



Extension

Strengthening Connections: Downtowns & Trails Keene, New Hampshire

2022 Final Report

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Introduction

The City of Keene, NH (pop. 22,953, [2019]) has many natural assets, and a number of built, and social assets, including two rail trails that connect to the downtown/city center. The downtown has multiple uses for visitors and residents including shops, offices, housing restaurants, overnight accommodations, a theater, parks, children’s museum, and housing options. In the Fall of 2021 Keene entered into a formal partnership with UNH Extension as part of the Community & Economic Development team’s Downtowns & Trails Program. UNH Extension has been providing assistance in further exploring actions that can be taken to better leverage natural assets for economic vibrancy, especially when it comes to better connecting the rail trails with the downtown. The first step was working with the Director of Parks, Recreation and Facilities to establish a working group of the City’s Bicycle Pedestrian Pathways Committee (BPPAC) along with several business owners and a graduate student from Antioch University. We then went through the following steps that comprise our Downtowns & Trails Program:

- 1 Reviewed the importance of, and opportunities for, connecting trails to downtowns/ business districts
- 2 Assessed Keene’s downtown and rail trails using Esri Collector for ArcGIS mobile application
- 3 Developed and trained volunteers to administer an intercept survey for those using the trails (residents and visitors) to determine their interest and use of Keene’s rail trails and downtown.
- 4 Observed and discussed the potential for destination development by looking at tourism assets in Keene and the region that could appeal to trail users and other visitors.
- 5 Engaged the larger community to gather information and learn about the results of the assessment. This will help determine community support and interest going forward. This engagement has taken the form of community presentations and focus groups with groups like the Keene Rotary Club and the Keene Downtown Group

The following report will explain these steps in more detail, share the data and analysis, provide a summary and next steps for the community. This report, in conjunction with the community presentations are the culmination of the Downtowns & Trails Program.



Key Findings

Infrastructure/Wayfinding

Keene has many of the infrastructure in place need to connect downtowns and trail, including the presence of two state-owned rail trails that connect to a vibrant downtown. Assessors noted many assets in our review of the characteristics that a community needs to successfully connect its downtown with its trails. Wayfinding is one of the areas for improvement noted by both the spatial assessors and data from the resident and visitor surveys. Timing is ripe for this with the City's plans for marketing and branding. Special attention should be paid to making connections among business and service signage and information about the trail.

Community Art

A vibrant art scene is something Keene is known for and was noted by our assessments. Art and trails are logical connection and our findings show support for the Wall Dog murals. It also highlighted many opportunities for increasing the connections among art, trails, and the downtown. The amphitheater behind Monadnock Coop, for example, is one area of potential collaboration. Additionally, the installation of sculptures or even more murals was noted as possibility. Collaboration with the ongoing Arts Corridor initiative was also noted.

Engagement with the Business Community

Capitalizing on natural assets in a community economic development setting requires strong, consistent, and interdisciplinary connections among recreation, conservation, and business interests. Inviting business owners to learn more about the natural and recreational assets of the community and how those can support their customers and employees is a start. Keene has the beginnings of these connections but will benefit from deliberative efforts to grow these connections. Engaging with the local Chamber of Commerce, Keene Rotary Club, and the Keene Downtown Group is important and can include inviting members to sit on current committees, such as the bicycle and pedestrian advisory committee. Because trail users are a specific type of customer segment, trainings about their demographics, interests and needs can help businesses better cater to them and increase spending from the trail to the downtown. Additionally, highlighting trail amenities can help with workforce recruitment and retention.

Tourism Considerations

Insights from the survey findings reinforce how Keene already has a lot to offer visitors in terms of in-town businesses and amenities. The trails are viewed as valuable assets in terms of transportation as well as recreation. Clear communication is key in creating safe and enjoyable experiences for visitors as well as positive interactions between residents and visitors. Community engagement in planning processes can help create an active and invested group of residents and stakeholders who can continue to ensure that tourism is managed and promoted in a sustainable and equitable manner. With the forthcoming city branding efforts, there is an excellent opportunity now to consider how trail signage and outdoor recreation awareness and promotion can be synced with broader branding efforts, creating a distinct feel and identity for the city that works to unite different aspects of its resources and amenities. In Keene, visitors and residents alike show great interest in leisure experiences that combine outdoor recreation with eating, drinking, socializing, and exploring. Keene's abundance of trail systems stemming from its downtown core creates an ideal setting for these types of enjoyable blended experiences. For instance, connecting with downtown hotels to learn about their guests may be an opportunity to welcome more visitors to the rail trails and support downtown businesses by offering more activities that lead to longer and repeat stays.

The Economic Benefits of Trails & Natural Space

Trails and natural spaces provide us with many benefits and services. Some of which are quantifiable (such as spending on recreation) and others, such as water purification and flood control as well as cultural and spiritual benefits, as less easily quantified but nonetheless important. These “ecosystem services,” which are essentially benefits humans receive from nature, all contribute to community well being and quality of life. The Outdoor Industry Association (2017) reports the following economic impact of the outdoor recreation economy:

Ecosystem Services:

Ecosystem Services are benefits humans receive from nature that contribute to our quality of life and well-being.

- Accounts for \$887 billion in annual U.S. consumer spending
- Supports nearly 7.6 million jobs across the U.S.
- Generates \$124.5 billion in annual federal, state and local tax revenue
- Adds \$524.8 billion in active outdoor recreation trip and travel expenditures
- According to U.S. Department of Commerce’s Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA), the outdoor recreation economy grew 3.8 percent in 2016 in comparison to the overall U.S. economy’s 2.8 percent growth. BEA estimates that outdoor recreation accounted for 2 percent of the overall U.S. Gross Domestic Product in 2016, contributing \$373.7 billion to the economy (BEA, 2018).

Regionally, in the state of Vermont, a recent study of Mad River Valley emphasized the importance of trail tourism, specifically in terms of mountain biking (SE Group, 2014). Further, the Vermont Trails and Greenways Council (2016) examined four trail network in the state, estimating that these networks alone generated nearly \$30 million in economic impact from out-of-state visitors. Trail tourism is particularly beneficial for economic impact when it attracts non-local visitors. Kingdom Trails, one of the four trail networks examined in the Vermont Trails and Greenways study, is a prime example of destination trail tourism. Local trail users and non-local visitors alike visit businesses including restaurants, breweries, coffee shops, ice cream shops, etc. and non-local visitors further support the economy through use of overnight accommodations.

Beyond recreation, research has shown that homes near trails also command higher property values, the presence of trails can attract new residents to move to or stay in a location, and trails also encourage physical fitness.

Trails in New Hampshire

The NH Bureau of Trails includes more than 1,200 miles of wheeled OHRV trails, over 300 miles of state owned rail trails, and over 7,000 miles of snowmobile trails (NH Trails Bureau, 2018). Further, volunteer organizations manage more than 4,000 miles of hiking trails in the state (NH State Parks, 2018). Special interest organizations also have their own estimates of certain types of trails, for example the Rails to Trails Conservancy reports that NH currently has 75 total rail trails which encompass 558 miles (Rails to Trails Conservancy, 2018).

Bicycle Trails

There are many studies that show the economic impact of cycling and cycling infrastructure, such as bike paths and rail trails, this includes the fact that:

- People who ride bikes buy other things and are more likely to make multiple or repeat trips to local stores
- Bicycling tourism brings millions of dollars to cities and towns across the country
- Bike accessible business districts benefit from catering to cyclists as customers (League of American Bicyclists)

Assessments

As detailed in the introduction section of this report, this program involved several different types of assessments:

1

An assessment of the physical characteristics of the Cheshire and Ashuelot Rail Trails in the areas that connect with the downtown of Keene and its business districts using spatial technology- ArcGIS online and the Collector app.

2

An assessment of residents and visitors to Keene via an intercept and modified intercept survey by using both paper surveys and leaving cards with businesses with a QR code.

3

Observations of destination development opportunities in Keene and the broader region

The following section will discuss the process of conducting these assessments as well as the findings and what the data means for the community and its goals of economic vibrancy through better connecting Keene's rail trails with its downtown and other regional assets.

UNH Extension's Community and Economic Development team conducts programming to support communities in learning the best processes for engaging community members, making informed decisions, developing effective strategies and taking action. In the case of the Downtowns & Trails Program, we trained working group members and additional community volunteers to conduct the physical characteristic assessment and the intercept surveys. We trained 8 people to conduct these assessments.



Physical Characteristics of Downtowns & Trails

The characteristics used to conduct the downtowns and trails community assessments are research-based and are adapted from multiple sources. These characteristics are adapted from a list of characteristics used to conduct a general downtown assessment through the First Impressions program. The downtown characteristics have been adapted from multiple states' First Impressions programs and the National Civic League's Civic index by UNH Extension staff. The downtown characteristics are based on what makes a downtown vibrant for a resident, visitor, or business owner, and are based on the built environment.

Building on the downtown characteristics, the purpose of the downtowns and trails characteristics are to assess the connectivity between a downtown and nearby trails and assess amenities in the downtown that are useful to trail users. The characteristics specific to downtowns and trails were adapted from multiple trail town guides, including the Trail Town Program in Pennsylvania and Michigan's Trail Town Program.



Broadly speaking, research and practice shows that there are essentially four categories that need to be in place for a successful connection between downtowns and trails. Natural, economic, built and social/leadership conditions need to be assessed when considering how to better leverage natural assets for economic vibrancy. Having a trail as well as an additional natural feature, such as rivers, lakes, beaches, and community forests enhance the connection because they provide more opportunities for residents and visitors to create and enjoy enhanced quality of life that the natural assets provide. Additionally, certain economic conditions need to be in place such as the right type of businesses that a trail user might frequent—such as bike shop/sporting goods stores, restaurants, breweries, cafes, restrooms and overnight accommodations. There are also features of the built environment, such as the layout of the central business district, the presence of bike racks/bike parking, sidewalks, benches, that are important to understand. Finally, the most successful programs, such as Pennsylvania's Trail Town program, have strong community leadership and participation that can be sustained over a long period.

Characteristics that are Critical to Assess

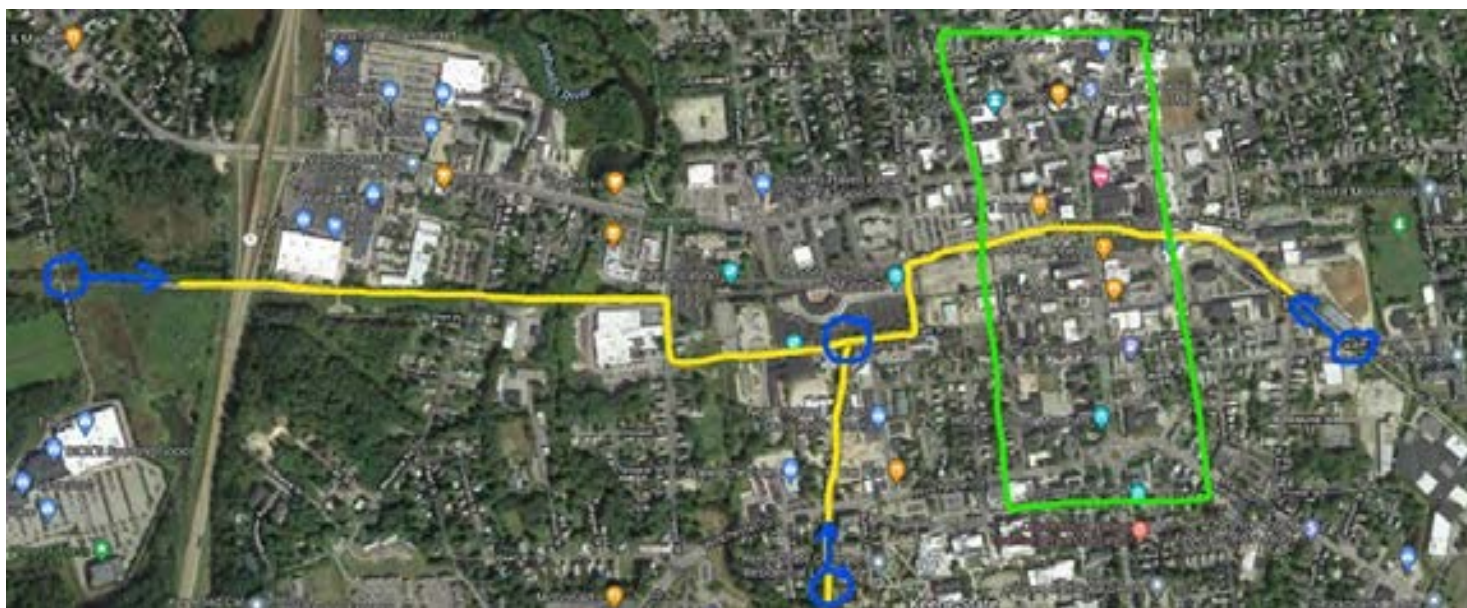
The following provides an explanation of characteristics that are critical to understand when connecting downtowns and trails.

| | | | |
|---|---|---|--|
|  | Trailhead- Point where a trail begins. Is the trailhead well marked? Is there a kiosk, maps, community information, parking, restrooms? |  | Natural Feature- Rivers, lakes, community forests. |
|  | Pathway- Path leading people from the trail to the village area. |  | Park- Parks, parklets, pocket parks. |
|  | Downtown Entrance- Where people enter the village. Is it clear where the entrance is? Is the entrance attractive and welcoming? |  | Point of Interest- Historical homes & buildings, architecture, fountains, memorials, statues, museums, plaques. |
|  | Overnight Accommodations- Hotels, motels, campgrounds. |  | Public Facility- School, library, town hall, post office. |
|  | Public Restrooms- Availability of public restrooms near trail and around the village area. |  | Seating- Benches, stoops, chairs, lawns, place people gather that are not considered a park, outdoor seating, outdoor dining, benches. |
|  | Business- Especially businesses relevant to trail users – casual restaurants, coffee shop, drugstore, bike shop, grocery store, local shops. |  | Sidewalks & Crosswalks- Pedestrian safety, sidewalks, crosswalks, quality, connectivity, usability for a range of abilities. |
|  | Community Art- Murals, artwork, musicians, concerts, street performers. |  | Streets & Transportation- Streets, bicycle lanes, bicycle racks, shared bicycles, buses, cars, taxis, ridesharing, street parking, public and private lots, traffic lights. |
|  | Displays & Signage- Pedestrian signs, wayfinding signs, parking signs, business signs, municipal signs. |  | Waste & Recycling- Availability and quality of waste and recycling receptacles. |
|  | Landscaping- Flowers, trees, green spaces. |  | Other- Other characteristics you wish to capture but do not fit into any of the existing categories. |
|  | Lighting- Availability and quality of lighting on streets, in parking lots, in parking garages. | | |

Physical Assessment Using Mobile Data Collection

Extension staff along with members of the working group and students provided characteristic feedback through the ArcGIS Collector App. The City was assessed on October 11, 2022. Assessments included walking and driving through the town, observing the characteristics, taking pictures and making notes with a mobile spatial application for cellphones. Below is a map of the assessment area chosen by the Downtowns & Trails working group in consultation with Extension staff. This area captured the majority of the downtown as well as the areas near where the Cheshire and Ashuelot Rail Trails intersected with the downtown. This data collection area was believed to be the most reflective of the downtown business district along trail heads connecting trail users towards the downtown or business centers

Assessment Map of the Study Area



Key

Blue – trail heads

Yellow – horizontal = Cheshire vertical = Ashuelot

Green – downtown footprint

Analysis of Downtowns & Trails Characteristics

Assessors collected a total of 161 points, the most common characteristic assessed was Business (21) rounding out the top three most commonly assessed characteristic features were: community art (17) and displays & signage (17).

| Characteristic | Count |
|--------------------------|------------|
| Business | 21 |
| Community Art | 17 |
| Displays & Signage | 17 |
| Downtown Entrance | 5 |
| Landscaping | 6 |
| Lighting | 2 |
| Natural Feature | 1 |
| Overnight Accommodations | 3 |
| Other | 7 |
| Park | 8 |
| Pathway | 11 |
| Point of Interest | 11 |
| Public Facility | 8 |
| Public Restrooms | 2 |
| Seating | 10 |
| Sidewalks & Crosswalks | 4 |
| Streets & Transportation | 12 |
| Trailhead | 13 |
| Waste & Recycling | 3 |
| Grand Total | 161 |

Looking at the breakdown of ratings, 59 characteristic points were rated Assets, 36 were rated Asset/Opportunity, and 27 were rated as an Opportunity (some assessors did not rate all of the points). Assessors were looking for how the characteristic might contribute to a user's experience of both the rail trail and the downtown. The following pages capture the feedback provided under each characteristic, and a sampling of the comments provided.





For a small city, Keene seems to offer a wide variety of businesses with numerous restaurants and a variety of retail as well as office space. A downtown grocery option, in the form of the Monadnock Co-op is a tremendous asset. Assessors by in large, found the business amenities available in Keene to be great assets. From a variety of restaurants, sporting opportunities, to general shopping, there were a number of places a trail user and any visitor or resident for that matter, might frequent. Some comments included:

- “Inviting coop entrance with outdoor seating and ample bike parking”
- “Monadnock Coop right on the rail trail”
- “CVS, Panera both have bathroom”
- “Local gifts and wares”
- “skateboard shop and barber shop”
- “street savory food truck”
- “Keene does have a bike shop and mobile bike repair service but there are not in the city center.”
- “Modestman brewing and Monadnock Food Coop. Outdoor seating and food, drinks and restrooms.”
- “Backend of hotel, with small bike parking. could be more. Could hotel offer loaner bikes?”
- “Outdoor seating along trail creates vibrant, euro vibe. but access from trail could be improved”
- “Hannah’s Books next door to Keene International Market”



Community Art



Community art can be a powerful value-add to a user's or resident's overall experience in a community. Keene is fortunate to have a strong commitment to community art. The Walldog Murals are the most vivid display of this effort and are visible from the trails. During the assessment there was discussion of additional wayfinding and information about the Walldog murals and the history and culture they display. In addition to this clear asset, assessors noted a potential opportunity to enhance the community art space behind the Monadnock Coop and right on the Cheshire rail trail. Others also noted that there were places along the trails that could be enhanced by the addition of some community art-such as sculptures. Below are some of the comments written by the assessors.

- "Plenty of space to engage community with some facilities to promote live performances"
- "Amphitheater that hasn't been used to full extent according to local knowledge"
- "Music, films and art installations would be wonderful here"
- "Cool Keene specific mural paired with attractive brick buildings. feels historic. nice spot!"
- "Wonderful mural. it needs to be more promoted"
- "Plenty of space to have a sculpture or two"



Displays & Signage



It was clear from our assessment that Keene has made progress in thinking about its displays and signage but also that there was work to be done in this area. Wayfinding is a key part of connecting downtowns with trails for economic vibrancy and it is one of the main opportunities Keene can capitalize on as it works towards its goals. One main feature that will help with this connection is the inclusion of information about businesses and services on signage about trails. Simple statements such as “downtown businesses are ___ miles from this point and include food, retail and services.” There is a great display in Railroad Square that could be further enhanced with information about general downtown amenities. There were several opportunities for the inclusion of a trail map. Additionally, some of the current trail signs looked in need of replacement or update. Assessors comments are below:

- “Lack of signage on the trail”
- “As you approach downtown on trail, may be opportunity for ‘welcome to downtown Keene’ sign”
- “Great sign for murals. No mention of rail trail. Add a complementary sign nearby?”
- “‘Battered original’ only Rail Trail sign I’ve seen. A map would be great!”
- “Trail sign right out of downtown”
- “No sign directing to connection”
- “[Opportunity] for wayfinding to points northwest”
- “Info Koop, seating and trash receptacle at Island St. on the Cheshire RT.”



Downtown Entrance



Keene has many entrances to the downtown due to the fact that the Rail Trails intersect with the business district in several locations. This is a great opportunity for welcoming visitors and residents to the business district and encourage them to frequent restaurants, retail, and other services right in Keene. These entrances are also opportunities to raise awareness about the trails and other parks and recreational assets.

Comments on Keene's downtown entrances included:

- "Need way finding entering into downtown"
- "Wide path trail entrance spot by Marriott. if on path, side street does not look very enticing here."
- "Appealing downtown entrance. Sense that there is lots to do here - brewery, theater, etc nearby"
- "Greyhound drops off here. Not the greatest location for making a positive first impression."
- "Begin wayfinding for identifying shops on emerald Street"



Landscaping



Assessors noted many positive landscaping assets in Keene. There has clearly been an effort to make the city feel welcoming through the use of plantings and greenery. Assessments took place in the Fall when the colors were lovely and seasonal. There were a few opportunities for improvement.

- “Nice space to grow some plants. it looks like abandoned space now.”
- “Raised area could be great for picnic table.”
- “Gorgeous in autumn. Nice section of main street. Very inviting with benches.”



Lighting



Lighting is a very important feature in promoting safety in both downtowns and trails. It is also something for which communities need to have an installation and maintenance protocols and funding in place. Some survey respondents also indicated the importance of lighting in making them feel comfortable on the trail and thus interested in spending more time in both the trail and the downtown.

- “Lighting helpful, dark stretch of trail”
- “Lighting along Cheshire RT from Island St.past the North Bridge”



Overnight Accommodations



Keene is fortunate to have at least three hotels in the downtown area. The Cheshire Rail Trail goes right by at least one of these hotels. There were not significant comments from assessors on the accommodations except

for overwhelmingly ranking them as assets. There were some suggestions about better connecting some of the hotels with the trail better. One assessor noted that because of the location of the Courtyard hotel in this picture, a bike rental service might be a great opportunity. Additionally, the rental service might be a great opportunity. Additionally, the hotels proximity to the amphitheater in the picture below might be another opportunity for synergy and collaboration between downtown, trail, and community arts.

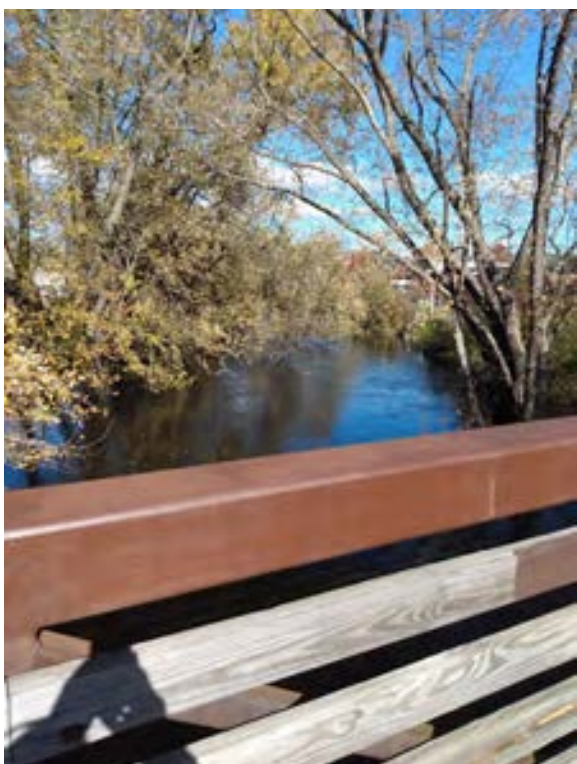


Natural Feature & Parks



For a city, Keene has a wonderful mix of both urban space and nature features. A number of pocket parks and green spaces fill the downtown and along the rail trails. The Ashuelot River, nearby Drummer Hill, Wantastiquet-Monadnock Trail, the Keene Bike Park, and Robin Hood Park (among many other parks) are all within a short distance of the downtown and offer many opportunities for residents and visitors to get outside and stay outside and in the city longer. They also support high quality of life that will attract and retain new residents and workers.

- “Basketball courts next to lot on trail, pretty birches. add picnic benches for spectators?”
- “Skate park near rail trail”
- “Arboretum maintenance provided by volunteers, could be lots more education opportunities”
- “Green space in the middle of the Cheshire rail trail. Opportunity for seating and art”



Point of Interest



Assessors noted a number of diverse points of interest in Keene. The presence of the Colonial Theater, two colleges (Keene State and Antioch University) a children’s museum, several bridges over the trail, senior housing and even an air quality monitoring station along the Cheshire Rail Trail were all noted as assets and opportunities to build upon for better connections between downtown and trail. Some comments included:

- “Interesting old silo building. makes unique cityscape. but in disrepair. skateboard park on trail”
- “Senior housing on the rail trail”
- “Children’s museum in a strip mall”
- “Footbridge over the Ashuelot River”
- “Bridge over the Ashuelot River on the Ashuelot RT near Keene State”
- “Potential educational opportunity by adding signage to the air quality monitoring station”



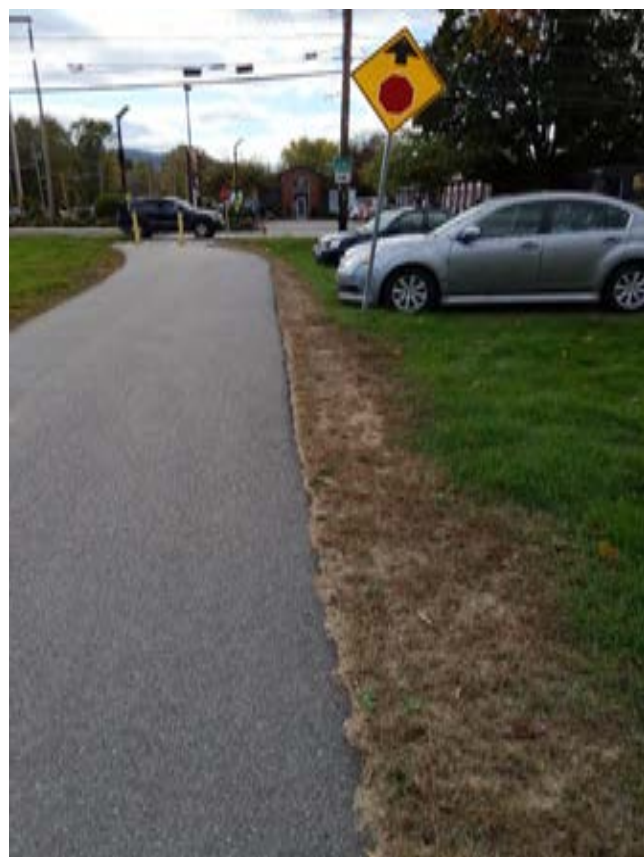
Pathway



There are various pathways connecting the Cheshire and Ashuelot Rail Trails to the downtown areas of Keene. In some cases, the trail itself brings one right into the downtown. In others, there are sidewalks or roadways that connect. Having a clear path or route from trail to town make individuals more comfortable entering the downtown to shop and eat. Since the pathway is intertwined with many of the other characteristics assessed, individuals also noted opportunities for signage, art, and landscaping along the pathways.



- “Path to nowhere; no signage”
- “Trail sign, kiosk, trash can, lights on trail”
- “Seems like code issue related parking on trail easement for apartment complex”
- “Benches, map, trash, dog mitts, trail sign, lights, could use wayfinding to business locations”
- “Path connection to Cheshire along industrial heritage section connection to public works parking”



Public Facility/Public Restrooms



Keene has a number of public facilities within walking/riding distance of the trails. Everything from parking, public restrooms, the police station, public library, city hall, department of motor vehicles, and bike repair stations were noted. Most were noted as assets and are key for supporting connections between downtowns and trails. Chief among these is access to public restrooms as residents and guests will spend more time and money in the downtown if they have access to a clean and safe facility. However, there are many challenges communities can face with public restrooms-such as crime and vandalism. Libraries are also a key resource for visitors and residents and having one in close proximity to the trail is a huge advantage for a community.

- “Water and public restrooms [at library]”
- “[City Hall] open m-f 8-4 with public restrooms and water”
- “[Public Restroom] closed due to drug use could be revisited but needs major work or new location”
- “Restrooms in lobby of police station near trail head open 24/7”



Seating



Assessors noted many locations that already had seating in the downtown and along the trails. There were several opportunities to improve seating or add seating to an existing location. When people are visiting an area on foot or on bike, seating not only offers a place for rest, it also allows visitors to stay longer in a community or to venture out further than they would otherwise. It increases accessibility for those with mobility issues and creates chances for connecting and gathering with friends and new acquaintances. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the presence of outdoor seating and dining has allowed businesses to stay open and maintain safety for their workers and customers.

- “Absence of seats. nice space to spend some time outside”
- “3 stone benches around green area”
- “[Opportunity to have] space to have seats and tables for food”
- “Old patio for restaurant and bus stop [opportunity]”
- “Bench not very comfortable to sit, bit nice gesture”



Sidewalks & Crosswalks



Assessors noted many examples of sidewalks and crosswalks throughout Keene and at connections of the rail trails. Most were assets, a couple presented opportunity for fresh paint and clearer visibility such as the sign and light featured in this picture.



Waste & Recycling



Having waste and recycling options clearly marked and available on and near the trail and in the downtown contribute to feelings of safety and cleanliness. Assessors noted several locations with good access to these resources and several opportunities for improvement. One example was this mutt mitt station (in the picture to the right). It is a great idea to encourage the proper disposal of pet waste. However, when assessors were on the trail they noted that the container was empty and there was not a waste receptacle present.



Streets & Transportation



Assessors noted many positive aspects of the streets and transportation options in and around Keene’s downtown. Some assets included charging stations for electric vehicles and many options for bike parking. A public bus stop near the trails is also an asset. There was some confusion about parking options—a parking structure near to the Cheshire Rail trail was mostly private parking, which might be confusing to visitors. There was also a parking lot near the Cheshire that had a sign indicating it was only for the basketball courts on the trail. This may dissuade potential trail users and leave them with an unwelcoming feeling.



Trailhead



Because our assessment included two rail trails with numerous connection points there are number of trailheads for potential assessment. Trail heads are most obviously an opportunity to welcome users to a trail but they should also been seen as method for welcoming people to a community and if the trail is in close proximity to the downtown, a method for connecting trail users to downtown businesses and services.

Assessors noted many positive features of current trailheads, such as information signs and bike repair stations. Some opportunities for improvement were also noted. These opportunities included sharing updated and additional information as well as providing some parking.



- “3 benches, two kiosks, parking, ripped trail map, bike repairs station, information sign”
- “Map needs to be updated, no parking”
- “A trail head with information kiosk is a good idea and location is heavily used”
- “Opportunity for more info! Length of trail, its features, location of other end etc”
- “Well maintained and attractive trail entrance, good signage and bench. trash on ground - no bins”



Intercept & Modified Intercept Surveys

Methods:

Intercept Surveys are used to talk to people on the go and are meant to be brief and easy to complete. Community volunteers were trained to conduct surveys in Keene at various locations in the downtown and along the rail trail. Two versions of the survey were created—one for residents, both seasonal and year-round residents and the other for visitors. Both surveys had questions about use and impressions of Keene and the two rail trails. The visitor survey included a section on visitor spending so that the community could better understand how people were spending money during their visit to town. Due to the ongoing pandemic and our interest in reaching a broader audience, we also utilized modified intercept surveys with QR codes on postcards left at local businesses in Keene.

Findings:

As the table above shows, the vast majority of respondents (both residents and visitors) expressed either medium or high satisfaction with both Keene’s downtown and its trails. The following sections provide further explanation.

| Question | | Residents | Visitors | Overall |
|--|--------|-----------|----------|------------------|
| Surveys completed <i>(Note: some respondents skipped some questions)</i> | | 130 | 24 | 154 |
| Satisfaction with downtown: | High | 74 (60%) | 13 (54%) | 87 (59%) |
| | Medium | 44 (35%) | 10 (42%) | 54 (36%) |
| | Low | 6 (5%) | 1 (4%) | 7 (5%) |
| Satisfaction with trails: | High | 94 (74%) | 12 (54%) | 106 (72%) |
| | Medium | 30 (24%) | 9 (41%) | 39 (26%) |
| | Low | 2 (2%) | 1 (5%) | 3 (2%) |

Resident Impressions of the Downtown:

Overall, survey respondents’ comments illustrate a downtown area that has a lot to offer residents, but also has several noted areas of improvement. Many respondents reflected upon Keene’s attractive and charming visual qualities, and while there was a lot of satisfaction around the availability of businesses, some were disappointed to see empty storefronts or felt that businesses could be more diverse. Several respondents expressed concerns about loitering. While Keene’s trails were commonly perceived as an asset to downtown, many expressed that downtown felt unsafe for bicyclists and pedestrians. Some excerpts below:



- “Historic, beautiful setting, access to work, businesses, restaurants, entertainment.”
- “Love the businesses downtown - from coffee to clothing I can find most of what I need downtown.”
- “Keene's downtown is real. It's not overloaded with boutiques, yoga studios and galleries. Real folks live and work in our lovely downtown.”
- “I'd like to see more mixed-use development, sustainable housing development”
- “Lost restaurants; need more diversity; more filled store fronts.”
- “Homeless allowed to panhandle. Not as family friendly as days past.”
- “More bicycle and pedestrian friendly infrastructure is needed so all users can pass freely”

Intercept Surveys Continued

Resident Impressions of the Rail Trails

Survey respondents' comments reflected a variety of uses for the trails, such as bike commuting, running, and dog walking. Many respondents expressed positive impressions of trail maintenance, while others commented that maintenance could be improved, especially farther from the downtown area. Some appreciated the gravel or more rugged sections of the trails, while others wished for more regularity. Perceptions of safety varied; concerns regarding traffic/road crossings and potential for crime were common in the responses. Below are some select excerpts from the responses:



- “Great trail network that is cared for. Very safe and beautiful.”
- “The trail network helps make Keene a more walkable city (including walking or biking to work)”
- “I love the rail trail even exists. My friends and I run on it at least once a week. Much safer than running where there’s traffic. I will say I won’t run it alone though.”
- “Safety... have to cross 101 to continue on the rail trail from the bridge to Marlboro St. This cross keeps me from using the trail more”
- “Homeless camp close to trail. Would be nice to extend trails further. Only good for road bikes when dry.”
- “Trails are great and I use them a lot, however once you leave downtown the low maintenance becomes quickly apparent. It would be nice if potholes and such were maintained a little more.”
- “We are lucky to have it! Don't 'overdo' the upgrades, please.”

Results from Visitor Surveys







Many towns do not know about their visitors. The following infographic summarizes the findings from the visitor spending profile. While not statistically representative, this does give a snapshot and some useful information to begin better understanding this component of the economy. The relatively low number of visitors captured in this survey provides some indication that there is not a proportionately large number of visitors currently using Keene's rail trails and downtown area. The majority of visitors, both in-state and out-of-state, were from other communities in the broader region (e.g., Peterborough, NH; Marlow, NH; Brattleboro, VT). All out-of-state-visitors were from other northeastern states: six from Vermont and one each from Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and New York. All of the Vermonters were from a 45-minute drive radius from Keene.

Of the 154 completed surveys, 24 were from visitors

14 of the 24 are visiting from somewhere else in NH

9 of the 24 are visiting from outside of NH (1 respondent did not specify home state)

Total spending from the 21 visitors who provided spending information:

| | |
|--|--------------|
|  Food: | \$841 |
|  Gas: | \$231 |
|  Overnight Accommodations: | \$520 |
|  Gifts: | \$240 |
|  Alcohol: | \$354 |
|  Recreation: | \$275 |

Based on these figures (including some minor spending in the "Other" category, not shown), these 21 visitors on average spent \$120 in Keene for the entire duration of their visit. According to the NH Division of Travel and Tourism Development, the average traveler in NH spends \$88 per day¹. Nearly all of these visitors in Keene spent some money on food while visiting and about one-third spent money on alcohol. Only three visitors spent money on lodging. These numbers suggest that Keene has room to grow in becoming a popular overnight destination.

¹ www.visitnh.gov/press-media/travel-tourism-information/economic-highlights

Results from Visitor Surveys (cont.)

Visitor Impressions of the Downtown:

Visitors also exhibited nearly all medium or high (skewing toward high) satisfaction with downtown Keene. Traffic safety and parking were listed as common areas of concern, with notes that the city could be even more bike friendly. Several respondents expressed satisfaction with the variety of businesses and amenities available, as well as the general look and feel of the downtown:

“It has mostly what I need in a town, shopping, food, and entertainment all close by (not very big)”

“Good dining, pleasant place to walk around.”

“Comparably to most downtowns, there is much less empty stores! Safety, convenience and options like cafes!”

“So cute, very New England”

However, homelessness and nighttime safety came up as factors that could influence perceptions of the downtown’s appeal to visitors:

“Beautiful, quaint but there is a level of...”less friendly” people that makes it less fun.

Safety alone or at night is somewhat a concern.”

In looking at survey responses more broadly, many of the visitors’ concerns echo the concerns of residents. The themes of safety and maintenance arise both in terms of the downtown and trails, but many respondents reflected that the downtown and trails already exhibited strengths in these areas. Collectively, survey responses paint a picture of a generally friendly, accessible, and lively small city that is growing in terms of its outdoor offerings, as well as in-town offerings. While there are several potential areas for improvement, there is already a strong foundation upon which a tourism economy can continue to build.



Results from Visitor Surveys (cont.)

Visitor Impressions of the Trails:

In the survey, nearly all visitors exhibited medium or high satisfaction with the rail trails in Keene that they had used. Signage and wayfinding were common themes in which visitors expressed that there could be improvements. Several comments reflected how the trails were an enjoyable way to get around and/or be active, while also providing opportunities to enjoy in-town amenities. Below are some direct quotes from the visitor survey respondents:

“It is great to go for a fall ride and stop in for hot coffee and hot chocolate.”

“Most importantly [the trails] connect to places to visit/shop/dine.”

“It's an excellent way to get around without a car!”

“Need more connections to other trails and neighborhoods.”

“More signs; more breweries on the trail”

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Observations and Recommendations for Destination Development

Keene offers many of the key features that tourists interested in visiting New England seek in a destination: a historic, walkable downtown with boutiques, restaurants, breweries, galleries, and museums; opportunities to immerse oneself in a rural landscape, visit farms, and enjoy local foods; and ample ways to spend time being active in the outdoors. The city's southwestern location in New Hampshire near I-91 positions it to be a welcoming gateway into to the state as a broader destination, offering a representative sampling of many of the state's key types of offerings. Keene State College brings both in-state and out-of-state visitors to the city, many of whom might not otherwise think to visit, and the college's presence creates an environment of amenities that can appeal to a wide range of ages. Keene is a relatively direct 4-hour drive mainly on interstates from New York City, and about 2 hours from Boston. These manageable drive times are within a desirable range for tourists seeking a destination for an overnight getaway or weekend trip. The city is also easily accessible through bus service, which sets it apart from many other New England destinations. Visitors can reach Keene via Greyhound on a direct itinerary from New York City in 7 hours. Amtrak train service is also possible via Brattleboro, if combined with other ground transit. Since Keene is the primary city on the Route 9 corridor coming from I-91 in Vermont heading towards Concord, it is well-positioned to capture drive-by visitors en route to the capitol city or Manchester. Many of these types of travelers will seek just a quick roadside stop (e.g., restaurants, farm stands). The challenge lies in showing these passerby visitors that Keene merits attention for an overnight/multi-day stay.

While Keene should consider ways to reach more through-travelers and road trip visitors, it also has amenities to singularly offer a comprehensive destination experience for tourists, especially for long weekend length trips. Participation in outdoor recreation generally requires that visitors stay longer in an area, which in turn generates greater economic impacts through lodging, dining, and retail sectors. With this in mind, outdoor recreation can be a key aspect to strategically highlight in marketing. The popularity of nearby Mount Monadnock for hiking provides a substantial draw to the region. Other outdoor amenities can leverage this asset to increase visitation to other recreational sites, if desired.

The availability of attractive lodging options in the downtown area enables an appealing visitor experience in which one can walk to restaurants, bars, and shows after a day outdoors. While having personal transportation is useful for exploring the Keene region, it is not required. As this report shows, even outdoor recreation is available from the heart of the downtown area. Keene's numerous public parks, squares, and broad sidewalk areas create a variety of possibilities for hosting events, which the city has already begun to incorporate within its tourism development and promotion strategies. While large events like the Clarence DeMar Marathon have established reputations that attract people annually from a broader geography, smaller regular events like farmers markets (another popular Keene happening) can also be very appealing tourism products.



Observations and Recommendations for Destination Development (cont.)

Tourism promotional efforts can present an attractive visage of what being a tourist in Keene can look like by providing an example of “a day in Keene” – for instance, coffee and a pastry at the bakery and a stroll through the farmers market, followed by mountain biking around Goose Pond, and then an afternoon rest and recharge session at the brewery and food truck before going out to a comedy show at the Colonial Theater. A family-friendly version might instead include the Cheshire Children’s Museum and bike rentals to explore the all-levels-friendly rail trails. In Keene, all of these options can happen right off the steps of a downtown hotel, all within a manageable small city setting.

Trail Assets

Keene’s regional trail assets are particularly important to its tourism branding and promotional messaging given the growth of interest in outdoor recreation that has arisen during the COVID-19 pandemic. By highlighting trails and outdoor recreational offerings, Keene can also align its tourism marketing efforts with that of the state, which has focused heavily on outdoor recreation in recent marketing campaigns, and has recently established a state Office of Outdoor Recreation Industry Development. Not limited just to rail trails, Keene hosts a variety of trail networks for hiking, mountain biking, Nordic skiing,



equestrian, snowmobiling, and other recreational uses. For mountain biking alone, riders can choose from Drummer Hill and Goose Pond, Keene Bike Park, Ladies’ Wildwood Park, Robin Hood Park, and Stonewall Farm, all within the city limits (some which are more established/extensive than others). Some of these areas can be linked together or linked to downtown via established, multi-use trails including the Cheshire Rail Trail and the Jonathan Daniels Trail. The diversity of trail offerings in Keene allows activities to be “scaled up” based upon level of experience, age, and desired challenge. For visitor groups that consist of members with varying abilities, each can find options suitable for them, which is a great asset in terms of destination appeal and something promotional efforts can highlight.

Recent efforts to develop and expand the Wantastiquet-Monadnock Trail offer an exciting opportunity for multi-day through-hikers to take a break or stay overnight in Keene. Other rail trail developments in New Hampshire and neighboring states, such as the proposed Massachusetts Central Rail Trail which would extend from Northampton to Boston, may create further opportunities down the road for connecting Keene to larger continuous trail networks. Keene’s rail trail system plus other nearby trail networks create opportunities to link activities like hiking, walking, and cycling to a variety of other attractions and activities. The Downtowns and Trails program brings attention to ways trails and main street communities may reciprocally benefit one another. Keene has an opportunity to consider how trails and other types of assets can also mutually benefit one another, such as “trails to farms,” or “trails and breweries.” Establishing routes and itineraries designed to connect trail users with certain types of businesses could help amplify regional attractions that already exist and encourage development of future related businesses.

Summary, Recommendations & Next Steps

The path toward better connections between rail trails and a vibrant downtown

Recommendations the committee and other volunteers could address in the short term:

Combined Business and Trail Promotion and Information Sharing

- During the Downtowns & Trails program, we shared Trail Finder Trailside Services as a resource to businesses seeking to promote their services to trail users. We suggest continuing to promote this free service.
- Adding downtown business and service information to wayfinding along the trails would help promote businesses and highlight the trails' connectivity strengths. There could be general information about businesses and services posted and not necessarily specific business names called out as those can turn over.

Collaboration and Planning Around Wayfinding/Branding

- This program illuminated opportunities for improvements in signage, displays and wayfinding. The forthcoming destination branding and marketing consulting from Guide Studio can help to further support the goals of the Downtowns and Trails program. Guide's current plan contains several strategies to engage residents in the planning process and opportunities to connect wayfinding and branding. While this report has focused largely on trails and outdoor recreation as regional assets, destination branding should find a balance between natural and cultural resources in the region, and emphasize how they are all collectively part of the same destination experience. An outdoor recreation destination that *also* has strong cultural amenities such as food, art, and historic sites will offer a more compelling destination product than one without such elements. Similarly, a cultural destination that *also* offers accessible ways to enjoy nature and the outdoors will seem all the more well-rounded and be able to appeal to more diverse visitor segments.

Recommendations that may require funding/longer-term coordination:

- Creating and implementing a vision for the amphitheater behind the Monadnock Coop and along the Cheshire Rail Trail
- Establishing more formal connections with the business community through reciprocal memberships on committees and joint projects. Specifically partnering with the Courtyard Hotel on the Cheshire Rail Trail to learn more about visitor interests and needs and possibly offer bike rentals or other services
- Offering trainings in partnership with UNH Extension for business owners to learn about trail users
- Prioritizing future grant opportunities