

## **Florida's Statewide Bike Trails**

Regardless of where you're living in Florida, it's probably close to one of our popular multi-use trails. Fortunately for us, the state is committed to continuously growing the trail system while making it more interconnected.

### **Financial Investment and Economic Growth**

Fortunately the economic benefit of trails to local communities in the state can no longer be ignored or denied. Around 100 million people a year visit Florida, generating close to a \$100 billion in revenue. An estimated 73 percent of those visitors include nature-based activities in their travel plans. Florida has some of the nation's most popular long distance destination trails throughout the state and along its eastern and western shores.

These include the 90-mile Florida Keys Overseas Heritage Trail, the 110-mile Cross Florida Greenway, and the work-in-progress 250-mile Coast to Coast Trail linking Titusville with St. Petersburg. When completed, the C2CT will be a continued paved trail from the Atlantic Ocean to the Gulf of Mexico. It includes two of the state's most popular trails, the Fred Marquis Pinellas Trail and the West Orange Trail, both of which have positively impacted local economies.

In 2015, the state legislature designated an annual \$25 million to establish the SUN (Shared-Use-Non-motorized) Trail program for the development of trail networks. With funds derived from a portion of the new motor vehicle license tags payments these long corridors are constructed to typically follow a canal bank, scenic highway, abandoned railway ("rails for trails"), or utility transmission line.

Biking trails are an important resource for adjacent towns that offer hikers and bicyclists access to local businesses providing food, supplies, local attraction information, and lodging. They have the added bonus of

connecting rural to metro areas. Through a partnership of local governments and citizens groups, these trails now run from the Florida Keys to the Panhandle. In Orlando, trails are designed to connect residents and visitors to recreational opportunities, places of employment, and other useful and fun destinations.

### **Florida Trail Town Program Successes**

To spotlight Florida's trail towns, the Office of Greenways and Trails (OGT) developed the Florida Trail Town program in 2018. Interest in participation has been exponential since its inception. The criteria are based on the town's strengths and weaknesses in relation to nearby trails and trail users.

Dunedin became the first Florida Trail Town in early 2018 since it has long been a center for non-motorized paved trail users. The 54-mile Pinellas Trail lends access to downtown via an abandoned CSX railroad corridor. The trail loop goes from St. Petersburg to Tarpon Springs and is credited with growing business occupancy from 30 to 100 percent. Local retail outlets (cafes, motels, bike shops) cater to trail users and have thrived as a result of this important artery. Dunedin Mayor Julie Ward Bujalski commented, "Our downtown has thrived around the trail and attracted folks of all ages and abilities. We like to think of the trail as the main artery of our community." (Quote taken from "Florida's Growing trail Town Program" by Doug Alderson at [www.americantrails.org](http://www.americantrails.org).)

Subsequently, an additional nine towns have been designated as Florida Trail towns with at least another dozen pursuing the prized designation: Titusville, Malabar, Vilano Beach, Clermont, Inverness, Palatka, Deltona, Everglades City and Winter Garden. A section of the West Orange Trail runs right down the middle of the main street in Winter Garden in a landscaped, park-like median. Since opening in 1999, downtown Winter Garden has seen a total economic revitalization. With substantial investment in beautification and preservation, it now offers a

variety of thriving bike shops, restaurants, fountains, museums, and boutiques.

A further example of what can happen when paved bike trails are embraced is Inverness, a town that raised \$14 million to build a visual gateway from the Withlacoochee State Trail to downtown. According to Doug Alderson, trails coordinator for Florida Office of Greenways and Trails, Inverness is pursuing redesign of its trailside parks, converting an abandoned warehouse along the trail into a farmer's market and events center, and transforming a defunct railroad depot into an amenity-filled trail facility. Clermont—the halfway point of the C2CT—is building a paved loop trail through its downtown to connect the South Lake Trail and the Florida Coast-to-Coast Trail. It is also building the “Meet Us in the Middle Trailhead and Gateway” with seats and tech-based kiosks.

In summary, the Florida Trail Town designation has given all these towns—and will give to those in the pipeline—value-added incentive to improve and expand on abundant local amenities available to residents and visitors. Cycling infrastructure in the form of paved bike trails contributes to Florida's overall human and environmental health, safety, economic growth, and quality of life.

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