

<https://www.americantrails.org/resources/unique-trail-funding-solutions>

Six Unique Trail Funding Solutions

Securing funding is one of the most important things we can do for our trails, but it can also be one of the most challenging. These funding solutions will help.



Think Outside the Box to Entice Users to Donate

In Steamboat Springs, Colorado the city decided to think about trail funding in a different way. Rather than go through the government or through a private corporation, why not reach trail users directly, while they are on the trail, and therefore the most likely to be thinking about those trail benefits? The city [took ten parking meters](#) from their original urban centers and parked them at trailheads, painting them a bright orange color so trail users can't miss them. The visuals of this had the added effect of creating novelty, which creates publicity, which makes people want to be a part of things. Users immediately started donating, swiping their credit cards at the re-purposed parking meters with a minimum \$5 donation, and raising thousands within weeks of installation. The city ultimately projects a whopping \$1.5 million by the year 2026 from this program, with all of those funds going into the trails.



Parking meters are helping to raise funds in Steamboat Springs, Colorado. Photo via the city of Steamboat Springs

Work With What You've Got

Wild Horse Island State Park in Montana happens to be home to bighorn sheep, and in 2016 one of these sheep (or at least its skull) made some [news](#). "A bighorn sheep carcass discovered on Wild Horse Island State Park in the fall of 2016 is the reigning world record holder — and it is continuing to draw attention to the park from a variety of visitors, including the bighorn conservation community." Unbeknownst to most people the world's largest bighorn sheep skull is actually a hot auction item, with even replicas of the skull being very valuable. Wild Horse Island operates on a very small budget, so the find, to them, was the equivalent of finding a chest of gold. The Wild Sheep Foundation (WSF), a non profit that supports the restoration of bighorn sheep, stepped in to help use the skull to raise funds. The organization "commissioned 20 replicas of the world record ram's skull to be auctioned off at various fundraisers around North America. These sales act on a 50/50 split after the WSF recoups the cost of producing the replica. Half of the money goes to the organization that hosts the auction, and half goes to the Montana State Parks Foundation to fund future conservation efforts in the parks."

Make Your Trail Irresistible to Private Funders

We have [previously written](#) about the unfortunate reality of public funding becoming a less reliable source of money for trails. This has meant many groups are turning to private funding for their needs. Private funding requires you to be able to sell your trail, so to speak, to these funders and explain why investing in your trail is the right use of their funds.

American Trails held a [webinar](#) on this topic with experts who have successfully courted private funding, and although the webinar itself is behind a paywall, the [questions and answers](#) the webinar presenters provided are free to all. These answers provide solutions such as bringing in partners from businesses and residents along the trail. They also have answers for both urban and rural communities, such as, "We work in both rural and urban communities, and we have been successful in raising the necessary funding to complete our projects. While urban areas often have the advantage of more foundations and corporate funding, rural communities have the advantage of lower costs and the ability to

leverage in-kind support and government funding. For instance, one of our rural communities has been very successful raising funds through Steak Fry events, working with the Appalachia Regional Commission for grant funding and in-kind support from energy companies. In over 26 years of fundraising, I have never seen a project fail due to lack of funding. If there is a shared vision and a visionary plan to present to funders, the funding will come."



Wild Horse Island State Park. Photo via Visit Montana

Penny Pinching

Chris Gensic, Parks and Trails Planner for the City of Charlottesville, has an innovative plan he calls "My Two Cents." As Chris says, "Since many trail projects are grant funded or compete for funding from gas-tax revenues, there is often not a direct source of funding for trails tied to the user base. This proposal explores the possibility of having a direct one penny per item (hence "My two cents") tax on shoes, bike tires, and other products that directly relate to trail users and can provide some funding for such projects." You can read more about Chris and his proposal, including seeing his slide presentation, [here](#).

Don't Leave Money on the Table

In the Spring of 2020 Congress passed the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act meant to jump start economic development and strengthen communities. At the time Liz Thortensen of Rails-to-Trails Conservancy [urged](#) trail organizations to submit their trail infrastructure for this funding. Thortensen pointed out that although the money came from the Economic Development Administration (EDA), "While EDA programs are not a traditional source of trail funding, we believe trail and active transportation applications that make a strong economic impact and recovery case could very well be competitive in this program. EDA will accept applications for grants to support a wide variety of assistance."

Opportunities such as this one, where your organization may not initially see itself as a candidate, could very well be funding trail projects if the right approach and language is used in the application process. It is important to keep a working knowledge of both ongoing and new funding opportunities. Know when your state's Recreational Trails Program funding cycle comes around and be ready to apply, but also check news sources for new opportunities such as the CARES act. There is always the possibility of another economic stimulus bill in 2020 or 2021, and some of those funds should go to trails, as trails are proven to spur economic development.



Environmental Impact Bonds Funding Trail Systems

In Athens County, Ohio, [Quantified Ventures](#) has piloted an innovative funding structure that uses an Outdoor Recreation Environmental Impact Bond to fund the Baileys Trail System. The Baileys Trail System is a proposed 88-mile, premier mountain biking trail system on the Wayne National Forest. Through increased visitation, the trail system has the potential to diversify and strengthen Southeast Ohio's economy. Private investment will provide the upfront cost of building the Baileys Trail System with repayment tied to the successful achievement of the economic development outcomes, in this case increased sales tax and transient guest taxes. The project is supported by the USDA Forest Service, National Forest Foundation, Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Governors and Premiers, and the US Endowment for Forestry and Communities. You can learn more [here](#).