

Connecticut Trail Census

Statewide multi-use trail user study



Making Connections

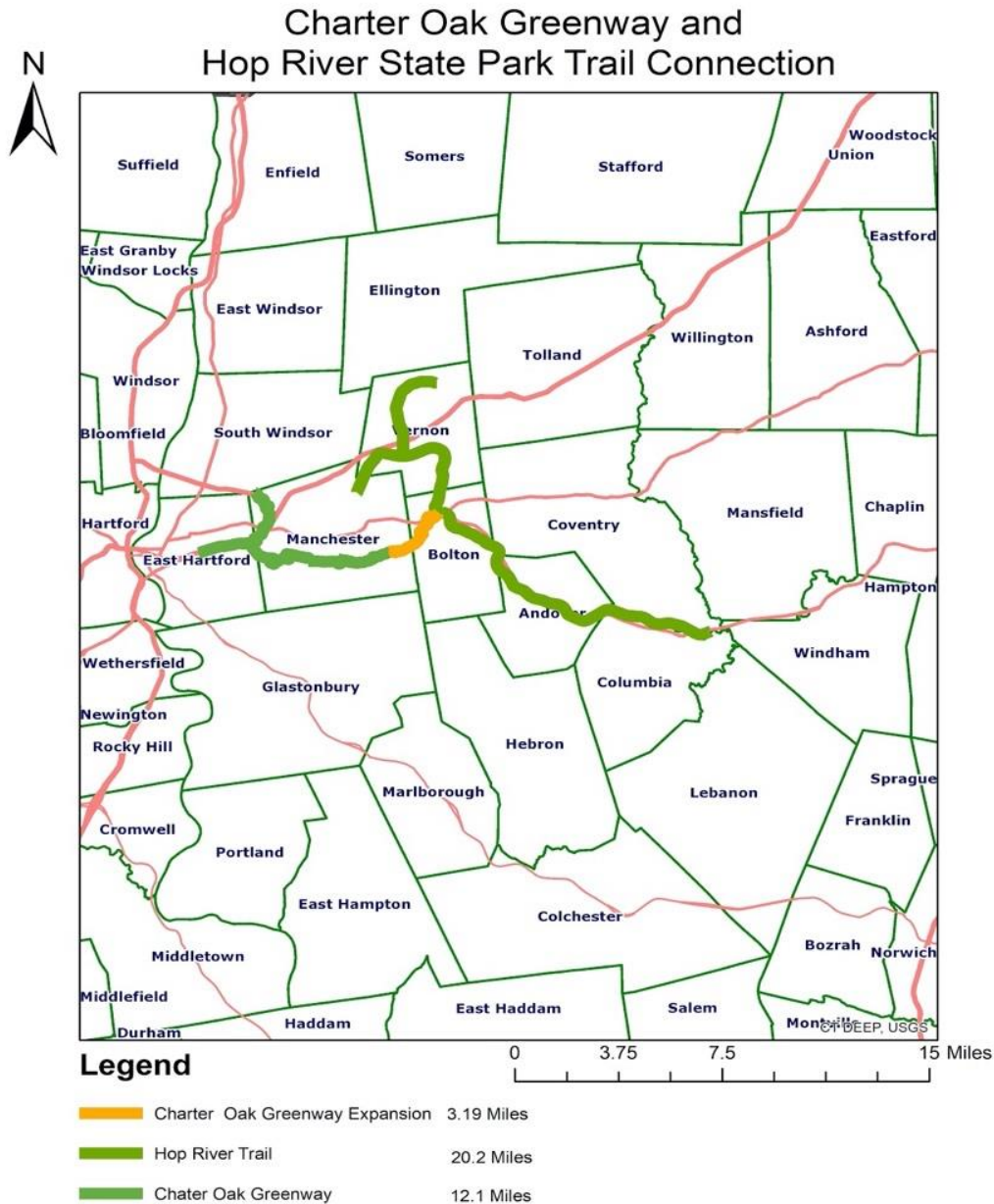
Completing the Hop River-Charter Oak Gap

March 9, 2020



Overview

The [Connecticut Trail Census](#) has been measuring use on the [Hop River Trail](#) with an infrared counter deployed on the trail at [Bolton Notch State Park](#) since 2017. Using three complete years of data, this report highlights key insights into usage patterns and economic impacts along this section of the popular 20-mile trail.



Prepared by: Laura Brown, Aaron Budris, Ryan Faulkner, Charles Tracy. For more information contact Laura Brown, University of Connecticut - Department of Extension 305 Skiff Street, North Haven, CT 06473 Direct: 203- 407-3157, laura.brown@uconn.edu. Online: <https://cttrailcensus.uconn.edu/>

Closer to Home: Increasing Trail Access to Communities

| Town | Population* |
|--|----------------|
| Manchester | 63,457 |
| East Hartford | 53,383 |
| Vernon | 30,658 |
| Windham | 26,046 |
| Columbia | 5,793 |
| Bolton | 4,882 |
| Andover | 3,382 |
| Total | 187,601 |
| *2020 Population estimates: CT Open Data | |

A primary catalyst for this report is Connecticut Department of Transportation’s construction of a trail connection across I-384 to the 12-mile Charter Oak Greenway (Manchester and East Hartford). This 3.19 mile new trail segment—part of the 3000-mile [East Coast Greenway](#)—opened in September 2018. Outdoors writer Peter Marteka recently offered [a user perspective of the new trail](#) in the Hartford Courant.

By connecting the Hop River Trail to the Charter Oak Greenway in Manchester and East Hartford, both highly populated communities, this new link increased the total population with access to this trail network by 62%. Within a regional context, this trail network is now one step closer to connecting to the City of Hartford and Greater Hartford metropolitan region.

Build It and They Will Come: A Measurable Increase

Based on Connecticut Trail Census data, the new connection appears to have produced an estimated increase of 10,000 users a year, a 52% increase from 2018 to 2019. Since trail use was essentially flat for the previous two years, there is high confidence in attributing the increase to the new trail connection.

Months typically associated with trail tourism saw increases in total and average uses after the connection was built. For example, in 2019 there was overall a 78% growth in average daily uses during May, June, July, August, and September. Overall, the summer of 2019 averaged 79% more daily uses than recorded in the previous two summers. There were 87% more uses in the summer of 2019 than in 2018, an increase of more than 18,000.

| Year | Daily | Annual | Total Users* |
|-------------------------------------|-------|--------|---------------|
| 2017 | 148 | 54,142 | 27,071 |
| 2018 | 147 | 54,093 | 27,047 |
| 2019 | 226 | 81,966 | 40,983 |
| *Estimated at ½ of the count total. | | | |

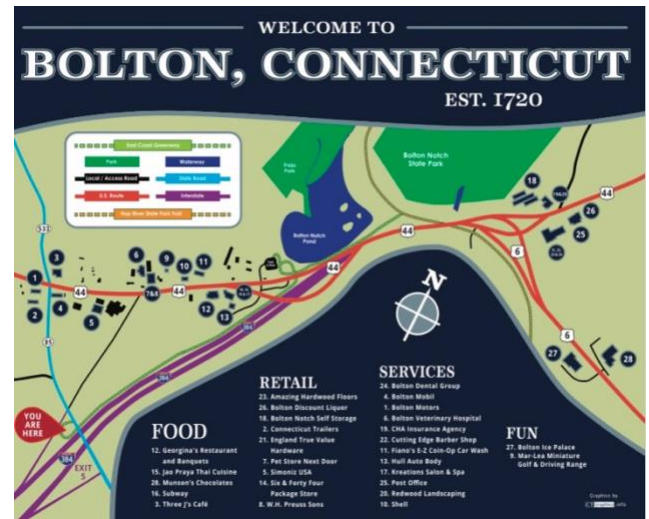
| Year | Overall Peak | Weekday Peak | Weekend Peak |
|------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| 2017 | 789 | 787 | 789 |
| 2018 | 857 | 470 | 857 |
| 2019 | 1123 | 1115 | 1123 |

Another way to view the impact of the new connection is the increase in peak volume, which represents the highest number of users on the trail per day. As shown in the chart, the 2019 peaks for both weekday and weekend use were significantly higher than those in 2018 and 2017: of the top 15 busiest trail days, all but 3 were recorded in 2019.

Estimating Economic Impact

The overall increase in usage and doubling in summertime use may also be a catalyst for increased spending in these communities. One way to conservatively estimate the economic value of this increase draws on recent studies* of bicycle tourists and expenditures. While a comprehensive economic impact analysis is beyond the scope of this paper, we offer estimates of likely increases in total user expenditures based on comparison to other similar trails.

A 2018 review of economic impact studies of trails across the country revealed that average user spending on trails ranges from between \$5 to over \$67 or more per user per day.† The Connecticut Trail Census Intercept Survey has found that current users on Connecticut Trails statewide spend significantly less per visit than on other trails, averaging \$6.05 in 2019 and \$7.95 in 2018.‡ This is likely due to the prevalence of local users on these trails. The average spending on the Hop River Trail in Bolton in 2018 was \$8.06 and \$11.03 in 2019. Given the increase in users from 2018 to 2019 we can estimate that these additional users contributed \$110,300 in direct consumer spending to the local economy.



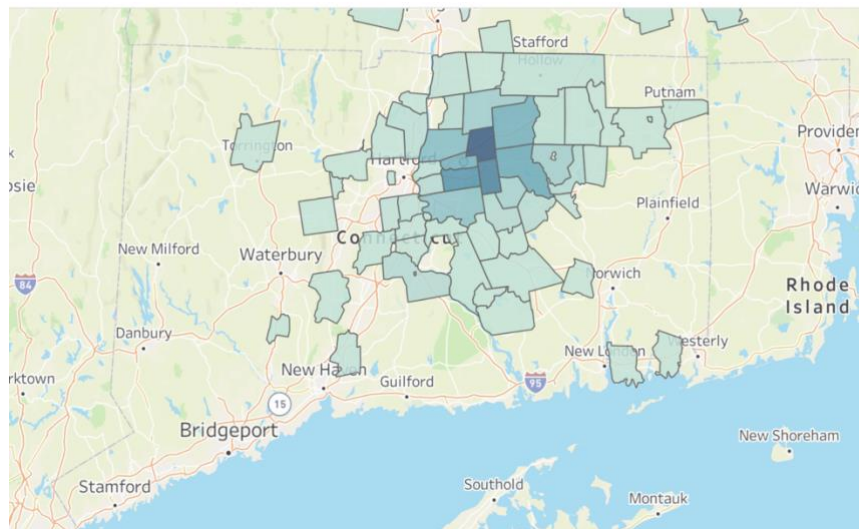
*Economic Impact | U.S. Bicycle Route System. (2015, October 2). Adventure Cycling Association. <https://www.adventurecycling.org/advocacy/building-bike-tourism/economic-impact/>

† Institute for Transportation Research and Education. (2018). Evaluating the Economic Impact of Shared Use Paths in North Carolina. Accessed online at <https://itre.ncsu.edu/focus/bike-ped/sup-economic-impacts/>

‡ Brown, L., C.Tracy, & R. Faulkner. (2020). Connecticut trail Census Aggregated 2019 Survey Data Report. Retrieved from <http://www.cttrailcensus.uconn.edu>

From a purely economic perspective, a significant and growing body of literature documents the value of trails and greenways which includes economic benefits through increased business spending and expenditures for capital projects and operations and individual benefits such as improved health, increased property tax and property valuation. The value also includes larger society benefits like reduced health care costs, congestion reduction, ecosystem services, and climate mitigation or safety benefits. Although difficult to monetize, trails play a key role in improving the quality of life for those living and working nearby. A 2016 study from the National Association of Homebuilders for instance found that close proximity to a park and access to walking and jogging trails were two most desired amenities ranked in the top four for every age cohort. §

Map of Hop River Bolton Trail Users Home Zip Code



Link to table: [Survey Respondents by Zip Code](#)

2019 Bolton Trail User Characteristics:

A 2019 intercept survey of 146 trail users surveyed in Bolton in the Hop River Trail found that:

- A greater percentage of users surveyed were bicyclists, 55.2% compared to 21.9% on all trails participating in the survey.
- Hop River Trail users surveyed in Bolton spent \$11.03 on average per trip to the trail
- 48.7% of respondents agreed that the trail influences their yearly outdoor recreation spending. Users surveyed spent an average of \$514 per year.
- Users surveyed on this trail spend an average of 113 minutes on the trail in 2019 compared to 96 minutes in 2018.

§ National Association of Homebuilders. March, 2016. “Three community amenities that top all home buyers wish-lists” Accessed online <http://nahbnow.com/2016/02/3-community-amenities-that-top-all-home-buyers-wish-lists/>

- 80.3% of surveyed users agreed with the statement “The trail provides the amenities I need.”
- 62.5% agreed with the statement “The trail is well connected to communities services.” and 14.8 % disagreed.
- 40.5% of users surveyed agreed that the trail is well connected to local businesses and 28.6% disagreed.



Bolton Trail User Survey

Qualitative Data

Bolton survey respondents were asked to comment on their favorite things about the trail and things they would improve about their trail experience. For this report, this data was analyzed in aggregate using a word analyzer.**



** Text analyzer online utility. <https://www.online-utility.org/text/analyzer.jsp> and vi

Conclusion: Connections Matter

Based on this analysis, it is likely that the completion of the Hop River-Charter Oak Gap has had a significant impact on trail use. The capital investment has yielded over 10,000 more total trail users, generating economic impacts through increased trail-related spending. The trail also serves as a health and recreation asset to the community, creating additional economic returns. The new 3.19-mile link also advances the regional significance and value of the entire trail network. This analysis also demonstrates the utility of trail counters, which make it possible to measure and evaluate the return from publicly-funded trail projects.

