



# Trails for the Middletown Valley

## A report of findings from community listening sessions

Over three evenings in June 2023, Catoctin Land Trust and the Middletown Valley Trails Alliance hosted public listening sessions on creating a connected trail network in Mid-Maryland's Middletown Valley. Objectives of the gatherings included:

- Learning whether there is significant interest in seeing public investment in expanding and developing off-road trail networks;
- Gathering opinions on where such trails might be created, looking both at trails already in Frederick County's trail plan and conceptual new trail corridors;
- Identifying obstacles impeding trail development now;
- Assessing interest in formalizing an organization to promote and support trail development and trail volunteerism.

Combined, more than 60 trails enthusiasts gathered to share ideas and choose priority projects. A dozen or so others expressed interest but were unable to attend. At each gathering, participants were invited to review an enlarged map of Frederick County's current trails master plan. They were also invited to review and add to a concept map of potential trail corridors — using markers to express ideas for trail connections (see attached). At each subsequent meeting, participants began with the concept map marked up and “improved” at the previous gathering.

### Key Findings

There is enthusiastic support for a network of off-road trails in the Valley — including construction of trails identified in the county trail plan and other ideas forwarded by participants.

The need for a more organized constituency was widely endorsed. At each gathering, there was vibrant conversation about how to organize under the Middletown Valley Trails Alliance, the roles of various committees and volunteers, and short- and long-term actions the group could address.

Obstacles to accelerating the pace of trail development were also cited. These include:

- Inadequate staffing levels in Frederick County government, resulting in a lack of staff capacity to pursue large federal grants;
- Low prioritization for trails among some previous county administrations;
- Lack of a framework for trail easements at the state and local levels;
- Absence of an organized, passionate constituency for trails.



## Priority Trail Projects

Of the many ideas presented by participants, four ranked as priority projects:

**1. Middletown to Myersville Trail.** This 4.2-mile path is in the county trail plan, and is currently the subject of feasibility study. County funds have been allocated for a subsequent design phase. Trail advocates prioritized securing funding for completing this trail.

**2. Frederick to Middletown Trail.** This proposed trail — approximately 5 miles, connecting Frederick and Middletown — is in the county trail plan and has already been subject of a feasibility study. With currently robust availability of federal funding, advocates want the county to prioritize this project now. The feasibility study cited technical challenges that, at the time of the study, were considered too expensive for construction. New sources, such as the Reconnecting Communities Program of the U.S. Department of Transportation, are designed for this type of project.

**3. Catoclin South Mountain Loop.** The idea of northern and southern connections between Catoclin Mountain and South Mountain Recreation Area has been a dream among backpackers for decades. It would, promoters say, create a world-class backpacking route in our region.

- A northern connection from Catoclin Mountain Park is already feasible via a 3-mile road walk. Advocates believe it could be signed and safely used today; what is needed is cooperation among park managers and state highway officials.
- A southern connection with Gambrill State Park via a trail from Middletown is part of the current Middletown-Myersville Trail feasibility study. Completing a southerly connection from South Mountain to Middletown could be achieved via a trail to Myersville (and south to Middletown) or to Middletown via trails over eased lands beginning in the vicinity of Reno Monument or points south.

**4. South Mountain Trail.** The concept of a multi-use trail along the eastern flank of South Mountain has captured the imagination of many trail enthusiasts. It would lie primarily on state-owned land, and would make possible a number of other trail loops and connections — such as a Civil War trail along roads and rights-of-way in the Middletown Valley. This trail is not currently in the state's trail plan. Planning and development of this trail requires partners from the State of Maryland Department of Natural Resources, Frederick County, nonprofit organizations, and other entities. Advocates want to work with partners to develop a concept map outlining the steps and requirements to see the project advance. At least one county council member has endorsed the idea.



## **Other findings**

**Burkittsville and the Civil War.** There was support for a Civil War loop associated with the Battle of South Mountain and the many encampments, skirmishes, marches, etc., that took place throughout the Middletown Valley during the entire Civil War period.

**Need for off-road trails for safety.** Many longtime residents expressed concerns about the impact of increased vehicular traffic on bicycle and pedestrian safety. The absence of off-road trails excludes the vast majority of trail users from safely enjoying linear parks. Currently excluded users include young children, families, multi-generational families — all of whom are not comfortable on the roads. Roadway bike lanes are also not appropriate for dogs and pets. An off-road trails system will create safe, scenic connections between parks and towns.

**Train crossing from the Towpath to Brunswick.** When trains park at the entrance to Brunswick Station, access to and from the C&O Canal is completely cut off. In addition to choking off access to a national park, the situation creates avoidable safety hazards by prohibiting people to get from the towpath into Brunswick and for emergency vehicles to get to Brunswick Campground. This situation has been allowed by federal regulators to linger for years, to the detriment of safety and quality of life for the residents of Brunswick. It must be addressed.

**Other towpath connections.** Supporting County plans to connect with the C&O Canal Towpath were supported.

**Stream Valley Parks.** Stream valley parks provide an opportunity to provide green infrastructure, forest buffers, and recreation access.

**Catoctin Creek Water Trail.** Participants discussed the benefits of a water trail, like the Monocacy River Trail, along Catoctin Creek.

**Rural Roads Overlay.** Our rustic roads could provide connections and safe passage as links between trails and parks — for people and wildlife.

**Power lines.** A county investigation into the potential of utilizing power line rights-of-way for trails was encouraged by several participants.

## **Co-benefits of trails**

Participants noted other benefits that could be attained through trail networks, including:

- Safe bicycle and pedestrian access to state, county, and national parks.
- Access to public transportation hubs currently disconnected from residential neighborhoods.



- Improved connectivity to carpool lots for carpoolers and trail users.
- Safer access into town centers, especially for kids, the elderly, and people who don't or can't drive.
- Opportunities for educational and interpretive programs.
- Trails and greenways should be integral to the county's green infrastructure planning, and, when appropriately designed, can support wildlife diversity, clean water goals, and greater fishing access.

### **Formalizing a Middletown Valley Trail Alliance**

Participants expressed enthusiasm for formalizing a trail organization to advocate trail networks, provide volunteers to maintain and (where appropriate) build trails, help raise private funding for trail projects. Follow up meetings will be planned.

### **Contact information**

The forums were organized and facilitated by Catoclin Land Trust with assistance from John Canan on meeting design and format.

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Map below represents input from local trail enthusiasts and concepts from participants in the June 2023 Trail Listening Sessions.

