PROJECT BACKGROUND

INTRODUCTION AND PROJECT PURPOSE
The Northwest Georgia Regional Planning Commission (NWGRC) has been working with neighboring jurisdictions and project stakeholders to recognize the value of the nation’s longest and oldest paved rail trail, the Silver Comet Trail.

In December 2012, NWGRC selected a qualified trail consultant team to prepare a two-part study to identify existing and future economic impacts and future expansion of the trail.

This report evaluates the current and potential demand and use of the Silver Comet Trail and its associated economic impacts on a local and regional level. Future trail expansion opportunities are also identified and include cost-benefit and use analysis. The report is intended to provide a framework for future trail expansion that builds on the function of the existing facility, attracts tourism and business development, and stimulates the local economy.

HISTORY OF THE SILVER COMET TRAIL
The Silver Comet Trail is named after the Silver Comet passenger train, which carried passengers from the northeast United States to Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama from 1947 to 1969. After cancelling passenger service in the late sixties, the rail line only carried freight until it was closed in 1989.

In 1992, The Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT) bought the inactive rail line that ran through Cobb, Paulding, and Polk counties from CSX. GDOT wanted the rail line for future use as a high-speed transit route. Instead the corridor has been operated and maintained as a shared use, non-motorized trail since construction began in Cobb County in 1998. Construction of the Silver Comet Trail began through a collaborative effort among GDOT, Georgia State Parks, PATH Foundation, Cobb County DOT, Paulding County, and Polk County. Each of the three counties (Cobb, Paulding, and Polk) lease the rail trail from GDOT and operate and maintain their sections in cooperation with several local advocacy groups.
The Silver Comet Trail is located 13 miles northwest of Atlanta, Georgia. It begins in the city of Smyrna at the Mavell Road Trailhead and extends 61 miles west through Cobb, Paulding, and Polk counties to the Georgia/Alabama state line. The trail links seven cities along its route: Smyrna, Powder Springs, Hiram, Dallas, Braswell, Rockmart, and Cedartown.

At the Georgia/Alabama state line, the Silver Comet Trail connects to the 33-mile long Chief Ladiga Trail. Plans are underway to extend the Chief Ladiga an additional 7 miles. Both the Silver Comet Trail and Chief Ladiga Trail are paved shared-use trails that have been acquired through the process of federal railbanking. The combined Silver Comet and Chief Ladiga Trail length is approximately 100 miles from Smyrna, Georgia to Anniston, Alabama.
**Project Goals**
The Silver Comet EIA and Planning Study was developed using the following project goals:

1. Collect, analyze, and publish data on the typical and prospective users and associated economic impacts of the Silver Comet Trail.
2. Increase economic development in the region by promoting the Silver Comet Trail as a destination that offers a variety of attractions and amenities to all trail users.
3. Make information about the Silver Comet Trail, its amenities, and nearby attractions readily available through a variety of communication outlets.
4. Determine the most appropriate elements of a safe, secure, and accessible trail environment for all types of trail users.
5. Improve connectivity between the Silver Comet Trail and nearby municipalities and destinations.
6. Develop a Plan that is integrated with other existing and future bicycle plans and other municipal and regional plans.
7. Pursue funding and partnership opportunities for the long-term maintenance and management of the Silver Comet Trail.

**Stakeholder Involvement**
The Silver Comet Economic Impact Analysis and Planning Study drew many stakeholders who have been involved with the trail since its earliest development in the 1990s. Efforts were made to involve each stakeholder group throughout the planning process including a workshop that was scheduled in January 2013 to discuss project goals, needs, and challenges. A second stakeholder workshop was held in May 2013 to review the draft plan and results of the economic impact analysis.
The following stakeholders were identified as part of the project and provided input and oversight of the plan:

- Georgia Department of Transportation
- Polk County Board of Commissioners
- Polk County Tourism
- City of Rockmart
- GRITS
- Georgia Bikes
- City of Dallas
- PATH Foundation
- Paulding County Transportation
- Rome Chamber of Commerce
- Outdoor Chattanooga
- Cobb County Department of Transportation
- Cobb County Parks and Recreation, Cultural Affairs Dep’t.
- Silver Comet Cycles
- Bike Cobb
- Walker County
- City of Atlanta Department of Parks, Recreation and Cultural Affairs
- City of Atlanta Department of Planning and Community Development
- Georgia Department of Economic Development
- Lula Lake Land Trust
- Rome/Floyd County Planning Department
- City of Rome

Stakeholders’ primary interests included:

1. Determining spurs and trail connections to the trunk line of the Silver Comet Trail
2. Providing user services along the trail such as lodging, restaurants, and entertainment that would spur economic growth
3. Developing a more robust wayfinding system that directs users to destinations and towns along the trail
4. Partnership opportunities with other uses such as mountain biking and bicycle rentals were also desired.
Several concerns with the existing Silver Comet Trail were also determined, including future maintenance, funding, and lost economic development opportunities that attract employers, businesses, and residents.

**Benefits of Trails and Greenways**
Given the hard work involved in the planning, design, and development of the existing Silver Comet Trail and future connections, it is important for all those involved in any effort to periodically remind themselves, and others, of the meaning behind the work and the tremendous value it brings to the broader community. Communities across the U.S. and throughout the world are investing in trails as a factor of overall livability. They do this because of their obligation to promote health, safety, and welfare, and also because of the growing awareness of the many benefits of having a connected system of trails and greenways, which include social, ecologic, and economic benefits. The following are general benefits of greenways and trails. A more detailed summary of the specific benefits of the Silver Comet Trail can be found in Chapter 3.

**Greenways and Trails Create Value & Generate Economic Activity**
The economic benefits of trails are generated from several sources and accrue to many different local groups, including residents, businesses, and government agencies. First, trails increase adjacent property values, which benefits property owners as well as local government agencies that see increased property tax revenues. Second, trails attract both businesses and tourists, spurring economic development that benefits all residents. Third, improved bicycle and pedestrian access near businesses, through trails or other means, has been shown to increase sales while reducing the need for expensive parking. Finally, trails are less expensive to construct than roadways and allow residents to travel by bike or foot, saving money on gas and car maintenance.

**Greenways and Trails Increase Real Property Values**
There are many examples, both nationally and locally, that affirm the positive connection between trails, walkability, and property values.¹ Residential properties will realize a greater gain in value the closer they are located to trails and greenspace. In a survey of home buyers by the National...
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Greenways and Trails Spur Economic Growth

In addition to real estate values, trails also create positive economic impacts from tourism and recreation-related revenue. Trails and greenways create opportunities in construction and maintenance, recreation rentals (such as bicycles, kayaks, and canoes), recreation services (such as shuttle buses, ferry services, and guided tours), historic preservation, restaurants, and lodging. The industry rule of thumb is that for every one dollar of investment, there is a three dollar return on that investment, if not more. One of the most relevant tourism examples that saw an even higher return on investment is from the North Carolina coast. In the Outer Banks, bicycling is estimated to have an annual economic impact of $60 million, and 1,407 jobs are supported by the 40,800 visitors for whom bicycling was an important reason for choosing to vacation in the area. The annual return on bicycle facility development in the Outer Banks is approximately nine times higher than the initial investment. Another study in Kansas City found an even higher return of $11.80 for every $1 invested.

Like the Outer Banks, the northwest Georgia region is currently a significant draw to tourists because of the Silver Comet Trail, with jobs directly attributable to tourists and many more supported through indirect effects. Expanding connections to the Silver Comet Trail could build upon this existing activity base and provide a safe and enjoyable way for tourists to visit towns in northwest Georgia.

Developers understand the positive impact of trails on property values.

Association of Realtors and the National Association of Home Builders, trails ranked as the second most important community amenity out of a list of 18 choices (highway access was number one). Similarly, the 2009 report "Walking the Walk" by CEO’s for Cities, which looked at 94,000 real estate transactions in 15 markets, found that in 13 of those markets, higher levels of “walkability” were directly linked to higher home values. For example, in Apex, North Carolina, the Shepard’s Vineyard housing development added $5,000 to the price of each of the 40 homes adjacent to the regional greenway – and those homes were still the first to sell. Other findings from the Trust for Public Land’s ‘Economic Benefits of Parks and Open Space’ and the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy’s ‘Economic Benefits of Trails and Greenways’, are illustrate how trails have positively impacted property values across the country.
Georgia so that these areas can share in the economic gains of tourism.

Recreational facilities also attract businesses seeking a place to locate with a high quality of life for their employees. In Morgantown, West Virginia, the 45-mile Mon River trail system is credited by the Convention and Visitors Bureau for revitalizing an entire district of the city, with a reported $200 million in private investment as a direct result of the trail.6 Similarly, Chicago’s Millenium Park is credited with one-quarter of all new retail, commercial, and residential development that has taken place in the East Loop since the park’s creation.7 At the street scale, pedestrian and bicycle access have been shown to increase retail sales. High quality walking and cycling conditions tend to attract retail customers.8,9 Further, consumers report a willingness to pay approximately 11 percent more for goods in landscaped business districts than in non-landscaped districts. They are willing to pay as much as 50 percent more in these districts for convenience goods.10 One of the goals of the Silver Comet Trail expansion will be to link commercial and residential areas in order to reap these benefits for local businesses.
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Greenways and Trails Offer Transportation Cost Savings
When looking at the returns on investment noted above, it is also important to put into perspective the massive differences in costs inherent in the transportation decisions we make, both as individuals and as a region. Consider the individual costs associated with various forms of transportation. Walking is virtually free and the cost of operating a bicycle is far less than operating a car. A study cited by the Victoria Transport Policy Institute found that households in automobile-dependent communities devote 50 percent more of their income to transportation (more than $8,500 annually) than households in communities with more accessible land use and more multi-modal transportation systems (less than $5,500 annually).

On a broader scale, consider the regional costs of our transportation infrastructure investments. According to the Federal Highway Administration, the basic cost of a single mile of urban, four-lane highway is between $20 million and $80 million. In urban bottlenecks where congestion is the worst, common restrictions such as the high costs of right of ways and the need to control high traffic volumes can boost that figure to $290 million or more.11 By contrast, the costs of bicycle and pedestrian facilities range anywhere from a few thousand dollars per mile to rarely more than $1 million, with great variability between types of infrastructure and local circumstances.12

Bicycling and walking are affordable forms of transportation, and with the relatively low cost and high return on investment for trails, it is hard to argue against developing a regional system that creates value and generates economic activity.

Greenways and Trails Enhance Bicycle and Pedestrian Transportation Options
Communities that invest in trail systems will be better prepared to accommodate shifting modes of travel, especially as driving becomes more expensive. Provided there are viable alternatives to driving, Americans are willing to change their travel habits, as shown during the dramatic increases in gas prices in 2008. According to the Rails to Trails Conservancy and the Bikes Belong Coalition, “Every day, more commuters switch to public transportation, bicycling and walking in places where prior infrastructure investments have made these options safe and convenient”.13

Choosing to bike or walk rather than to drive, however, is often made difficult by the way our cities and towns have developed. The sprawling nature of many land development patterns often leaves residents and visitors with little choice but to drive, even for short trips. In fact, nearly two-thirds (62.7 percent) of all driving trips we make are for a distance of five miles or less.

Surveys by the Federal Highway Administration show that Americans are willing to walk as far as two miles to a destination and bicycle
as far as five miles. A system of expanded trails in the northwest Georgia region, combined with other bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure, will offer viable opportunities for walking and biking to homes, workplaces, schools, parks, downtowns, and cultural attractions.

**Greenways and Trails Improve Health through Active Living**
Additional trails throughout Cobb, Paulding, and Polk counties will contribute to the overall health of residents by offering people attractive, safe, and accessible places to bike, walk, hike, jog, and skate. In short, regional trails will create better opportunities for active lifestyles. The design of our communities—including towns, subdivisions, transportation systems, parks, trails, and other public recreational facilities—affects people’s ability to reach the recommended 30 minutes each day of moderately intense physical activity (60 minutes for youth). According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), “Physical inactivity causes numerous physical and mental health problems, is responsible for an estimated 200,000 deaths per year, and contributes to the obesity epidemic.”

**A Health Impact Assessment of Park, Trail, and Green Space Planning in Greenville, South Carolina**

In 2012, the South Carolina Institute of Medicine and Public Health conducted a Health Impact Assessment (HIA) to determine the health effects that parks, trails, and green space have on the west side population of Greenville, South Carolina. The HIA team ranked the possible health benefits to the area based on the estimated significance of impact. These include opportunities for physical activity provided at low- to no-cost, improved social cohesion and social capital, community and family economic stability, access to healthy food, individual and community safety, and improved air and water quality. According to the HIA, “Research has demonstrated that individuals with high levels of social cohesion live longer and experience improved mental and physical health.”

In regards to food access, “Research shows that providing access to healthy and affordable foods is an important contributing factor for decreasing cancer and chronic diseases.” The HIA builds upon its listing of potential effects and includes recommendations on how to maximize the health benefits of park, trail, and green space gained by the community.
In identifying a solution, the CDC determined that by creating and improving places in our communities to be physically active, there could be a 25 percent increase in the percentage of people who exercise at least three times a week. This is significant considering that for people who are inactive, even small increases in physical activity can bring measurable health benefits. In a December 2010 article published by the Mayo Clinic, it is suggested that:

“Walking, like other exercise, can help you achieve a number of important health benefits such as:

- Lowered low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol (the “bad” cholesterol).
- Elevated high-density lipoprotein (HDL) cholesterol (the “good” cholesterol).
- Lowered blood pressure,
- Reduced risk of or managed type 2 diabetes,
- Improved mood, and
- Increased feelings of strength and fitness.”

Many public agencies are teaming up with foundations, universities, and private companies to launch a new kind of health campaign that focuses on improving people’s options instead of reforming their behavior.

A 2005 Newsweek Magazine feature, “Designing Heart-Healthy Communities,” cites the goals of such programs: “The goals range from updating restaurant menus to restoring mass transit, but the most visible efforts focus on making the built environment more conducive to walking and cycling.”

Clearly, the connection between health and greenways is becoming common knowledge. The Rails-to-Trails Conservancy puts it simply: “Individuals must choose to exercise, but communities can make that choice easier.”

**Greenways Enhance Environmental Stewardship by Reducing Vehicle Emissions & Fuel Consumption**

Trails can help to reduce automobile dependency, which in turn leads to a reduction in vehicle emissions – a benefit for Georgians and the surrounding environment. As of 2003, 27% of U.S. greenhouse gas emissions are attributed to the transportation sector, and personal vehicles account for almost two-thirds (62%) of all transportation emissions. Primary emissions that pose potential health and environmental risks are carbon dioxide, carbon monoxide, volatile organic compounds (VOCs), nitrous oxide (N2O), and benzene. Children and senior citizens are particularly sensitive to the harmful affects of air pollution, as are individuals with heart or respiratory illnesses. Increased health risks such as asthma and heart problems are associated with vehicle emissions.
Decreasing the dependency on daily motor vehicle trips and increasing the availability of alternative travel methods such as bicycling and walking can reduce emissions and assist in improving air quality. Replacing two miles of driving each day with walking or bicycling will, in one year, prevent 730 pounds of carbon dioxide from entering the atmosphere.\textsuperscript{20} The Silver Comet Trail will enable citizens to consider replacing two miles of driving with walking or bicycling because the trail links neighborhoods to important basic needs destinations, such as grocery stores, schools, retail areas, and parks. Other studies have likewise shown air quality benefits as a result of increased walking and bicycling rates and reduced vehicle miles traveled:

As of 2008, roughly 9.5\% of all U.S. trips are made by walking or bicycling. A modest increase in walking and bicycling to 13\% of all trips would save 3.8 billion gallons of gasoline each year and reduce CO2 emissions by 33 million tons. A substantial increase in walk and bike rates to 25\% of all trips would save 10.3 billion gallons of gasoline and prevent 91 million tons of CO2 emissions.\textsuperscript{21}

Minneapolis-St. Paul, MN: If bicycles were used for half of the short trips made on good weather days, the Twin Cities could prevent 300 deaths and save $57 million in annual medical costs due to reduced air pollution and increased physical activity. Collectively, 11 major Midwest cities would save $7 billion in medical costs each year and prevent 1,100 deaths.\textsuperscript{22}

A 5\% increase in the walkability of a neighborhood is associated with a per capita 32.1\% increase in active travel, 6.5\% fewer miles driven, 5.6\% fewer grams of nitrous oxide (N2O) emitted, and 5.5\% fewer grams of volatile organic compounds (VOCs) emitted.\textsuperscript{23}

**Greenways Enhance Environmental Stewardship by Improved Water Quality and Wildlife Habitat**

There are a multitude of environmental benefits from trails, greenways, and open spaces that help to protect the essential functions performed by natural ecosystems. Multi-use trails are often included as part of greenway or green space corridors, offering transportation options while also contributing to environmental quality. Green space corridors help link fragmented tracts of land to provide larger habitats for wildlife while also protecting sensitive natural features, natural processes, and ecological integrity. These tracts of open space also contribute to cleaner air by preserving stands of plants that create oxygen and filter air pollutants such as ozone, sulfur dioxide, carbon monoxide, and airborne particles of heavy metals. Vegetation within the green space corridors also creates a buffer to protect streams, rivers, and lakes, preventing soil erosion and filtering pollution caused by agricultural and roadway runoff.\textsuperscript{24} Trails that are built within green space corridors give bicyclists,
pedestrians, and other non-motorized trail users access to these natural areas and provide safe off-road facilities for walking and bicycling. These corridors also provide opportunities for restoring wildlife habitat in areas that have been previously disturbed.

**Greenways Enhance Environmental Stewardship by Encouraging Energy Conservation and Independence**

According to the National Association of Realtors and Transportation for America, 89% of Americans believe that transportation investments should support the goal of reducing energy use. The transportation sector currently accounts for 71% of all U.S. petroleum use, with 40% of daily trips made within two miles or less and 28% less than a mile. Providing alternative modes of travel has the potential to reduce dependency on foreign oil and promote more energy-efficient transportation choices in communities.

**Greenways and Trails Enhance Cultural Awareness and Community Identity**

Trails, greenways, and open space can serve as connections to local heritage by preserving historic places and by providing access to them. They provide a sense of place and an understanding of past events by drawing greater public attention to historic and cultural locations and events. Trails often provide access to historic sites such as battlegrounds, bridges, buildings, and canals that otherwise would be difficult to access or interpret. Each community or region has its own unique history, its own features and destinations, and its own landscapes. By recognizing, honoring, and connecting these features, the combined results serve to enhance cultural awareness and community identity, potentially attracting tourism. Being aware of the historical and cultural context when naming parks and trails and designing features will further enhance the overall trail and park user experience.

Finally, greenways and trails provide opportunities for people to interact with one another outside of work and their immediate neighborhood. Positive interaction (such as through exercising, strolling, or even just saying ‘hello’) among people from a wider community helps to build trust and awareness of others, which strengthens the overall sense of community.
ENDNOTES


5. Wilmington-New Hanover County Joint Coastal Area Management Plan: 2006 Update.


