



KINGDOM TRAILS

Abby Long, Executive Director Kingdom Trail Association

House Commerce & Economic Development

Testimony 1.17.25 / 1-2pm

Act to Incentivize Landowner Participation in Public Recreation

Hello, my name is Abby Long, Executive Director of the Kingdom Trail Association. I also serve with Nick on the Vermont Trails & Greenway Council, am a member of the VOREC Steering Committee, and am the Board Chair for the NEK Collaborative as the Kingdom Trail's 100+ miles extends throughout Caledonia County's Burke, Kirby, and Lyndonville, plus Essex County's East Haven. It is actually Essex County, where the world's #2 rated MTB trail is located!

KT is a world-class trail system deeply intertwined with the local community. In 1994, it was Northeast Kingdom community members, private landowners, who banded together to develop the multi-use nonprofit trail network that now generates over \$10,000,000 in annual direct spending for the Northeast Kingdom, a region with significant social and economic challenges. KT's 106 private landowners who host our trails know firsthand the positive economic, public health, and conservation benefits of communities investing in outdoor recreation. However, they do not receive compensation for their generosity. Stewardship organizations, such as KT, are prohibited from directly compensating host landowners, as it would compromise the landowner's protection under the state's liability statute.

Although our trails are a remarkable recreation resource with tremendous economic impact, KT wholeheartedly acknowledges this level of use places pressure and stress on the private landowners who make our trails possible. In 2019, KT experienced a landowner who chose to restrict access to Mountain bikers on their property. This was detrimental to KT's continuous network, and the loss of beloved trails devastated our community and trail users. They saw area businesses reaping the economic benefits of outdoor recreation, but they themselves were not, even though they were the ones hosting miles of trails on their land.

These KT landowners are not alone. VAST, Craftsbury Outdoor Center and others have all experienced landowners withdrawing access to their land. Currently, over 70% of Vermont's public-access trails are on private land and dependent on the benevolence of private landowners. With increased demand on our trail assets, these non-profit trail stewardship organizations face more and more challenges in retaining public access to crucial trail corridors.

This question of how we develop an appropriate mechanism to recognize private landowners will be a critical component of how we retain public access to Vermont's trail system. Please support Kingdom Trails and their private landowners by supporting this legislation.

Thank you for your consideration, support, and for listening. I invite you all to Outdoor Recreation Day at the Statehouse on February 12th and NEK Day at the Statehouse on February 20th.