



Trail Planning

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5.0 Trail Planning

5.1 Introduction

This section of the guidelines provides information to assist with the initial planning stage associated with recreational trails. This could include a new trail, an extension of an existing trail or the rehabilitation of an existing trail. The planning stage is of utmost importance and could be the difference between success and failure. If undertaken correctly, the planning stage will establish partnerships, assist with funding applications as well as identifying strengths and weaknesses. Importantly, proper planning will ensure that the trail is sustainable from an environmental, social and economic point of view.

A Trails Planning, Design and Construction Checklist is provided in Appendix C. This checklist can be used to ensure that all steps of the trail development process have been considered.

5.2 Establish a working group and develop a plan

Once the initial idea for a recreational trail has been developed, a Working Group or Steering Committee should be formed to help manage and coordinate the trail planning process. The Working Group should provide a focal point for key individuals who are keen for the trail project to proceed and should include land managers, user groups and, for larger proposals, representatives of local businesses. Wide representation will result in more effective and successful trail planning and greater community ownership of the final project. The Working Group should either include a representative from the local Council or should ensure that close links are established.

One of the first tasks of the Working Group will be to write a clear plan so that everyone involved in the proposal has a clear understanding of the objectives of the project. The project plan should cover the following areas:

- the background and perceived need for the trail
- the overall trail purpose, aims and objectives
- the intended user groups
- the community consultation approach to be taken
- any background studies or reports relating to the proposed trail or location
- the timing and staging of the development of the trail
- any potential agency or community support that may be available
- roles and responsibilities of working group members
- overview of project.

During this early planning stage, it is vitally important that the Working Group clearly identify the intended users of the trail and test whether the proposal will meet their needs. Specifically, consideration should be given to the ability of the target market to access and utilise the trail. Will the trail be attractive and interesting to this market? Why would they want to use and visit the trail? Could the trail be too long, challenging or remote for these users? If people with mobility impairments are part of the target market, will the trail meet their specific requirements? If there is some doubt about the ability of the proposed trail to clearly address these matters, it would be wise to reconsider the merits of the proposal.

Notes from the meetings of the Working Group should be recorded and specific tasks allocated to members of the group.

5.3 Review existing trail provision

Prior to the development of a trail project, it is important to get a comprehensive picture of existing recreational trails in an area. In most cases, the local Council will be able to provide information and maps which identify existing trails. One of the first questions that Council and State Government officials will ask is “Is there a demand for this trail”. Without any credible evidence to suggest that a new trail is needed and will be used, it is unlikely that it will be supported.

This review process may find that there are a number of underutilised or run-down trails already in the area which could be improved at a much lower cost than the construction of a new trail.

5.4 Local Government endorsement

While a representative of the local Council may have been involved in preliminary discussions about the trail project, it is important that formal endorsement be given. The Council’s endorsement could include a resolution of support for the project, or take the form of a broader agreement concerning the development and maintenance of the trail.

As part of this process, the local Council will consider a number of aspects of the proposal including:

- the need for the trail from a social, environmental and economic perspective
- support given to the trail proposal by local, regional and state strategic plans
- any issues that neighbouring property owners may have with the proposal and mechanisms to resolve those issues
- any up-front financial contributions that may be requested of Council, and the funding involvement of other Government Departments
- the ongoing cost of the proposal in relation to maintenance and management.

5.5 Community consultation

As with any community project, it is best to involve the public and interested stakeholders in as many ways as possible. The investment of time and energy in community consultation is necessary to develop community support and ownership of the project. Ideally the Working Group will have developed a clear message regarding the proposed trail and prepared answers for any possible questions. This message should then be taken to the wider community via a number of different forums or presentations. Chapter 6 provides more information about community consultation.

5.6 Decision

A decision on whether or not to proceed further with the trail proposal including the expenditure of more time, energy and money on a feasibility study, should be made at this point. In addition, the option of abandoning the proposal in favour of upgrading an existing trail before deciding upon developing a new trail should also be considered.

5.7 Feasibility study

A well researched feasibility study should be prepared in order to attract funds and other support for the trail proposal. A feasibility study will refine the concept of the trail and then test that concept to determine if it will 'perform' both practically and financially. While a feasibility study should ideally be professionally prepared by people with skills in recreation planning, engineering and landscape architecture, they can also be developed by local community groups. It should be remembered that assistance can be provided by the relevant peak user group as well as the local Council or Government Department.

The elements that should be included in a trail feasibility study will depend on the size and scale of the project, but the following topic headings give a guide as does the checklist contained in Appendix C:

1. **Introduction and background:** How did the project come about? What is the proposed location? What type of recreational user is the trail designed for?
2. **Supply and demand:** Is there a demonstrable need for this trail? Are there other trails in the area which may be more appropriate or could be upgraded to meet the demand?
3. **Planning process:** Has the project been identified as a priority in any recreational plan, open space strategy plan or any other local/regional/ state strategic plan? Has the local Council and/or land manager given their endorsement for the project? What approvals are necessary? Have they been granted or are there any obstacles that may complicate the approval process?
4. **Connections:** How will the project provide linkages between towns or community facilities, other trails, as well as areas of natural, cultural, historical, or recreational significance?
5. **Partnerships:** How will the project demonstrate cooperation or partnerships between trail users, trail groups, private interests within the area and public agencies? What type of funding has been promised? Has 'in-kind' labour or other support been secured?
6. **Community input and support:** Can the project demonstrate that it has support from the local community, trail user groups, community leaders, service organisations, recreation and environmental groups, schools, businesses and other non-Government groups? What methods have been used to gain knowledge of this support?
7. **Environmental matters:** How will the project protect and improve areas of environmental significance? How will it contribute to an improved knowledge of the environment and what interpretive material will the project provide?
8. **Cultural and heritage considerations:** How will the project recognise and reflect any Aboriginal and other local cultural and heritage factors?
9. **Trail access and trail sharing opportunities:** Does the project accommodate a range of trail users (e.g. walking, cycling, horse riding, people with mobility impairments and educational purposes)? How will the different users share the trail?
10. **On ground assessment:** Has a preliminary assessment been made in relation to the 'on ground' conditions? Have constraints and opportunities been identified and the proposed corridor flagged in accordance with sustainable trail design principles?

11. **Concept design:** What are the physical specifications of the trail: length, width, surface materials, drainage, trail heads, interpretive signage and trail markers? What are the required standards of construction?
12. **Management and maintenance planning:** How will usage and maintenance issues be addressed? Is there a 'friends of group' for the trail or the potential to establish one? How will public access and cooperation be ensured in the long term? Who will undertake and pay for ongoing operation and maintenance costs?
13. **Capital Cost:** What is the expected capital cost for the construction of the trail project? How will the construction of the trail be funded?
14. **Funding:** What funding opportunities are available? Can 'in-kind' support be provided from community organisations? Does the project satisfy the requirements of the funding organisations?
15. **Conclusion:** Why should the project proceed? What are the strengths and weaknesses of the project? What is required for the project to proceed?

Horse SA has prepared an *Action Planner for Shared Use Trails*⁹. This planner provides an excellent model and checklist for organisations and community groups who are considering the development of a shared use trail.

5.8 Concept design

In order to develop a concept design for the proposed trail, consultation should occur with the various potential trail users, the local Council and land manager to identify any specific design requirements. Visits to similar trails and discussions with other trail groups will also assist in the design process.

The design should give special consideration to road crossings to ensure the safety of users. In addition, the width of the trail, type of surface and the dimensions of directional signs should satisfy any relevant Australian Standard. This will be particularly important if it is anticipated that funding for the trail will be provided by Government Agencies.

Other design considerations should include water crossings, wet areas, trail heads, parking areas, shelters and interpretive signage. The trail should seek to connect places of environmental and historical significance. It should also include attractions such as look-outs, existing recreational facilities and tourist related businesses such as eateries, bed and breakfast accommodation and hotels.

It is important to understand the role that on-ground assessments and flagging of the potential trail route have in relation to the preparation of the concept design. The concept design needs to be based on the on-ground findings as well as principles of sustainable trail design. Trail routes which are shown on maps with clearly defined control points or flagged trail corridors are easier to explain to stakeholders, land managers and funding bodies. In addition, accurate assessments of costs and timelines cannot be determined unless the physical feasibility of the trail has been considered.

Once the trail has been approved, funded or a tender awarded to a contractor, the concept design can be refined to accommodate cost restrictions and requirements set by the land manager, owner or funding body. A further review of the final design and flagged corridor by responsible parties and key stakeholders should occur before the construction begins.

⁹
Available at www.horsesa.asn.au

5.9 Funding

Sourcing appropriate levels of funding for the construction and ongoing maintenance for the trail is essential. While this can seem a daunting prospect (especially when many Government Departments will only fund 50% of the project) the best approach is to develop a Funding Strategy based on a 'cocktail' of grants and in-kind support. For example, a Funding Strategy may focus on applying for three or four different grants from Government Departments, together with assistance from the local Council and in-kind support from the community or user group. Such an approach will reduce the amount of money requested from each Government Department and, therefore, improve the chances of success.

It is also useful to break the project into stages such as; feasibility study; concept design; and construction. It may also be possible to stage the construction of the trail over a number of years. In this way, an initially large cost can be broken down into smaller 'bite-size' chunks which may be more palatable to funding agencies. Staging a project will also reduce the level of perceived risk associated with the project as each stage will only proceed once the previous stage has been successfully completed.

When seeking funding, it is important to think beyond the traditional grants which are available from the recreation and planning related Government Departments. Given the often close link that recreational trails have with the natural environment, funding from environmental organisations at a local, regional, state and federal level are becoming more and more common. A project which can demonstrate a strong component of environmental rehabilitation is likely to attract funding from a much wider range of agencies.

When preparing a Funding Strategy and when writing applications for grants, it is very important that consideration be given to the strategic objectives of the relevant Government Department. The application should clearly articulate how the project will help the Department to further its goals and, ideally, should demonstrate links to relevant strategic plans. If these links or the objectives of the Department are unclear, it is strongly recommended that a meeting be arranged between the proponents of the trail and the Government Officers who are responsible for allocating funding. Such a meeting will determine whether an application to a specific grant is worth pursuing and, if so, what the Officers will be looking for when they make their assessment. It may be appropriate to seek the assistance of the peak user group(s) when preparing funding applications.

In addition to the potential sources of funding described in Section 4, many alternative grants which should be considered can be found at the following websites:

www.grants.ord.sa.gov.au

www.grantslink.gov.au

www.aph.gov.au/library/intguide/sp/spgrants.htm