

**Connecting Our Community:
A Proposal for a Regional Bicycle and Pedestrian Trail Network**
A Community Investment with a Great Return

Presented by the Charlottesville/Albemarle Trail Network Advocacy Coalition

I. Introduction:

There are compelling transportation, economic, social, and ecological reasons for the City of Charlottesville (hereafter City) and Albemarle County (hereafter County) to work collaboratively to build a robust bicycle and pedestrian network that provides effective connectivity between the shared urban areas of the City and County. Unfortunately, such collaborative efforts are currently lacking. The result is a disconnected collection of bike lanes and pedestrian paths that make it difficult for anyone to navigate by bicycle or on foot between the residential, employment, commercial, and recreational centers in the City and County.

It is time for our community and our City and County elected leaders to focus on a clear, unified and prioritized plan for building an urban bicycle and pedestrian transportation network. In order to begin implementation of this system the City and County should:

1. Work together to focus on building a coordinated and interconnected regional bicycle and pedestrian transportation network;
2. Utilize off-street facilities and natural stream valleys to link residential, employment, and commercial centers with schools and recreation areas as the key components of this network in order to enhance safety and attract the widest array of users;
3. Integrate the network of off-street trails combined with on-street facilities as an effective means to achieve maximum transportation benefit with the least effort or disruption of existing facilities for automotive traffic;
4. Combine and coordinate efforts to identify funding solutions for the network such as allocation of City and County capital improvement funds, local bond funding, private philanthropy, VDOT funds, and federal transportation funds.

II. Past Plans & Underpinning Logic:

The need for such a trail network and the community benefits that would be realized have already been well documented within City, County, and TJPDC planning documents. Despite these plans we are building more roads, highways and interchanges for automobiles that clog our roadways, while the solutions offered by a walkable and bikeable community remain elusive, unfunded, and unbuilt.

Various past and current bicycle and pedestrian planning documents lay out most if not all of the pieces of the puzzle that would be needed to make such an interconnected system work. Those documents are as follows:

- The Thomas Jefferson Planning District's (TJPDC) UNJAM 2025/ UNJAM 2035 plans;
- The TJPDC's 2004 Jefferson Area Bicycle, Pedestrian, and Greenways Plan;
- The Metropolitan Planning Organization's (MPO) Long Range Transportation Plan;
- The MPO's Six-year Transportation Improvement Plan;
- VDOT's Route 29 Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan;
- The City's 2003 Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan;
- Documents from the City's on-going Bicycle Planning Process;
- The City's Comprehensive Plan;
- The City's Capital Improvement Plan;
- The County's Places29 Master Plan;
- The County's Pantops Master Plan;
- The County's on-going Southern and Western Master Plans;
- The County's Capital Improvement Plan; and
- The City-County-UVA's Area B Study.

III. Focus for Change:

In order to reshape and unify these disparate planning efforts the community's focus should be on two key maxims:

1. **A successful regional bicycle and pedestrian trail network must integrate and connect major centers within the most urbanized portions of the City and the County.** Pedestrians and bicycle riders in our community cannot walk or ride safely from one side of the combined City/County urban community to the other, despite the fact that the urban center is less than six miles across.

The City's past and current efforts to establish safe urban bike paths, while relatively effective internal to the City's boundaries, do not provide City citizens with connections to County destinations and green spaces. The County's planning efforts have suffered from the same shortcoming in reverse, or worse. For example, the Places29 plan proposes only three bike connections to the City (Hillsdale Drive Extended, Rio Road, and the John Warner Parkway).

At the regional level, the TJPDC's plans either lack sufficient detail because the focus is on too large a study area, e.g. the 2004 Jefferson Area Bike Plan, or their focus is too narrow and they miss opportunities for making connections needed for forming a functional network. The TJPDC's 2010 Northtown Trail Plan, an example of the latter, fails to identify any feeder trails along its southern reaches. As a result, projects like the recently completed Treesdale Apartments on Rio Road do not connect to the existing John Warner Parkway Trail. Other potential projects, such as a proposed bike & pedestrian tunnel under the Norfolk-Southern railroad leading to Greenbrier Park are discounted simply because they are not shown directly within the Northtown Concept.

To create a sufficiently dense network of bicycle and pedestrian facilities and to spark a large shift of commuters out of their cars, our community needs a more holistic planning effort. There are recent examples of other cities successfully crossing over to a new paradigm where “active transportation” by means of walking and biking is equal in importance and utility to that of cars. The demographics and personalities of Charlottesville and the urban areas of Albemarle County make it ripe for this type of transformative transition to happen here, too.

2. A successful regional bicycle and pedestrian trail network for transportation purposes must rely heavily on a backbone of off-street facilities within the core urban areas of the City and the County.

The MPO’s Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP) represents our region’s most comprehensive, interjurisdictional bike planning strategy. This planning document, however, like most of the others, relies heavily on the existing street network for connections. Unfortunately, the presence of speeding cars and the fear of being struck by an automobile will always limit the number and types of bike riders (and even pedestrians) who are willing to venture out onto streets. On-street facilities are part of an overall bicycle and pedestrian system, especially where opportunities exist to reduce overly wide car lanes with cost-effective bike lane striping or where there is not a viable off-street trail alternative. However, a meaningful bicycle and pedestrian transportation network must be safe and accessible to everyone in our community. Therefore, scarce capital resources should be directed towards an off-street network, which is safer, more inclusive, and would better captivate the interest of a larger proportion of our community’s residents for both walking and cycling.

The best place to locate these off-street trails is in our region’s natural stream valleys. Advantages to using stream valleys include the following:

- a) The stream valleys in our area offer a unique alternative to roads for interconnecting our major residential, commercial, entertainment, and employment centers.
- b) The stream valleys intersect many of our existing parks and open space areas. As a result, connecting parks and open space with transportation infrastructure will also allow it to function as a recreational resource for both cyclists and walkers.
- c) Unlike the road network, the stream valleys offer gentle gradients that cut through the Piedmont’s rolling terrain. Thus, bike and pedestrian trails within them would be relatively flat by comparison to bike lanes running along major roads. This will make them more attractive to a wider array of potential users.

IV: Opportunities within our Community for a Regional Urban Trail Network:

A network of off-street bicycle and pedestrian trails effectively linking our area's major residential, employment, and commercial centers can be rooted in our region's geology. Our area has a natural system of ridges, folds, and stream valleys that parallel each other on an axis running from the southwest to the northeast. Historically, this natural system dictated the location and shape of our physical system of roads and major development patterns. The major transportation arterials (Route 29, Rio, Avon, West Main, Park Street, etc.) mostly run along the ridge lines. The City's and County's major residential, employment, and commercial centers are located on the flat, high ground where these streets intersect. The creeks flow away from these centers into gentle valleys flanked by steep slopes, which contain relatively undeveloped floodplains, parks, and wooded open spaces.

Figure 1 (below) shows how the major centers in the northern half of our community, e.g. Downtown, UVA, Hillsdale, Rio and Pantops, are linked by Meadow Creek, Schenk's Branch, and the Rivanna River. In the southern portions of the community, the County's neighborhoods can be linked via Biscuit Run, portions of Moore's Creek, and Pollock's Branch to the City destinations of Downtown, UVA, and West Main Street. Building an integrated network of trails that includes stream valley corridors can offer City and County residents attractive and safe connections to common destinations such as neighborhoods, schools, commercial and employment centers, parks, and the future Biscuit Run State Park.

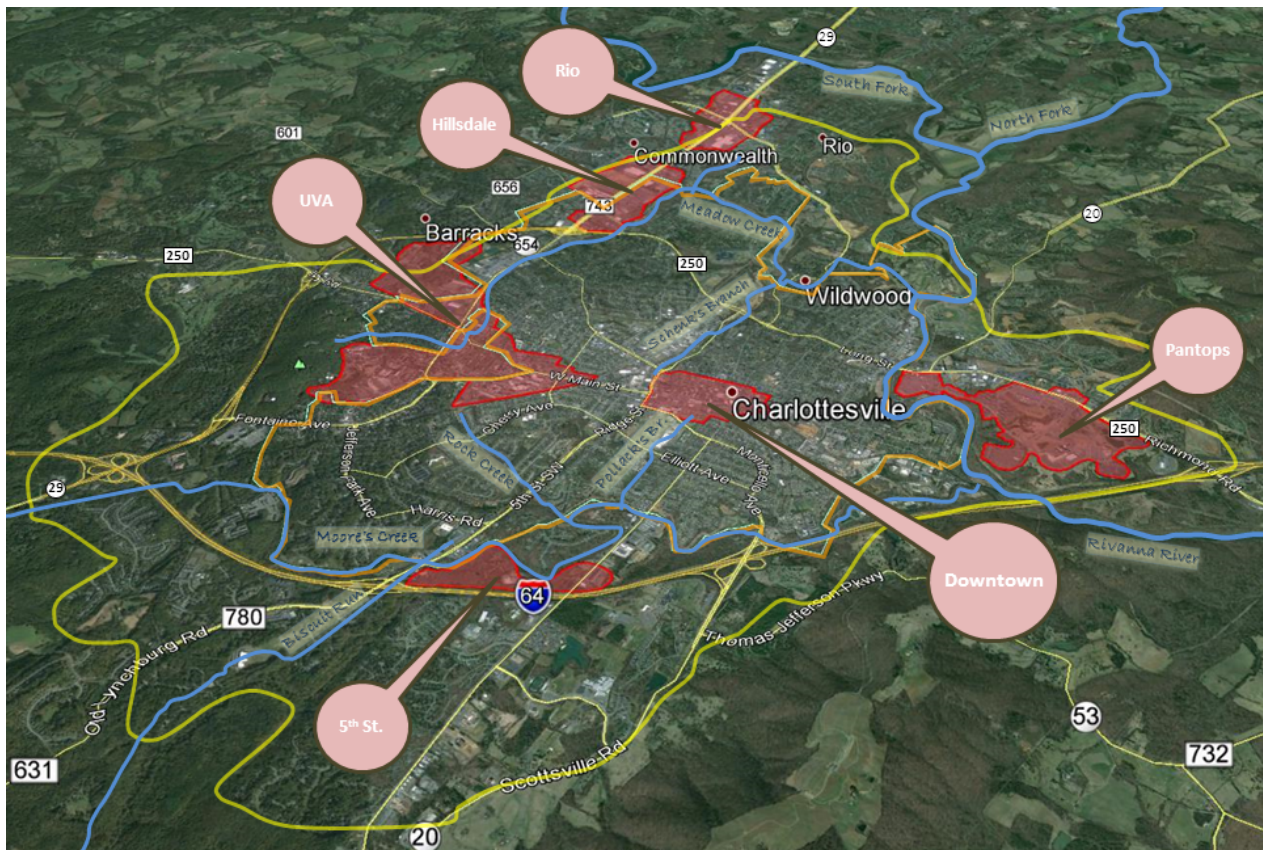


Figure 1 – The region's major employment and commercial centers are linked by stream valleys.

Figure #2 (below) shows roughly where these trails might run and how they could link major residential, employment, and commercial centers while providing access to schools, parks, open spaces, and neighborhoods. Three particular trails highlight the potential of an off-street system.

- A 4-mile, direct connection between Downtown and the commercial centers along Rio Road and Hillsdale via trails following Schenk’s Branch and Meadow Creek and running through McIntire Park, Greenbrier Park, and the Meadow Creek Valley Park that crosses only 4 streets. This trail would also provide direct access to the open space along the Rivanna River.
- A 4-mile, off-street route linking Fashion Square Mall to the Rotunda via trails running along the upper sections of Meadow Creek and behind UVA’s office complexes across from the Barrack’s Road Shopping Center.
- A 4-mile, (mostly) off-street trail linking Downtown to the future Biscuit Run State Park via the new Fifth Street Station Shopping Center.

It is important to note that not all of these trails for cyclists and walkers run exclusively in a wooded stream valley. At times, portions of the backbone system will need to run parallel to roads (for example the Schenk’s Branch Trail) or as bike lanes and sidewalks within the street corridor (i.e. West Main Street). However, by using a mix of approaches with stream valleys as the core, this community can develop a dense and effective system of trails, which are safe and attractive to a wider array of users than an exclusively on-street system.

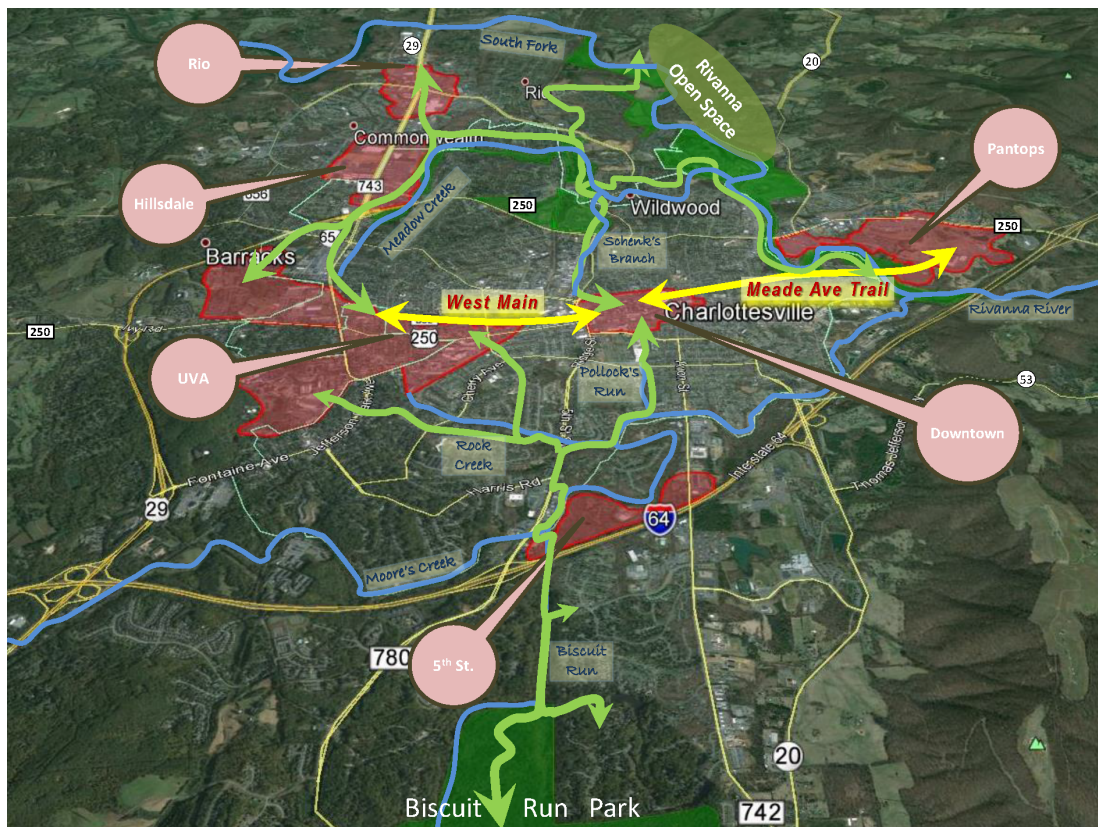


Figure 2 – Following stream valleys, off-street trails, and a few on-street facilities, an interjurisdictional bike network will link the region’s major centers

V. Existing Capacity to Implement a Successful Regional Trail Network:

Over the past five years or so, the City of Charlottesville has shown a significant commitment to the construction of bicycle and pedestrian facilities. A steadily growing network of on-street bike lanes and constructed off-street trails (the Schenk's Branch, Route 250 Commuter Trail, and the Meade Avenue Trail) demonstrates their commitment and vision. The City has also hired several personnel dedicated to the task: a Trails Planner in the Parks and Recreation Department, and a Bike/Ped Coordinator and a Design Planner in the Neighborhood Services Department. The City can also be commended for funding bike and pedestrian facilities from the City's local tax base. In addition to setting aside money to match grant funds for several streetscape and urban park projects, the City also provides \$200,000 annually in Capital Improvement Funds dedicated towards "bicycle infrastructure." Finally, the City has been actively purchasing strategic properties in recent years to expand its park system and trail network, including several within the adjoining County urban area.

In contrast, over the same time period, the County's implementation of bicycle and pedestrian facilities in the Growth Area has not matched the rhetoric of its Neighborhood Model or the demand for urban amenities from its growing and now dominantly urban population. The County does have two employees in its Parks Department dedicated to trail construction and park development, and their focus has resulted in 60 miles of foot trails within County Parks, but only the Old Mill Trail exists within the urban area of the County adjacent to the City. The County has little to no locally dedicated funds for this type of urban infrastructure and relies primarily upon VDOT funded projects or developer proffers to implement the elements of a trail system outlined in our local planning documents. The result is fragmented isolated pieces of a puzzle that do not fit well together.

VI. Conclusion & Moving Forward:

For too long plans have been formulated without implementation, and efforts by the City and the County have been disjointed. By and large, the pieces of the puzzle needed to build an interconnected bicycle and pedestrian transportation network have already been planned. Unfortunately, there has never been a coordinated and sustained effort where the City and County have worked together with the goal of making this network a reality. The opportunity exists and the time is right for the development of an implementation plan for bicycle and pedestrian connectivity within the combined City/County urban area.

Some steps in development of an implementation plan could include:

- The City and County Planning Commissions holding a joint work session to discuss the idea and importance of interjurisdictional bicycle and pedestrian planning and implementation;
- City Council and County Board of Supervisors could pass resolutions directing staff to work collaboratively on development of a prioritized implementation plan for bicycle and pedestrian connectivity;
- Based on these priorities the implementation plan could lay out a budget and identify funding opportunities such as allocation of City and County capital

improvement funds, bond funding, the VDOT Revenue Sharing Fund, and grants such as the VDOT Transportation Alternative Program or the US Department of Transportation's TIGER Discretionary Grant Program.

While implementation of this network needs to be looked at comprehensively, there are two high impact interjurisdictional projects that could be initiated now that would greatly increase bicycle and pedestrian connectivity in our combined urban area. These projects are:

- Construction of the Meadow Creek Valley and Greenbrier Park Trails in conjunction with trails along Hillsdale Drive and the John Warner Parkway.
- Construction of a trail corridor connecting Biscuit Run State Park in the County urban area to the Downtown Mall in the City in conjunction with the City's Strategic Investment Area project.

The City and the County should seize the opportunity to work together to build a functional and fully interconnected network of off-street and on-street facilities that are safe and attractive to both cyclists and pedestrians. This regional alternative transportation network will relieve pressure on automotive congestion by providing safe and effective bicycle and pedestrian routes that ensure our community continues to be a "world class" place to live.

VII: Coalition members and supporting organizations:

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VIII. To support this proposal or for more information, please contact:

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