

**Dealing with Opposition to Trails**

**Presentation by Mark Flint**

**Arizona Horse Council Sharing the Trails Symposium**

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**An Ounce of Prevention**

The most effective way to prevent opposition from derailing a trail project is to ensure there is none – or that opposition is so minimal as to be insignificant. Most trail projects have *some* opposition, if only because some people simply do not like change. Communication and organization long before any plans are made can go a long way to ensure a broad base of support for trail projects. By following a few simple steps you can develop a support network that not only ensures success, but also can provide support in other areas, such as volunteers and funding.

**Step 1: Find and Cultivate Allies**

Who in your community is likely to support trails?

User groups are an obvious choice, but you need to cast as wide a net as possible. Trails benefit the economy in several ways, including tourism and providing quality of life enhancements that attract potential new businesses. Economic development groups, local chambers of commerce and the hospitality business community should easily come on board. You may also find friends in service clubs; it’s usually not too difficult to get on a meeting agenda as a speaker.

Trails also provide opportunities for people to exercise and enjoy a healthy lifestyle. The health care industry – hospitals, public agencies and mental health care providers – are potential supporters.

Open space advocates and environmental organizations can also be great allies, especially those who understand that trails can be highly effective resource protection tools.

Schools and colleges can use trails for environmental education, as an option for community service projects, even as a venue for cross country running.

An umbrella organization that brings the various groups together to share information and combine resources at a regional level can be extremely helpful. The Southwest Colorado Trails Roundtable is an example of how people in one region work together in support of trails. https://sites.google.com/site/swroundtable/

**Step 2. Know and Communicate the Benefits of Trails**

Most of us who have been involved in planning, building and enjoying trails are aware of the benefits they provide. Trails improve our physical, emotional and spiritual health; they can be significant forces behind economic development; they give communities a boost to quality of life; and as mentioned above, are excellent tools for protecting resources.

These benefits should be communicated often and well. You can find excellent research documenting these benefits. One of the best sources is the resources section of the American Trails website. (Also a good organization to support with your membership.)

**Step 3. Cultivate Local Media**

It’s good to establish relationships with local media – the environmental reporter at the newspaper and local television news staff. If they know you as a “go-to” source, an expert who can answer their questions, they will come to you when they need answers. Get to know them and let them get to know you.

Be sure to return reporters’ promptly; they may be on deadline, and knowing they can count on you strengthens the relationship.

Give them a story tips, but make sure they are good tips. By reading/watching what they print/air you will know what they consider newsworthy. Be wary of granting “exclusives,” because it can backfire if other media find out and don’t get the same story. In general, if they approach you with a question, it’s their story, but if you initiate the contact it should go out to all of your media contacts.

**Step 4. Communicating Project Plans**

**Internal process.** Typically, a trails plan begins with an internal process, making sure the agency departments are all on board.

After the agency is aligned and willing to move forward, a second step may be to bring in stakeholder groups to assess their level of support and recommendations for the concept.

The next step is to develop a conceptual plan, basically a description of objectives and lines on a map showing potential trails. These trails may be “ground-truthed,” or laid out on the ground to be sure they are feasible at this point.

**Going public.** At this point, the project should be ready to present to the public. The optimal format for this is an “open house,” where people can view informational displays and ask questions of staff (and volunteers). The meeting should be well publicized, with mailings, press releases to media, and social media postings. If your organization is not equipped to do all the work necessary for a public outreach effort, the National Park Service Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program has a grant process through which you can get their expertise in planning and putting on a forum.

The open house should provide forms for public comment, and also an opportunity for potential volunteers to sign up.

A less desirable alternative to the open house format is a public meeting, which typically involves a representative (or representatives) from the agency who speak to the public, and then provide an opportunity for public response. In addition to creating an “us-them” dynamic, this format is subject to “hijacking” by individuals with specific agendas, which may or may not be relevant, and may or may not be supportive. In addition, the audience is held captive for the length of the meeting. The open house, by contrast, allows people to gather the information they want at their own pace, submit comments and leave.

The public event should be held in the early evening, which is more convenient for the largest number of people.

Records of attendance, comments and visual materials should be available online for public access.

In addition to the public meeting, presentations to local homeowner groups/neighborhood associations, community groups, churches – any group that may be interested – can help get the facts out. The more people who have the truth about the project, the less effect rumors and misrepresentations will have.

**Step 5. Handling Objections**

Opposition can take many shapes. It may come from a neighbor who resents change; it could be that someone is fearful that the trails will bring crime and undesirable traffic to the neighborhood. It may also be expressed as fear of harm to wildlife – even though most trail projects are surveyed by wildlife biologists to prevent serious impacts on wildlife.

Beneath most of these objections is a resistance to change. It may be that people have been recreating on the property – using social trails created by themselves or others – and have come to view it as their own private playground. They don’t want a bunch of new people coming in.

It may be a larger issue, such as urban sprawl’s impact on once more or less remote communities. The trail project becomes the face of that threat to their lifestyle, a surrogate they can attack. The reality that trails are a way to manage the inevitable growth of recreation activity in their area is lost in the frustration at what is viewed as a threat to a way of life.

It’s important to be aware of, and sensitive to, the underlying causes of opposition. It’s also important to make adjustments where feasible, such as moving an alignment to increase distance from homes.

Finally, never lose sight of the fact that you can’t please everyone. You are providing a significant enhancement to people’s health and enjoyment as well as providing economic benefits to your community. It’s almost inevitable that a few people will remain opposed, but if you have done your groundwork, been transparent in the process and communicated effectively to the public those entrenched opponents will be isolated.