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How to Create Trails that are "More Accessible to a Wider Group of Folks"

BLUE HILL HERITAGE TRUST

Organization:
Blue Hill Heritage Trust

Challenge:
Making trails accessible to more people

Solution:
Finding balance between improvement and perfection



Case Study 2025, Larissa Crockett; all photos courtesy of Blue Hill Heritage Trust

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Organization at a glance

Established 1985

8 staff, 10 board

Hancock County, ME





Their Story:

In 2017 the Blue Hill Heritage Trust applied for a Recreational Trails Program grant from the State of Maine for rehabilitation of a 1/2 mile primitive trail serving the downtown. The trail was adjacent to the river and had erosion challenges the Trust wanted to address. They were denied and told that the state had concerns about the trail's limited accessibility. An easement at the trail head made full ADA compliance impossible but when BHHT applied again, and were successful, in 2018 they used the funding to improve the trail and made it "more accessible for a wider group of folks" according to George Fields, Executive Director.

The BHHT believes that learning from failure becomes success and that the grant denial in 2017 was an opportunity for the organization to reassess their approach to trail improvement with a focus on expanding use to more people. Embracing a model of "increased accessibility trails" has allowed them to enhance four of their properties to meet the needs of far more of the people in their community.

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No Need to Change Shoes = Accessible

Accessible trails don't just mean ADA compliant, it can simply mean allowing more people to go into nature. BHHT heard from focus group members across their community including older residents, parents with young children, people with diseases that limit mobility, and from social service providers about all the ways people can feel supported to use a trail.

One of the teachers at the local high school started using a close-by trail with her students weekly once improvements were made that allowed kids in any style of shoe to safely walk on the trail. She shared with BHHT that, "people being prepared for different activities takes a certain socio/economic status" and that by leveling the trail and making it traversable in every day shoes meant that her students felt safe being there and more welcome to see themselves as outdoorsy people who would use a trail.

Challenges

"Nature Happens" -
It can be hard to communicate clear expectations about how long accessibility improvements take. Permitting alone is time consuming and if birds are nesting or a storm hits unexpectedly project delays can require grant report extensions and clear communication to the board, staff, and public.

Finding Staff Time -
Your board and staff need to want to do this work and allocating adequate staff time is vital. Accessibility grant writing, communication, and project work may be a great place to make use of the energy and extra time an intern can provide.

Learnings for Other Land Trusts

Be Open to Suggestions:

Don't assume you know what accessibility means to the people in your community. Consider forming a task force to hear how the people you serve use your properties and to help develop a local standard for rating accessibility.

Assess Accessibility of Existing Trails:

Your existing trails may only need slight modifications to be useable by far more people's bodies. While ADA compliance may be ideal, simply removing a few barriers to use may mean a significant increase in users.

Accessibility Improvements Need Resources:

Make sure you have the financial resources to do this work. You may want to conduct a small capital campaign focused solely on increasing access to trails in your community.

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