

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?

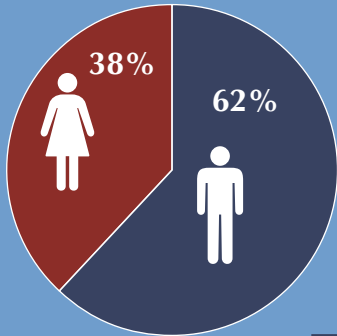
KEY FINDINGS*

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

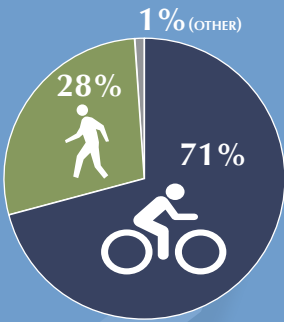
Estimated Usage of the Current Silver Comet Trail, by Major Trailhead

Smyrna Trail Head	Silver Comet Cycles Trail Head	Powder Springs	Hiram Trail Head	Dallas Trail Head	Rambo Trail Head	Rockmart Trail Head	Cedartown Trail Head	GA/AL State Line
434,000	350,000	277,000	270,000	203,000	192,000	90,000	25,000	47,000
Total Users								
1,888,000								

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



More males use the trail than females along every segment of the trail, though the proportion of **female users is higher in more densely populated and well-trafficked areas**, such as near downtowns and parks.



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.**

*Information was collected via counts and surveys at nine locations using methodology from the National Bicycle and Pedestrian Documentation Project (NBPDP)
**Field survey participants were asked 'If you do anticipate spending money, what do you estimate your party's overall spending to be during this trip?' This number is conservative and likely to be more than \$50 per user for non-resident users.

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** (bicycle rentals, 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

	Current Trail Network	Expanded Trail Network
Recreational Spending	\$47 Million	\$71 Million
Tourism Spending	\$10 Million	\$15 Million
Regional Spillover	\$98 Million	\$147 Million
State Spillover Impact	\$118 Million	\$177 Million
Statewide Fiscal Impact	\$4 Million	\$5 Million
Property Value Increases	\$182 Million	\$316 Million
Property Tax Gains	\$2 Million	\$4 Million
TOTAL	\$461 Million	\$735 Million

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 \$5 million more in tourism spending per year	REGIONAL	\$50 million more in economic impact each year	STATEWIDE	\$60 million more in economic impact each year
	\$130 million more in property value impact and \$1.7 million in annual property tax revenues to municipalities and school districts		400 more jobs		670 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.

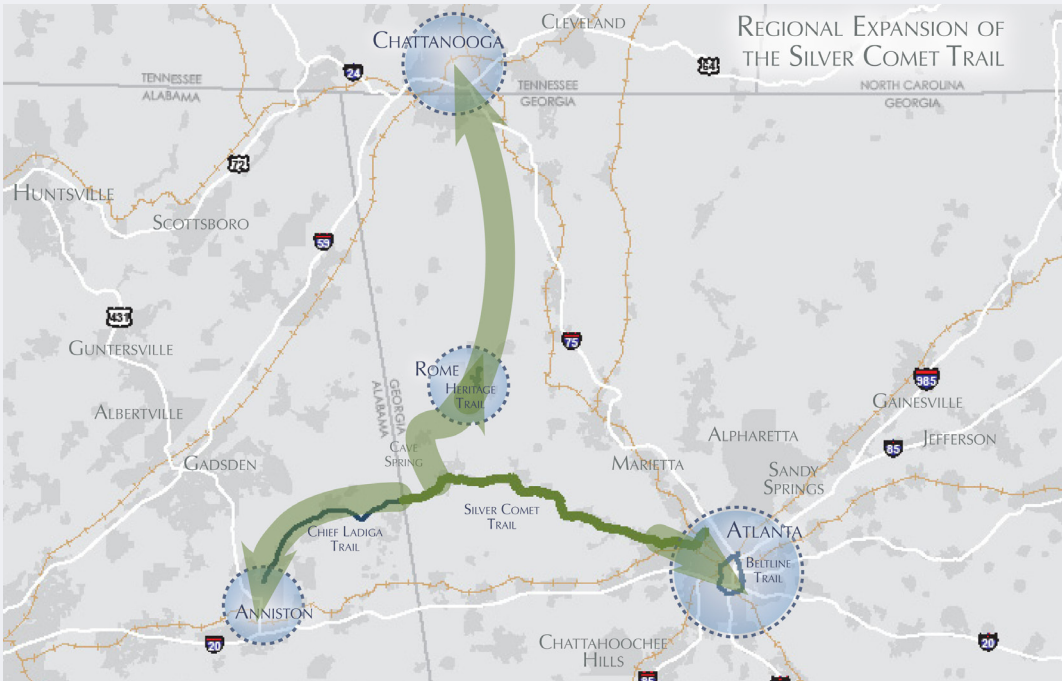
RETURN ON INVESTMENT

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.



PROJECT OVERVIEW

In 2012, the Northwest Georgia Regional Commission (NWGR) initiated the Silver Comet Economic Impact Analysis and Planning Study to determine the existing and future economic impacts of the Silver Comet Trail (SCT). The SCT is the nation's longest and oldest paved rail-trail, extending 61.5 miles and connecting seven cities and three counties from Smyrna to the Georgia/Alabama state line. NWGR is exploring a 66-mile expansion within Georgia as well as coordinating with Alabama and Tennessee on long-term interstate connections. This in-state expansion alone has the potential to double the number of users and economic benefits on a local and regional scale.



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.

QUALITATIVE BENEFITS OF TRAILS

In addition to the spending generated by the Silver Comet Trail, and the value conferred to residential locations that are near it, the Silver Comet Trail produces a number of other positive economic benefits to residents, businesses, and the State. These benefits tend to be qualitative in nature but are important to include in an overall discussion of benefits and costs.



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

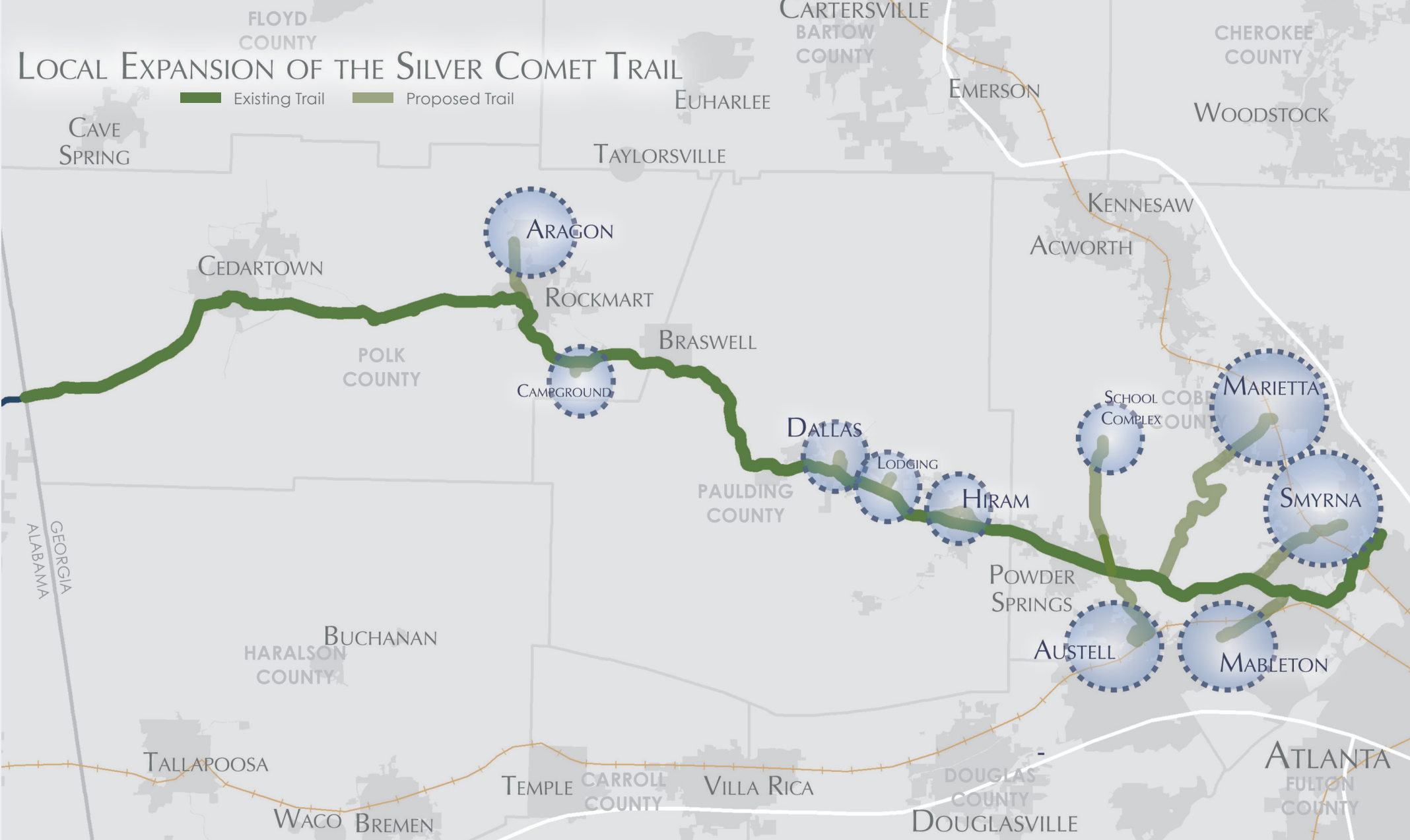
As health care costs soar, recreational amenities such as the SCT are seen by governments, health professionals, and citizens as an important way to encourage active lifestyles and minimize negative health outcomes.

Physical activity has been shown to lower health care 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

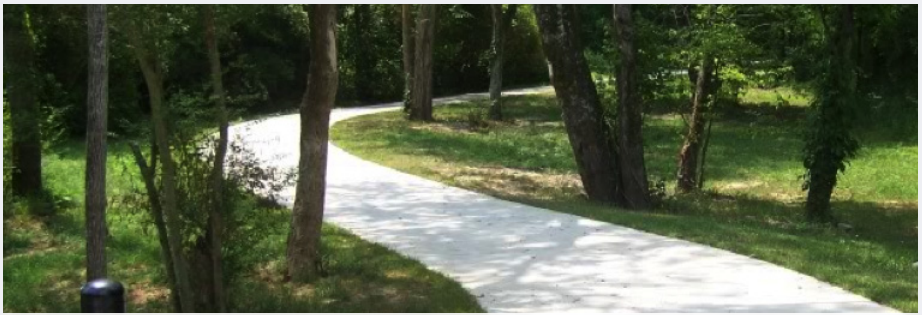


LOCAL EXPANSION OF THE SILVER COMET TRAIL



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



1. "Quality of Life in the Planning Literature," Dissart and Deller (2000) and "Amenities as an Economic Development Tool: is there Enough Evidence?" Gottlieb (1994).
2. Federal Highway Administration. (1992). Benefits of bicycling and walking to health. Gotchi, T. & Mills, K. (2008). Active transportation for America. Rails-to-Trails Conservancy.
3. Arendt, R. (1994). Rural by Design. American Planning Association, Chicago, Illinois.

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.

FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT:

David Kenemer, Principal Planner Northwest Georgia Regional Commission P.O. Box 1798 Rome, GA 30162-1798 (706) 295-6485 dkenemer@nwgrc.org	Byron Rushing Atlanta Regional Commission 40 Courtland St NE Atlanta, GA 30303 (404) 463-3345 brushing@atlantaregional.com
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PROJECT CONSULTANT TEAM

alta Greenways
In association with Econsult Solutions, Inc.
Robert and Company