



Pathways to Healthier Communities

# **TRAIL SYSTEMS AND HEALTHY COMMUNITIES DIALOGUE GUIDE**



National Recreation  
and Park Association



# INTRODUCTION

At the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA), we believe that local park and recreation agencies are strong leaders for creating healthy and vibrant communities. There is an increasing body of evidence documenting the benefits and significant contributions made by trails and park systems to physical and mental health, youth development, social well-being, and economic vitality. It is clear that increased physical activity is an important part of the solution to address the upward trends in obesity and related chronic diseases.

Trails and parks provide physical activity venues for people of all abilities — organized sports, running, biking, gardening, hiking, and swimming, among many others. In turn, these systems not only reduce the costs associated with poor health, they offer the very amenities and qualities that many families and businesses are increasingly looking for and create further opportunities for expanding a community's economic well-being. Moreover, there is evidence that people living adjacent to green spaces know more of their neighbors, report a stronger feeling of belonging, and are more supportive of each other. This stronger "civic fabric" can be an important contributor to the vitality of a community as members come together to invest their time and energy for the benefit of neighborhood and community improvement.

However, information on the relationship between trails and parks with the health and vitality of communities is not always included in our public discourse.

**It is important for local park and recreation professionals to create opportunities within their community for people to explore the role that parks, recreation, and environmental conservation efforts play in creating healthy communities, improving quality of life, and promoting community livability.**

NRPA is the leading advocacy organization dedicated to the advancement of public parks and recreation opportunities. Founded in 1965 through the merger of five national organizations dedicated to the same cause, NRPA has grown over the years — in total membership, in outreach efforts, in building partnerships, and in serving as the voice and defender of parks and recreation.

NRPA is dedicated to educating professionals and the public on the essential nature of parks and recreation. Through learning opportunities, research, and communications initiatives, we strive to generate significant public support for our movement in order to advance the development of best practices and resources that will make parks and recreation indispensable elements of American communities.

## INTRODUCTION

Making progress in these areas can be complex and should focus on long-term solutions. This requires the participation of a variety of local leaders and stakeholders. Partnering with public and private organizations, developing coalitions of community leaders that represent schools, businesses, public health agencies, municipal and county governments, and other key policymakers, and engaging the broader community in the development of plans and strategies that address their highest interests and aspirations will all be necessary for making and sustaining progress.

Convening diverse groups and laying the ground work for successful partnerships or coalitions may be a new role for some park and recreation leaders.

**This tool is designed to help local park and recreation agencies play a leadership role in bringing together a diverse group of people and organizations who are interested in or working towards creating healthy, vibrant communities by creating or improving community trail systems for all residents, regardless of physical ability, race, culture, ethnicity, socioeconomic status or age.**

This guide offers a starting place for building the trust, relationships and shared understanding that is needed in order to make progress toward creating and sustaining more accessible and valued trail systems in your community. And through the tips, materials and resources offered here, we hope that groups will use the attached action planning template (see “Our Next Steps”) to begin to identify steps they can take to enhance their trail systems and the health of their community.

Whether you are new to convening diverse groups, or have lots of experience building coalitions and partnerships, the discussion guide that follows will help you hold a highly productive conversation with potential partners and volunteers.

A well-planned and well-facilitated initial meeting will:

1. **Raise awareness about the role of trails in healthy communities;**
2. **Identify shared interests; and**
3. **Begin to establish a strong foundation for future collaborations.**

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# A. USING THIS TOOL

There are different ways to use this tool, including:

**1. To host an initial conversation about a particular facility or small set of facilities within one neighborhood;**

**2. As a conversational starting point for a meeting of representatives from different organizations or neighborhoods to look more broadly across an entire community trail system; or**

**3. As part of a comprehensive public engagement process. This guide can be used to host concurrent neighborhood-level conversations across different neighborhoods. Themes that emerged from the meetings can then be compiled and compared, and individuals from each neighborhood conversation invited to then look at opportunities for improvement across the entire trail system.**

These different approaches each have their potential advantages. Multiple conversations among a broad range of residents can build momentum and lead to a variety of outcomes including: grassroots activities; the creation of task forces; and the inclusion of resident recommendations into a strategic plan. Neighborhood-specific dialogues sometimes have the advantage of gathering people who already have a strong tangible connection and interest in the conversation, and also may be able to move more quickly and readily towards shared action following from the initial conversation. In all cases, the *Action Plan Template: Our Next Steps* (Attachment 5) will be useful in helping groups to be clear about how they are moving forward.

**Whether your focus is an individual park, a section of town, or the whole community, plan to engage a diverse group of participants and be sure to invite formal as well as informal leaders.**

The convener tips in the next section will walk you through the basics needed to organize and facilitate a successful conversation. For additional tools and advice about how to organize large-scale public dialogue, see the Resources Appendix for further information from Community Initiatives, Everyday Democracy, and National Coalition on Dialogue and Deliberation.

# B. CONVENER TIPS

To enhance the quality of your community conversation, and also build a stronger potential for actions emerging from it, it is important to be thoughtful around the organizing and set-up of your meeting. Based on experiences of other successful community dialogues, we offer the following tips for *organizing* an effective conversation:

## 1. Be clear about what you are asking people to do and why.

- Explain the purpose of the meeting.
- Identify the goal(s) of the meeting.
- Let people know the time commitment for the initial meeting.

## 2. Identify a diverse group of 8 to 15 people, including:

- Formal and informal leaders.
- Participants who use trails and walking paths.
- People who may already be working to improve community health.
- People who are in a position to make decisions about trails.
- People from different parts of town, age groups, income or education levels, cultural or racial groups.

In addition to park and recreation agencies, there are likely a number of different groups and organizations already with some level of interest or engagement in the relationship between trails and a healthier community. Additionally, there may be other groups who you recognize will be important “influencers” or decision-makers able to affect progress in this area. While the precise “mix” will look different in each community, some specific groups to consider include:

- Public health department.
- Transportation Authority.
- Public Works Department.
- Department of Elderly Affairs.
- Town/city/county planners.
- American Association of Retired Persons.
- Schools.
- Business groups such as the Chamber of Commerce or Rotary.
- Youth organizations such as the YMCA, or Boys and Girls Clubs.
- Local health care providers and health insurance companies, including local health departments, community health centers, hospitals or physicians groups.
- Private businesses.
- Elected officials and community leaders.
- Local Friends Groups.

## 3. Use a personal touch to recruit participants.

- Do some homework about those you are inviting, so you have a sense of why this issue might be relevant for them.
- Begin with a personal phone call or visit.
- Follow-up with a written invitation.
- Send a confirmation prior to the meeting.
- If the person you are recruiting is not available, invite them to suggest another person who might have a similar perspective.

## 4. Choose the time and location of the meeting carefully.

- Keeping in mind the invitees, decide whether business hours or evening hours will work best.
- Make sure the meeting space is welcoming and accessible to people of all abilities.
- Consider adding elements such as healthy snacks to create a welcoming and comfortable atmosphere.

## 5. Invite someone with facilitation experience to lead the discussion.

- If you plan to lead the discussion, become familiar with basic facilitation skills to ensure a successful meeting (see Attachment 1 in the Resources section for facilitator tips).

## 6. Evaluate the process.

- See Attachment 3 in the resources section for a sample evaluation.

## 7. Be prepared to establish next steps if needed.

- Use the *Action Plan Template: Our Next Steps* with the group to identify, clarify and record proposed action items emerging from the dialogue.
- Follow up with attendees and participants to clarify their roles and action items for potential next steps.
- Schedule follow-up meetings.

# C. DISCUSSION GUIDE

## AGENDA (3 HOUR MEETING)

### 1. Welcome and Introductions \_\_\_\_\_ 15 min.

Introduce yourself and let people know the purpose of this discussion.

Possible meeting/discussion goals could include:

- **Begin to establish a shared understanding about the role and status of trails in the community.**
- **Identify shared interests among meeting participants.**
- **Identify possible opportunities for future collaboration.**

Invite people to share their name, organization (if applicable).

Establish discussion ground rules (see Attachment 1 for some sample “Operating Agreements”).

### 2. Explore common interests \_\_\_\_\_ 30 min.

Invite participants to talk briefly about their connection to the community. Also invite them to share a few things they may be working on to help the community.

- **Describe your connection to the community.**
- **From your perspective, what’s going well?**
- **What contributes to this community being a healthy, vibrant place to live, work and play?**
- **What is your organization working on to help create a healthy community?**

While listening to the discussion, take note of shared interests and goals.

### 3. Consider the role of trails in supporting healthy, vibrant communities \_\_\_\_\_ 45 min.

Invite several people to share highlights of their conversations with the whole group.

- **Describe your personal experience using the trails in our community.**
- **Describe your experience using trails in other places you’ve lived or visited.**

Trails can serve multiple purposes. Invite participants to consider some different views about the role trails might play in a vibrant community. Ask volunteers to take turns reading through all the views listed below.

#### A. Promote exercise and healthy living:

- Walking and biking as easily accessible exercise.
- Address obesity and related chronic diseases in community/nation.
- Equity issue trails as a “public good” available for all community members.



**B. An important amenity for community and economic development:**

- Businesses increasingly looking for communities that have cultural and recreational amenities.
- Trails can make a difference when attracting new companies.
- Healthier people reduced health care costs.
- Preventive approaches, specifically trails, have a proven and positive "return on investment".

**C. Enhance quality of life for children, families and all community members:**

- Trails and trail systems provide critical opportunities for youth and families to get/play outside.
- Social capital benefits (people connecting with others in public spaces).
- Offers mental/emotional health benefits.

**D. Alternative transportation system:**

- Provide safer transportation pathways for bicyclists and pedestrians.
- Less automobile traffic miles equates to environmental benefits (less pollution).
- Saves money for people and community; don't need car to access shopping and other services.

After all of the views have been read aloud, lead a discussion about this list using the following questions:

- Which of these views stand out for you?
- Is there a viewpoint that's missing?
- What might other people you know say about this?
- What themes are you noticing?

**FACILITATOR INSTRUCTIONS:**

Before the meeting, copy the views (A thru D, with bullets) on a piece of flipchart paper and hang in a central location that is easily viewable and readable by participants. Encourage participants to reference these as they talk.

**FACILITATOR INSTRUCTIONS:**

Record key ideas and themes on several pieces of flip chart paper labeled *Strengths, Needs and How Trails Can Help*.

**4. Mapping Activity<sup>1</sup> \_\_\_\_\_ 45 min.**

Post a large map on the wall. If the map includes trails, invite participants to add any additional trails, paths or walking routes that are missing. If the map does not include trails, invite participants to complete the map, indicating where the trails, walking paths, and informal paths are located. Once people have completed their work on the map, invite them to take a few minutes to look at what they have created.

<sup>1</sup> Attachment 4 provides an additional exercise to help the group deepen its analysis of the community's trail system. If there is time, you can insert the exercise here. However, it may also be a useful follow-up activity for a future gathering.

## DISCUSSION GUIDE

Conclude this mapping activity with a discussion using the questions below:

- **What stands out when we look at the map?**
  - What trails seem particularly well used and popular? What is it about these trails that make them successful? How do the existing trails connect with one another?
  - Are the trails accessible to and used by all different kinds of people in our community (for example, people from different economic, cultural and ethnic backgrounds, different age groups, etc.)?
- **How well does our existing trail system support what we've said is important during the earlier discussion about the role of trails in healthy communities?**
  - What successes can we build on?
  - What unmet needs should be addressed?
  - What opportunities do we see for improving trail use and/or infrastructure?

### 5. Identify potential next steps \_\_\_\_\_ 30 min.

Invite participants to reflect on the conversation so far, and consider whether there is enough shared interest in order to move forward. If the interest is there, the questions below will help the group begin to explore next steps. (The attached *Action Plan Template* may help you record the group's responses and clarify your intended next steps.)

When you think about all we've discussed so far:

- **What stands out?**
- **What themes did you notice?**

What existing relationships, capacities, experiences and successes can we utilize and build upon if/when we move forward?

- **If we decide to move forward with work to enhance our built environment, what role might our different organizations play?**
- **Who else needs to be at the table?**

What specific next steps will we take?

### 6. Closing \_\_\_\_\_ 15 min.

If there is interest in moving forward,

- **Use the attached action planning template — "Our Next Steps" — to identify possible future directions.**
- **Discuss plans to reconvene the group.**

Thank everyone for coming.

# D. RESOURCES

## ATTACHMENT 1: FACILITATION TIPS

It's important to stress that you don't need to have an expert facilitator to have productive meetings. The following are tips and ideas to help make your team experience as productive and enjoyable as possible.

### Know Your Role

As the group's facilitator you should:

- Help the group understand its task/purpose.
- Make sure that everyone has an opportunity to speak and be heard.
- Create a safe environment for dialogue (including disagreement).
- Keep an open and balanced conversational flow.
- Focus energy of the group on the common task.
- Manage the group's time.
- Manage the group decision making process.
- Maintain neutrality when playing the primary facilitator role.
- Have available a mechanism through which contact information can be exchanged (e.g., a copied sign in sheet or a networking worksheet).

### Set Simple Operating Agreements

Review "group operating agreements" and ask the participants if they agree with them or want to add anything. Basic operating agreements may include:

- Be respectful.
- Everyone gets a fair hearing.
- Share "air time."
- One person speaks at a time. Speak for yourself, not for others.
- If you are offended or upset, say so, and say why.
- You can disagree, but don't make it personal.
- Everyone helps the facilitator keep moving and stay on track.
- Personal stories are not shared outside the group.

### Support the Group Process

Even though your team has agreed on some basic operating agreements, you will need to monitor how well the participants are honoring these agreements and communicating with each other — who has spoken, who hasn't, and whose points haven't received a fair hearing. Here are a few ideas to support the process:

- A well thought-out agenda is the key to a productive meeting; agenda needs to include desired outcomes/ agenda items/key questions/time estimates. (It is always good to give people a chance to shape/refine the agenda before the meeting and help with the creation of the agenda for the following meeting).
- Send relevant materials being discussed a couple of days before the meeting to make sure people have enough time to review them.
- Give the group an estimate of time you propose they spend on each question and give them time updates as needed (have a "game plan" for how the group could use its time and then be flexible).
- Don't be afraid of silence (it will sometimes take a while for participants to offer an answer to a question you pose).
- When deciding whether to intervene, err on the side of non-intervention. Facilitators are frequently trapped into taking too much responsibility for the group which can undermine the group experience. Encourage the group to take responsibility for the quality of their process.

### Focus On Content

In addition to helping the group with process, you will also need to help the group deal with the "content" of the discussion:

- Make sure the group considers a wide range of views.
- Ask the group to think about the concerns and values that underlie their beliefs.
- Steer the group away from focusing too much on or be overly influenced by one point of view.
- Remain neutral about content and be cautious about expressing your own values.
- Help participants identify "common ground," but don't try to force consensus.

### TIPS FOR HANDLING TYPICAL CHALLENGES

#### The Quiet or Shy Participant

**POSSIBLE RESPONSES:**

Try to draw out quiet participants, but don't put them on the spot. Make eye contact: it reminds them that you'd like to hear from them. Look for non-verbal cues to see if they want to speak. You can be more direct and ask them for their opinion: "Laurie, what do you think?"

#### The Dominator

**POSSIBLE RESPONSES:**

As the facilitator, it is your responsibility to help ensure an individual does not dominate the discussion. Once it becomes clear that a person is dominating, you must intervene and set limits. Start by reminding the group (and the individual) that you want to hear from all participants. Next, you might ask the individual to wait until everyone else has had a chance to give their opinion on the question. If the pattern continues you may need to be more direct: "Joe, please finish your point because I feel we are wandering a bit from our agreed upon agenda and I'd like to give others a chance to speak."

#### Lack of Focus/Wandering Off Track

**POSSIBLE RESPONSES:**

Responding to this can be a hard call. After all, the discussion belongs to the group members. Yet, it is the facilitator's job to maintain group focus. You may wish to give some leeway to participants who want to explore closely-related topics. However, if only a few participants are carrying the discussion in a new direction, the others are likely to feel frustrated, resentful, and bored. The facilitator should try to refocus the discussion, perhaps by asking, "How does your point relate to the \_\_\_\_?" or stating, "That's an interesting point, but I'd like for us to return to the initial question."

#### Lack of Interest/Excitement

**POSSIBLE RESPONSES:**

When people help craft the agenda, they are more likely to engage in the discussion. However, lack of interest/excitement can happen when the facilitator talks too much or does not give participants enough time to respond after posing the questions. It may help to pose a question and go around the circle so that everyone has a chance to respond. Another possible reason for the apparent lack of excitement in the discussion may be that the group seems to be in agreement. In this case the facilitator might check this assumption and then gain agreement for moving on to the next question or topic on the agenda.

#### Conflict/Tension

**POSSIBLE RESPONSES:**

If there is tension, address it directly. Remind participants that disagreement and conflict of ideas is fine and useful. You must interrupt personal attacks, name calling, or put-downs as soon as they occur. Remind group/the individual that it is acceptable to challenge someone's ideas, but it is not acceptable to challenge them personally. Don't hesitate to appeal to the group for help; if the group members are bought into the ground rules, they will support you.

## DIALOGUE V. DEBATE

DEBATE/DISCUSSION	DIALOGUE
Assuming there is one right answer, and you have it	Assuming many people have pieces of the answer and together can craft new solutions
Combative: participants attempt to prove the other side is wrong	Collaborative: participants work together toward common understanding and commitment
About winning	About exploring common ground
Listening to find flaws and making counter-arguments	Listening to understand, find meaning, and agreement
Defending assumptions as truth	Revealing assumptions for re-evaluation
Critiquing the other side's position	Re-examining all positions
Defending one's own views against those of others	Admitting that others' thinking can improve on one's own
Searching for flaws and weaknesses in others' positions	Searching for strength and value in others' positions
Seeking a conclusion or vote that ratifies your position	Discovering new options, not seeking closure

Adapted from The Public Conversations Project, Study Circles Resource Center, The Common Enterprise and Community Initiatives.

**ATTACHMENT 2: SIGN-IN SHEET**

<b>TRAILS MEETING</b>				
INSERT LOCATION HERE:				
INSERT DATE HERE:				
<b>NAME</b>	<b>TITLE</b>	<b>ORGANIZATION</b>	<b>PHONE</b>	<b>E-MAIL</b>

**ATTACHMENT 3: EVALUATION FORM**

1. Please rate the discussion:

EXCELLENT      GOOD      FAIR      POOR

2. How well did the meeting achieve the goals listed below:

**GOALS**

- Begin to establish a shared understanding about the role and status of trails in our community.

EXCELLENT      GOOD      FAIR      POOR

- Identify shared interests among meeting participants.

EXCELLENT      GOOD      FAIR      POOR

- Identify possible opportunities for future collaboration.

EXCELLENT      GOOD      FAIR      POOR

3. Are there topics or issues regarding trails or walking that we missed during this discussion? If yes, what?

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4. What next steps would you recommend?

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5. Would you like to continue to stay involved?

YES      NO      MAYBE

6. Contact Information.

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

E-MAIL \_\_\_\_\_

PHONE \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_

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## RESOURCES

### ATTACHMENT 4: EXERCISE TO BUILD ON TRAIL MAPPING ACTIVITY

This can be done in a follow-up meeting in order to help community leaders deepen their shared understanding about what is working and where to invest future resources and effort.

**STEP 1:** Invite participants to spend a few minutes filling out the trail “report card” for each trail in your community.

TRAIL: _____	A. DOING GREAT	B. DOING WELL	C. DOING OKAY	D. NEEDS IMPROVEMENT
Level of Use				
Signage				
Stewardship				
Equitable access				
Safety				
Funding				
Shared Use				

**STEP 2:** Invite participants to share the results of their report cards with each other. Where does the group agree? Where are there differences?

**STEP 3:** When you look at the report cards, what successes do you see? How can the community build on these?

**STEP 4:** What challenges or gaps need to be addressed?



**ATTACHMENT 5: ACTION PLAN TEMPLATE**

**OUR NEXT STEPS**

What change(s) do we want to see?

What specific action ideas do we want to work on?

ACTION IDEAS/ STRATEGIES	WHAT IS ALREADY BEING DONE?	WHAT OBSTACLES AND/ OR OPPORTUNITIES DO WE SEE?	WHAT INFORMATION DO WE NEED?	SOME IMMEDIATE NEXT STEPS: • Who will take the lead? • Other key participants?

## RESOURCES

### **ATTACHMENT 6: INFORMATION ABOUT TRAILS AND HEALTHY COMMUNITIES**

Below is a list of available resources that may be helpful for you to reference. Please note this list is not inclusive, but rather a short list of compiled resources that NRPA has found useful in the past.

**2010 Outdoor Recreation Participation Report:** [www.outdoorfoundation.org/pdf/ResearchParticipation2010.pdf](http://www.outdoorfoundation.org/pdf/ResearchParticipation2010.pdf)

**Active Living Research: The Power of Trails for Promoting Physical Activity in Communities:**  
[www.activelivingresearch.org/files/ALR\\_Brief\\_PowerofTrails.pdf](http://www.activelivingresearch.org/files/ALR_Brief_PowerofTrails.pdf)

**American Trails Resource Page:** [www.americantrails.org/resources/index.html](http://www.americantrails.org/resources/index.html)

- Trail building
- Planning
- Impacts
- Management
- Land Use and Rights of Way

**Henderson Trails Watch Volunteer Program: Henderson, NV Parks and Recreation:**  
[www.cityofhenderson.com/parks/parks/trail\\_watch.php](http://www.cityofhenderson.com/parks/parks/trail_watch.php)

**International Mountain Biking Association: Trail Solutions: IMBA's Guide to Building Sweet Single-track:**  
[www.imba.com/catalog/book-trail-solutions](http://www.imba.com/catalog/book-trail-solutions)

**LiveWell Greenville:** [www.livewellgreenville.org](http://www.livewellgreenville.org)

**National Recreation and Park Association; *Synopsis of 2010 Research Papers: The Key Benefits:***  
[www.nrpa.org/uploadedFiles/Explore\\_Parks\\_and\\_Recreation/Research/2011\\_Summary\\_of\\_Reserach-Final-Web3.pdf](http://www.nrpa.org/uploadedFiles/Explore_Parks_and_Recreation/Research/2011_Summary_of_Reserach-Final-Web3.pdf)

**National Trails Training Partnership:** [www.americantrails.org/nttp](http://www.americantrails.org/nttp)

**Parks and Recreation: Essential Partners in Active Transportation:**  
[www.nrpa.org/uploadedFiles/nrpa.org/Advocacy/Resources/Active-Transportation-Parks-Recreation.pdf](http://www.nrpa.org/uploadedFiles/nrpa.org/Advocacy/Resources/Active-Transportation-Parks-Recreation.pdf)

**Rails to Trails Conservancy:** [www.railstotrails.org/index.html](http://www.railstotrails.org/index.html)

- Corridor Research
- Rail banking
- Acquisition
- Outreach
- Plan Design Build
- Maintenance and Management

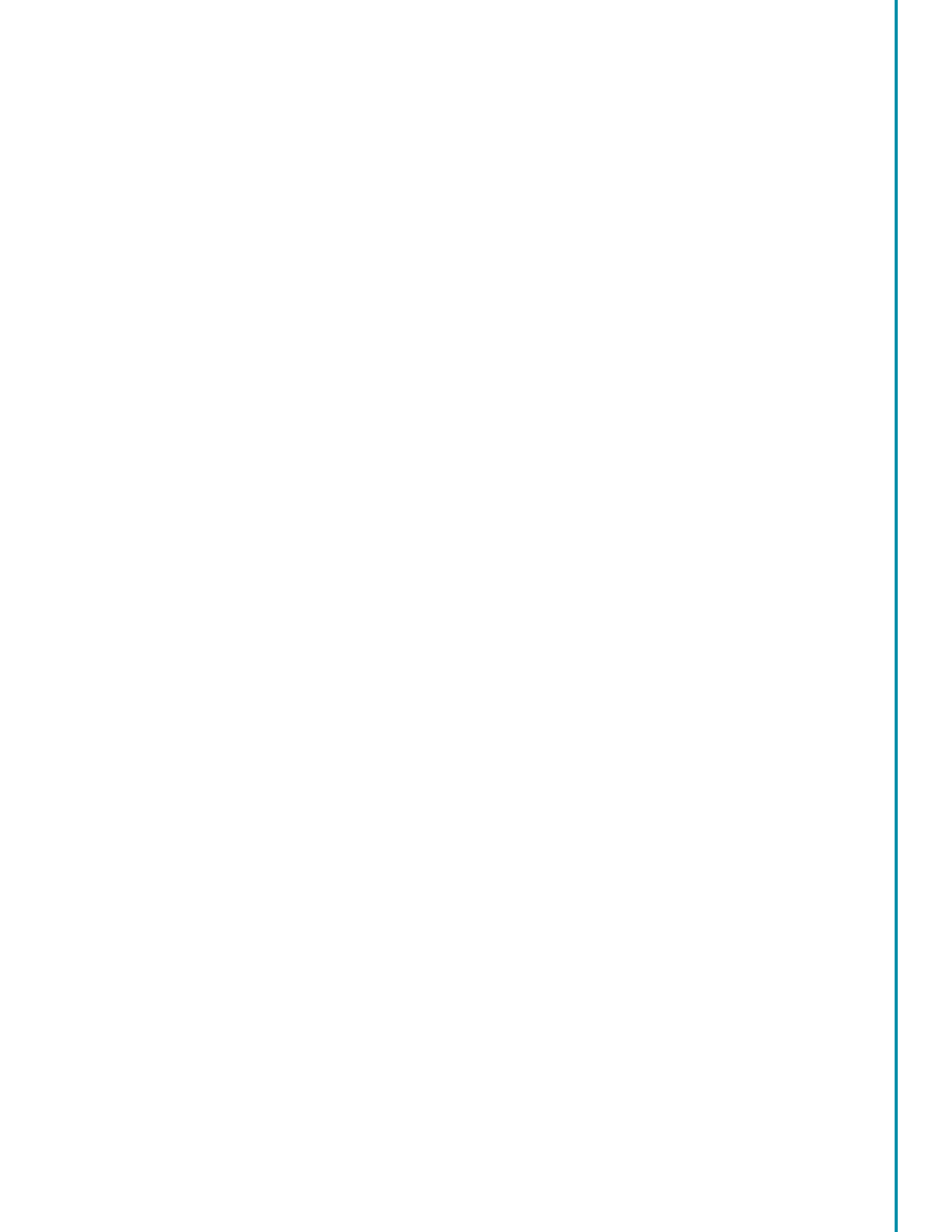
**Rails to Trails Conservancy Library Index:** [www.community.railstotrails.org/media](http://www.community.railstotrails.org/media)

### **ATTACHMENT 7: RESOURCES FOR PUBLIC DIALOGUE AND COMMUNITY CHANGE PROCESSES**

**Everyday Democracy:** [www.everyday-democracy.org](http://www.everyday-democracy.org)

**Community Initiatives:** [communityinitiatives.com](http://communityinitiatives.com)

**National Coalition on Dialogue and Deliberation:** [www.ncdd.org](http://www.ncdd.org)





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7-1-1 for speech and hearing impaired

[www.NRPA.org](http://www.NRPA.org)