



## **GENESEE TRANSPORTATION COUNCIL**

*The Metropolitan Planning Organization for the Genesee-Finger Lakes Region*

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### **Greenway can improve health and reduce disparities, impact study finds**

The Genesee Valley Greenway State Park—a verdant 90-mile corridor stretching from Rochester to the Pennsylvania border—is one of New York’s largest and most scenic assets for promoting physical activity.

But to reach the trail’s full potential as a health resource, trail surfaces and signage need to be upgraded, crosswalks added at road intersections and lighting provided in high-use areas.

These a few of the more than 50 recommendations to emerge from an extensive health impact assessment (HIA) from Common Ground Health and the Genesee Transportation Council.

“Research shows that walking, biking and other physical activities offered by trails like the Greenway can help lower rates of obesity, high blood pressure, stroke and cancer—leading causes of disability and early death in our region” said Wade Norwood, CEO of Common Ground Health, the region’s health research and planning organization.

“With improvements, the Greenway can become one of our community’s best prescriptions for health. It’s just what the doctor ordered,” he said.

The Genesee Transportation Council’s long range plan recognizes that expanding bicycle and pedestrian networks can improve public health by promoting active lifestyles, said James Stack, executive director of the Genesee Transportation Council. “The Genesee Valley Greenway is an asset for our region and beyond. We want to help raise awareness that it is in our back yard and gives people an opportunity to get where they are going while improving their health at the same time,” he said.

To meet these health goals, the study recommended:

- Partnering with governments and community organizations to promote programming and events that celebrate physical activity and are inclusive of vulnerable populations

- Providing infrastructure connections such as new trails, sidewalks, bicycle lanes and public-transit stops
- Developing ADA-compliant grade/trail surface conditions at all road crossings to accommodate wheelchairs and residents with disabilities
- Designing environments that promote formal and informal social interaction

“Monroe County is pleased to support the recommendations of this study by undertaking a \$1.2 million investment in crosswalk enhancements,” said Monroe County Executive Cheryl Dinolfo. “Our Pedestrian Safety Action Plan, which will improve signage, convenience and safety measures at 400 crosswalks Countywide, will enhance the accessibility of green spaces like the Genesee Valley Greenway and lead to stronger families in our community. I want to thank Common Ground Health, the Genesee Transportation Council and New York State for their continued efforts to activate our natural assets.”

HIAs are a new and different lens that local governments bring to decision making, said Norwood, noting that only five such studies have been conducted in New York State. “They bring together data and stakeholders to think about the potential effects of a proposed policy, plan, program or project on not just the environment, but the health of a population.”

The outgrowth of an 18-month process, this assessment was guided by a steering committee of representatives from city, county and state governments, the University of Rochester and the outdoor advocacy group Parks & Trails New York.

“There is mounting evidence that parks can improve our health, and now we have partners to help champion this open space,” said Randy Simons, spokesperson for New York State Parks. “When you’re part of an agency that’s responsible for the stewardship of the outdoors, you’re always touting the importance of recreation, exercise and exploration. But it’s even better when you have multiple sources speaking to the same mission.”

The study looked at four factors that affect public health:

- **Physical activity:** Approximately 63 percent of Monroe County's adult population is obese or overweight. Providing opportunities along the trail for increased active participation encourages physical activity, which help residents maintain a healthy weight.
- **Access and infrastructure:** Studies have shown that people with higher incomes are more likely to use walking trails than those with lower incomes. Roughly 15 percent of Monroe County residents and 13 percent of Livingston County residents fall below the federal poverty level. Raising awareness and accommodating the needs of all potential users increases usage.
- **Safety:** Personal safety concerns impact physical activity the most in women, African American, Latinos and people over 65. Reducing risk of injury and providing adequate way-finding signage and lighting helps allay those concerns.
- **Social cohesion:** Communities with greater levels of participation in community activities have better health outcomes than those with less engagement.

Organizing hikes and other trail events bring people together and foster further interest in physical activity.

**About Common Ground Health**

Founded in 1974, Common Ground Health is one of the nation's oldest and most effective regional health planning organizations. Located in Rochester, the nonprofit serves the nine-county Finger Lakes region. We bring together health care providers, insurers, consumers and other partners to find common ground on health challenges. Using the region's most comprehensive health data, together we hammer out strategies for better care, smarter spending and healthier people. Learn more about our community tables, our data resources and our work improving population health at [www.commongroundhealth.org](http://www.commongroundhealth.org).

**About the Genesee Transportation Council**

The U.S. Department of Transportation requires every metropolitan area with a population of over 50,000 to have a designated Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO). GTC is the MPO responsible for transportation policy, planning and investment decision making in the Genesee-Finger Lakes Region. The GTC Board consists of elected officials from nine counties, the City of Rochester, and representatives of other local, regional, state and federal transportation-related agencies. The Board provides direction to the staff, establishes policy and approves all activities and major work products, including the Long Range Transportation Plan, Unified Planning Work Program and Transportation Improvement Program, which detail how federal transportation funding is used in the greater Rochester area. Learn more at [www.gtcmpo.org](http://www.gtcmpo.org).

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