trail system for all allowed trail uses. Targeted messaging for expected conditions to potential trail users is critical to the next phase of marketing. In an age of quick information and social media sharing, a poor or bad review can deter new trail visitors. The ALSPT Region should continue to revise and update its website to fully communicate conditions and exciting new infrastructure on the



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*In 2021, a pocket-size map was produced for eight of the 12 towns. Interviews with trail users found that many of the respondents didn't know where they were relative to trail, town, or region. This can be both a safety concern and impact the experience for current and future trail visitors.*

trail. Another important marketing tool includes building the ALSPT Region Trail community by engaging with the public as stakeholders toward improved conditions on the trail.

Beyond coordination with CT DEEP's ALSPT website, CT Trail Finder, the East Coast Greenway, the Eastern CT Tourism District and CT VISIT, the ALSPT Region should advocate for and imprint mapping into the trail system marketing through QR code for cell phones and websites.

A key future action of the newly created ALSPT Region is to create a partnership between Connecticut Office of Tourism with ongoing coordination toward marketing the region. The ALSPT Region should work and advocate with CT VISIT and Eastern Regional Tourism District to

clarify visitors' understanding of the geography and the places, journeys, and amenities available in the ALSPT Region.

There is also a necessary action going forward in partnership with CT DEEP, UConn and the CT Office of Tourism to map and geo-locate amenities and services while branding and marketing. Interviews with trail users found that many of the respondents didn't know where they were relative to trail, town, or region. This can be both a safety concern and impact the experience for current and future trail visitors.

# WAYFINDING

Wayfinding is a high priority to the ALPST Region so that visitors can navigate the trail and easily determine their relative locations to their start and end point, and access services and emergency support if required. Signage is the mechanism by which wayfinding is communicated effectively. These two important elements should work effectively together as they will play a crucial role in marketing and providing supportive trail user experience on the Air Line State Park Trail.

To ensure that the signs are easy to understand, they should offer clear directions to the trailhead, landmarks, scenic overlooks, as well as access points, parking areas and other locations. The wayfinding signage should provide critical guidance for emergency personnel when needed since EMTs, medics, police and fire officials will use mile markers to pinpoint where on the trail their assistance is needed.

The signs will also promote safety and sustainability, encouraging visitors to follow designated paths and dispose of trash properly. The first wayfinding step to incorporate into future signage involves color coding. Color coding allows the trail user and visitor to the ALSPT Region to quickly correlate their location without reading. This is helpful when driving the region, parking at trail heads, and cycling on the trail. Each color code can be incorporated into signs in progress and future signage by towns.



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# LEADERSHIP AND IMPLEMENTATION

Effective leadership for the ALSPT Region and the ALSPT corridor is a critical component of establishing and sustaining implementation of the recommendations outlined in this ALSPT Region Master Plan. In the case of the Air Line State Park Trail, the single most practical and cost-effective strategy is to begin a bi-annual roundtable with CT DEEP and the new ALSPT Region organization which represents the twelve towns and other stakeholders in the ALSPT Region.

A key first step is the creation of the Air Line State Park Region organization into a nonprofit 501c3. As part of the planning process, the option of transforming the current 130+ member stakeholder group into a new nonprofit organization for the ALSPT Region was discussed. The recommendation included two representatives from each town as the Board of Directors with trail partners

and stakeholders as voting members of the full ALSPT Region board. The ALSPT Region has secured a \$75,000 grant from CTDEEP Recreational Trail Program in May 2023 with a 20% match supplied by town and trail committee volunteers. The purpose of this grant is to formalize the ALSPT Region organization along with several unifying marketing and event projects.

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*At right: in East Hampton, Site Tour of Upcoming Infrastructure Project Funded by Congressionally Directed Spending: Congressman Courtney Sponsor*





# EXAMPLES OF RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations shown here are a sample of recommendations from each chapter in the Air Line State Park Trail Region Master Plan.

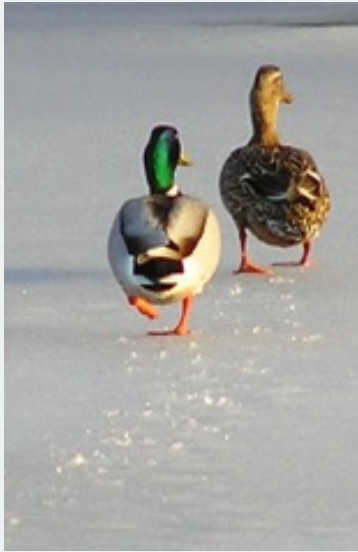
## LEADERSHIP AND COMMUNICATIONS

- It is critical to the ALSPT Region that an ongoing communication network be established for the regional trail system between the new ALSPT Region group, the CT DEEP, member towns, trail committees and various partner organizations. This should begin in Fall 2023 with coordination by the ALSPT Region leadership and continue forward biannually each year in March and November.
- Work with state legislators to specially fund through bonding an infrastructure buildout of the full trail system from Arrigoni Bridge to the Tri-state Marker in Thompson. For continuity of maintenance, safe trail conditions for cyclists on the full 64 miles of trail, this initiative will fill in the trail gaps, create economic growth opportunities and situate the ALSPT Region and State of Connecticut to leverage federal funds for more advanced infrastructure through national trail designation.

- Work across boundaries with influence areas, other towns, the universities in the ALSPT Region to improve marketing of trail progress and the website as a virtual destination for trip planning.
- Hire a part-time staff person at the beginning to support the ALSPT Region by arranging bi-annual workshops, ALSPT Region sponsored events, coordinate updates to website consultant and maintain database.
- Form the emerging ALSPT Region as a nonprofit for fund raising purposes. Until fully operational with staff as a formal 501c3, coordinate toward staffing and financial administration through potentially The Last Green Valley (which shares common goals and objectives with the ALSPT Region) or CT RC&D.



- Advocate for and build, coordinating with CT DEEP, The Last Green Valley, the Councils of Governments and the University of Connecticut CLEAR (CT ECO) toward geospatial database construction for the ALSPT Region and trail system.
- Work together toward efforts with state and federal legislators to buildout additional trail specialized infrastructure (bridges, permanent restroom structures, trail connections to town centers) to improve the trail user experience.



## CONSERVATION

- Promote the conservation trail goals; in work orders, service agreements or contracts set the terms to manage expectations. Work closely with CT DEEP prior to and during this process.
- Monitor and access online Natural Diversity Database Review for recommendations to avoid negative impacts to threatened, endangered or of special concern species.
- Follow new innovations for site specific stormwater drainage and best management practices for stormwater management and promotion of methods to ensure water quality.
- Manage invasive species prior to and/or after any tree cutting by mechanical or chemical means.
- Create a pollinator pathway on the trail and neighboring properties. Different types of pollinators will create a destination aspect for trail users as well as habitat enhancement.
- All trail contributors and management should continually inventory and support a natural resource management plan for the trail. CT DEEP should consider obtaining special grant funding to create a natural resource management plan for the trail corridor.



## INFRASTRUCTURE

- State legislators should strategize to fund CT DEEP for additional staff dedicated year-round to the Air Line State Park Trail system to assist with infrastructure permitting, ongoing maintenance coordination, general use permits, and serve as single point contact for the ALSPT Region, towns and trail committees.
- Install ALSPT amenities such as pavilions, toilet facilities, picnic tables, trash cans, benches, flag poles where parking areas are large enough, a permitted vendor for food and drink.
- Improve arrival and departure points for the trail in the parking lots/areas to ensure safety of trail users.
- Improve all-weather parking surfaces such as gravel, millings, or pavement along with traffic safety components such as timber guide rails, boulders, or other vehicle barriers
- Public informational signage/kiosks containing general park rules and maps or possibly trail-head specific information.

## LAND USE, ECONOMICS, MARKETING AND WAYFINDING

- Evaluate land use policy near the trail to promote business growth in service clusters zones or in village centers to ensure the larger conservation sections remain protected.
- Coordinate with CT VISIT to recognize the ALSPT Region (similar to “The Last Green Valley”) to describe the region as a tourism destination and provide a link to the ALSPT Region website by January 2025.
- Collaborate with the Hop River Trail Alliance during their wayfinding project for mileage markers, wayfinding strategies and signage.
- Embrace the culture and concept of becoming Trail Towns for the ALSPT Region to promote businesses and the ALSPT Region as a destination in CT and New England.
- Work closely with bike shops and trail oriented businesses to ensure they remain viable and profitable, including promoting



- events concurrently on ALSPT Region website and local business websites.
- Work with regional economic strategy organizations such as the Southeastern CT Enterprise Region (SeCTer) to make trail-oriented businesses aware of small business lending programs that help small to medium-sized businesses expand, upgrade machinery and equipment, and/or relocate in our region.
- Work with event organizers to cross promote the ALSPT Region, its website and the importance of naming the Air Line State Park Trail and the region as the area hosting the event.
- Promote diversity and equity on the trail and within the ALSPT Region. The audience of potential trail users and the economic opportunities, both cultural and economic, are the gift of becoming an inclusive and welcoming region.

