

March 17
2025

Recreation Access Recognition

Senate Committee on Natural Resources & Energy

Nick Bennette, Executive Director, Vermont Mountain Bike Association
Chair, Vermont Trails & Greenways Council

Background

Outdoor recreation is woven into the fabric of Vermont

- 8,000+ miles of public access trails
- Strong collaboration between public land managers & nonprofit stewardship orgs
- A vibrant and highly diversified outdoor recreation business sector
- Dozens of outdoor recreation-oriented communities
- Public-access recreation is a designated purpose for conservation
- Accounts for 4.8% of State GDP (↑ 0.2%)
- Private landowners host 70+% of trails



The Benefits

Outdoor Recreation drives health, environmental, and economic impact

- Supports healthy & resilient communities
- Fosters ecological awareness & conservation
 - Connects people with landscape
 - Promotes more equitable access
 - Recognition, minimization of impacts
- Fuels sustainable economic development:
 - Hundreds of outdoor businesses
 - Attraction, retention of new residents
 - Supporting infrastructure, amenities
 - 15+ million annual visitor trips

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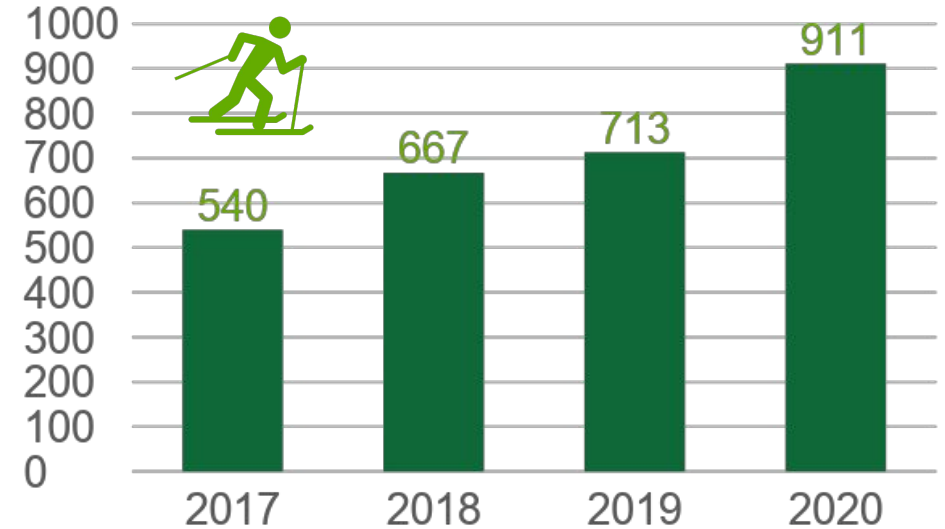
Source: Headwaters Economics

Growth

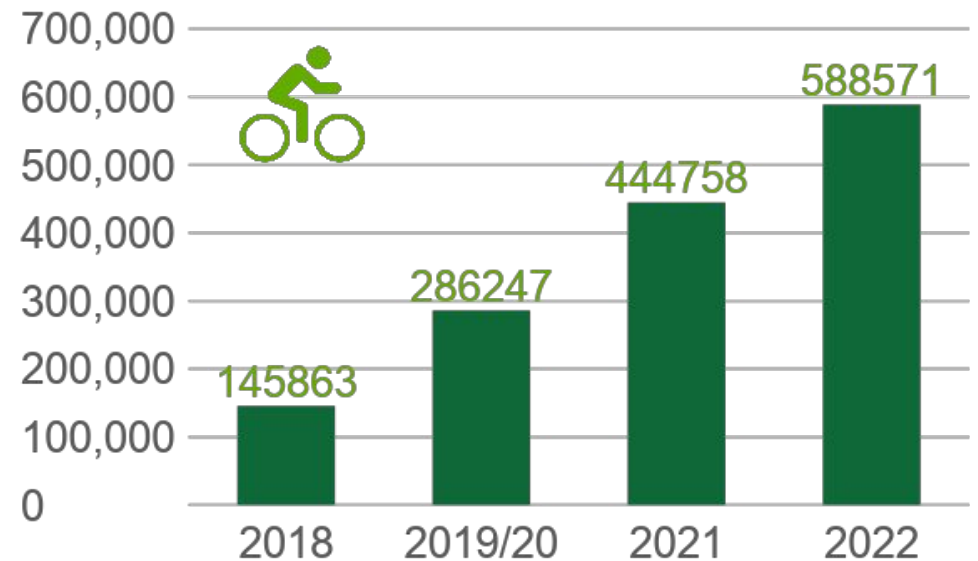
Vermonters and visitors rely on recreational trails, now more than ever

- Dramatic increase in demand for outdoor recreation over the last decade; accelerated through the pandemic
- Over half (57%) of Americans recreated outdoors in 2024, participation that has increased every year since 2014
- Trail usage across usage types, motorized/non-motorized and seasons has increased 100-200% over the last 5 years
- Over 70% of Vermont's recreational trails are hosted by private landowners, stewarded by non-profit organizations with limited public support

Trail Users, 'No-Name' Backcountry Area



TrailForks Trail Check-ins, State-wide



About the VTGC

The consolidated, expert voice and support hub for recreational trails in Vermont.

Our organizational members:

- Represent 50,000+ individual members
- Log 100,000+ hours of volunteer time annually
- Manage and maintain 7,750+ miles of trails
- Support 50,000+ jobs statewide through the broader impact of our work
- Steward trails on private land, which hosts over 70% of public access trails in Vermont
- Partner closely with state and federal agencies to manage trails on public land

<https://vermonttgc.org/>



Stewardship

Maintaining and growing trail infrastructure through private landowner relationships and public land manager partnerships

- Balance equitable access with responsible use of Vermont's amazing landscape
- Apply Best Management Practices (BMPs) on trail design, construction, use, and maintenance
- Develop maintenance, access, and stewardship plans
- Professionally-led with support of VTGC coordinator and Volunteer-supported work
- Establish and cultivate lasting relationships with landowners who host trails
- Funded primarily through memberships, grants, and philanthropic support



Challenges

Threats to the future prosperity of outdoor recreation in Vermont

- Deferred maintenance
- Underfunded stewardship
- Insufficient organizational capacity
- Ill-suited regulation & oversight system
- Dramatic increase in demand
- Limited understanding of the outdoor recreation economy
- Climate change
- Majority reliance on private landowners without any recognition or support

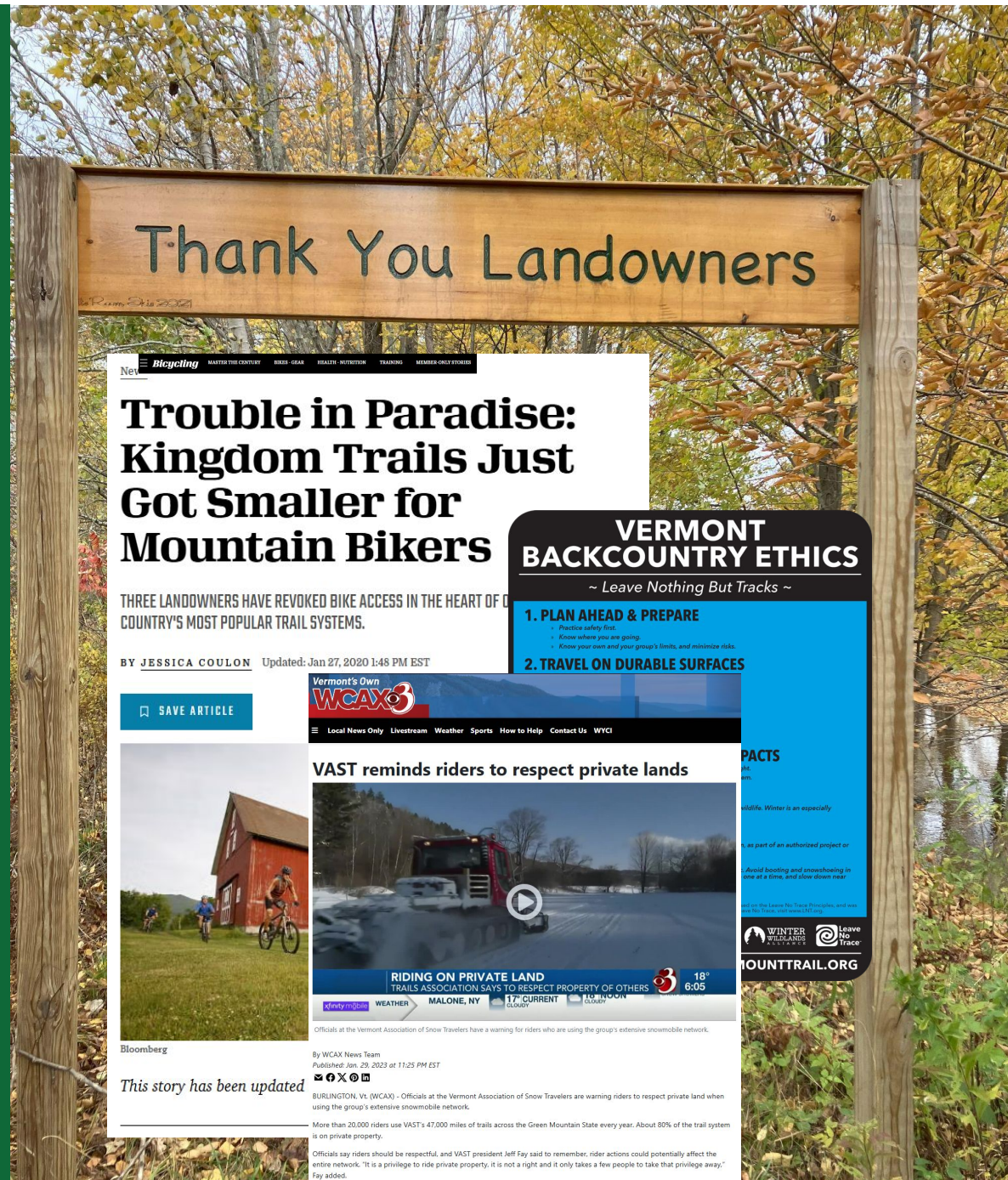


Private Landowners

Vital to Vermont's Outdoor Recreation Economy

- ~75% of public-access recreational trails are hosted by private landowners
- Different factors motivate Landowners to host public-access recreation, typically receiving no formal or tangible recognition
- Withdrawal of access can and has had serious impacts on connectivity and local economies
- Recreation managers act to address landowner concerns, though the scope of their ability to provide benefits is limited

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S.79 Objectives

An act relating to establishing the Recreational Trails Compensation Study Committee

1. Evaluate how private lands are currently used for public access trails
2. Assess landowner costs & liabilities
3. Estimate the economic value
4. Analyze other existing approaches
5. Recommend if and how host private landowners should be recognized
6. Consider how to ensure high quality trail construction & maintenance
7. Structure a merit-based model for recognition / compensation

1 S.79

2 Introduced by Senators Douglass, Beck, Collamore, Cummings, Gulick,

3 Harrison, Hart, Heffernan, Ingalls, Lyons, Major, Plunkett and

4 Williams

5 Referred to Committee on

6 Date:

7 Subject: Conservation and development; real property; trail use; compensation

8 Statement of purpose of bill as introduced: This bill proposes to establish the

9 Recreational Trails Compensation Study Committee to review and recommend

10 to the General Assembly whether real property owners who allow use of their

11 property for public recreational trails should receive compensation or other

12 benefit.

13 An act relating to establishing the Recreational Trails Compensation Study
14 Committee

15 It is hereby enacted by the General Assembly of the State of Vermont:

16 Sec. 1. RECREATIONAL TRAILS COMPENSATION STUDY

17 COMMITTEE; REPORT

18 (a) Creation. There is created the Recreational Trails Compensation Study

19 Committee to review whether real property owners who allow use of their

S.79 - Details

The Committee

- FPR Commissioner* - Chair
- Dept of Taxes Commissioner*
- VTGC representative
- VOREC representative
- Land conservation representative
- Host landowner, with easement
- Host landowner, without easement
- Trail planning, design, building, & maintenance expert
- VLCT Representative
- Others as invited (*non-voting*)

The Cost

- Per diem expenses for Committee members (6 meetings)
- \$250,000 for consultant support

The Output

- Report to the General Assembly due on or before December 15th, 2026
 1. Findings
 2. Any legislative recommendations

H.79 - Summary

Why this bill and why now

- Trail-based recreation is vital to Vermont's economic, social, and physical health
- Despite being vital to that landscape, private landowners receive no recognition or compensation for hosting public-access trails
- S.79 will provide the necessary information to develop a recreation access recognition program in the future
- Without action, access to current vital recreation assets is at risk, threatening communities that rely on these resources

S.79 SPONSORS

- Douglass of Orleans
- Beck of Caledonia
- Collamore of Rutland
- Cummings of Washington
- Gulick of Chittenden
- Harrison of Windham
- Hart of Orange
- Heffernan of Addison
- Ingalls of Essex
- Lyons of Chittenden
- Major of Windsor
- Plunkett of Bennington
- Williams of Rutland

A photograph of two off-road vehicles on a dirt road at sunset. The vehicle on the left is a dark-colored utility vehicle with a person standing behind it, looking out over the landscape. The vehicle on the right is a Polaris utility vehicle. The sky is a mix of orange and blue, and the background shows rolling hills. The text "THANK YOU!" is overlaid in the center in large white letters.

THANK YOU!

The VTGC Board of Directors; board@vermonttgc.org

VTGC Members

Comprised of over 50 trail-related organizations and individuals

- 18 Statewide Trail Stewardship organizations
- 10 Regional Trail Stewardship organizations
- 6 Local/Community Groups
- 7 Townships & Municipalities
- 7 State/Federal Agencies (ex-officio)
- 5 Individual and Commercial members

<https://vermonttgc.org/members>

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VTGC Board

- Nick Bennette, Vermont Mountain Bike Association (VMBA), Chair
- Tommy O'Connor, Vermont ATV Sportsman's Association (VASA) Vice-Chair
- Caitrin Maloney, Slate Valley Trails, Treasurer
- Carolyn Lawrence, Stowe Trails Partnership, Secretary
- Mariah Keagy, Sinuosity Flowing Trails
- Abby Long, Kingdom Trails Association
- Monica Raymond, Vermont Horse Council
- Jeff Nugent, Windham Regional Planning Commission
- Cindy Locke, Vermont Association of Snow Travelers (VAST)
- Rachel Batz, Town of Dorset

