TRAIL USAGE EVALUATION

To understand the scale of economic impact generated by the Silver Comet Trail, it is important to first know trail users and their activity patterns. The trail usage evaluation count and survey explored four key questions:

1. **How many people** use the trail and where are they using it most frequently?
2. **Who** is using the trail?
3. **When and how often** are people using the trail?
4. **Do people spend money** in the communities along the trail and if they do, what do they spend their money on?

**Key Findings**

The Silver Comet Trail has an estimated 1.9 million users each year.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trailhead</th>
<th>Total Users</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Smyrna</td>
<td>1,888,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The majority of trail users are bicyclists, particularly in remote and rural areas.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Smyrna Trail Head had the highest estimated annual trail volume.

97% of people use the trail either for recreation or exercise, though many people do use the trail for commuting or to access nearby destinations, especially in urban areas.

People visiting the trail traveled from 23 counties and 8 states, including Washington State, to use the trail (during the two-week survey period).

When users spend money while using the trail, the majority of them spend money on food and may spend up to $50 per visit.

**ECONOMIC IMPACT ANALYSIS**

This Economic Impact Analysis is the first of its kind to comprehensively report the economic benefits of the existing 61-mile Silver Comet Trail and its proposed 66-mile expansion. Recreational amenities such as rail-trails are increasingly seen as regional economic development tools that generate value through:

- **Recreational spending** (bicyclerental, food & drink, sporting equipment)
- **Tourism** (spending by out-of-state users on lodging, transportation, dining)
- **Spillover impacts** (additional jobs and worker spending)
- **Fiscal impacts** (sales tax revenue generated)
- **Increased property values** (increased household wealth near SCT)
- **Property tax revenue** (benefitting municipalities and school districts)

**Summary of Economic Impacts for Existing and Expanded Silver Comet Trail**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Impact</th>
<th>Existing Trail Network</th>
<th>Expanded Trail Network</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Recreational Spending</strong></td>
<td>$47 Million</td>
<td>$71 Million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tourism Spending</strong></td>
<td>$10 Million</td>
<td>$15 Million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Regional Spillover</strong></td>
<td>$98 Million</td>
<td>$147 Million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>State Spillover Impact</strong></td>
<td>$118 Million</td>
<td>$177 Million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Statewide Fiscal Impact</strong></td>
<td>$4 Million</td>
<td>$5 Million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Property Value Increases</strong></td>
<td>$182 Million</td>
<td>$316 Million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Property Tax Gains</strong></td>
<td>$2 Million</td>
<td>$4 Million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>$461 Million</td>
<td>$735 Million</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Econsult Solutions, Inc. (2013)

**Benefit/Cost Analysis**

Benefit Valuation of the Silver Comet Trail Expansion: Based on the estimates of the Economic Impact Analysis, the 66-mile trail expansion is conservatively expected to generate a combined economic benefit of $274 million. This includes local, regional, and statewide benefits:

- **LOCAL**
  - $24 million more in recreational spending and $8 million more in tourism spending per year
  - $130 million more in property value impact and $1.7 million in annual property tax revenues to municipalities and school districts

- **REGIONAL**
  - $50 million more in economic impact each year
  - 400 more jobs

The economic benefits of the Silver Comet Trail expansion will be even greater if this investment catalyzes new development within Northwest Georgia, which would create additional property tax gains and spillover impacts.

**Return on Investment**

The combined cost to construct all recommended trail connections within Georgia is estimated to total $59 million. An estimate of the return on investment of the Silver Comet Trail expansion can be provided using the results of the existing and proposed economic impact analyses. For every $1 spent on the Silver Comet Trail expansion, Georgians gain an estimated $4.64 in direct and indirect economic benefits. This translates to an over 400% return on investment for local communities, the region, and the state.

**History of the Silver Comet Trail**

In 1992, the Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT) purchased the inactive rail line through Cobb, Paulding, and Polk counties from CSX. GDOT intended to use the line as a high-speed transit route. Instead the corridor became a shared use, non-motorized trail in 1998. Construction of the trail was initiated through a collaborative effort among GDOT, Georgia State Parks, PATH Foundation, Cobb County DOT, Paulding County, and Polk County.
The Silver Comet Trail is a multi-jurisdictional project traversing three counties and multiple municipalities. Future connections will increase these numbers. One centralized authority is needed to plan, develop, and maintain facilities, as well as interface with the general public. For successful implementation and operations, the Silver Comet Trail’s expansion will require regional management. The careful creation of a Regional Management Agency would include a cooperative effort with the NWGRC and ARC and existing municipalities responsible for maintaining the trail network.

EMPLOYER AND EMPLOYEE ATTRACTION
Quality of life decisions, including the availability of recreational amenities like trails, are becoming ever more important factors in where people choose to live and work.1 The Silver Comet Trail is a valuable asset that boosts the relative attractiveness of the region compared to competing regions and plays an important role in Northwest Georgia’s ability to draw and retain talented workers and employers.

INCREASED ACCESS AND MOBILITY
By encouraging and facilitating non-automobile trips, the Silver Comet Trail improves access and mobility. Being able to choose between multiple modes of travel leads to gains for users, as they have more options for their business and leisure travel. It also takes cars off the road, which has at least three positive benefits:

- Reduces air pollution and improves air quality²
- Reduces congestion for drivers, saving time and energy consumption
- Reduces wear and tear on roads and vehicles

DIRECT USE BENEFITS
Silver Comet Trail users do not pay directly for their use, but do generate value for themselves. This value is known as a direct use benefit, or “willingness to pay”. This ranges from a couple of dollars for leisure walking to significantly more for more intensive activities like trail biking. At a time in which people are seeking no-cost and low-cost leisure options, the value associated with free use of an outdoor amenity is quite high, so the Silver Comet Trail represents a meaningful resource for the State and its residents.

HEALTH BENEFITS
As healthcare costs soar, recreational amenities such as the SCT are seen by governments, health professionals, and citizens as an important way to encourage active lifestyles and minimize negative health outcomes. Physical activity has been shown to lower healthcare costs in four major categories:

- Direct health care costs: Costs paid for immediate health care needs
- Indirect health care costs: Costs paid for long-term avoidance of chronic negative health outcomes
- Direct and indirect worker compensation costs: Costs paid in worker compensation claims
- Absenteeism and “presenteeism” costs: Costs paid in loss of workplace productivity from sickness or impaired ability to perform

ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP
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. 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.3


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