



Hit the trails

Bike and hike your way thorough the Miami Valley and Beyond

By Kevin J. Gray - July 30, 2013
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Cyclist of all ages enjoying the new Mad River Bikeway extension; photo courtesy: Five Rivers MetroParks

The Miami Valley has become a hub for outdoor activity thanks in part to extensive trail networks that zigzag across Miami, Montgomery, Greene and Clark counties. More than 330 miles of bikeways crisscross the region, connecting Troy to Xenia to Springboro and Franklin, as well as points farther north, south, east and west. In addition, two major hiking trail networks pass through the heart of downtown Dayton, connecting the Gem City to not only other cities in Ohio, but also a hiking network that spans more than 4,600 miles across the American North Country.

What are the trail networks?

Miami Valley Bike Trails

Most Miami Valley residents are familiar in some capacity with the thin ribbons of asphalt, the shared bike lanes and the bike path signs that dot the region. There's a good bet that most readers live within a few miles of dedicated bike path, but many people would be surprised to learn how extensive this network has become.

A cyclist in downtown Dayton could hop on his or her bike and head north to Troy or south to Middletown along the Great Miami River Trail. He or she could also pedal west past Brookville on the Wolf Creek Trail, or head northeast through Eastwood MetroPark and onto the base via the Mad River Trail – including the recently completed extension. The Creekside Trail connects Dayton to Xenia, where riders can pick up the Little Miami Scenic Trail and head north to Yellow Springs and Springfield, or meander south through Waynesville and Fort Ancient State Memorial to eventually end up in Milford, east of Cincinnati. If you really want to stretch your legs, the Ohio-to-Erie Trail connects the Ohio River in Cincinnati with Lake Erie in Cleveland. The trail passes through Xenia and extends for several hundred miles along dedicated paths and marked roadways through Columbus and Akron before reaching Ohio's Great Lake.

Buckeye Trail

The Buckeye Trail is a 1,444-mile hiking trail that navigates around the state of Ohio. Designated as "Ohio's trail," it runs north from Cincinnati, crossing through several of Dayton's Five Rivers Metroparks (Eastwood, Deeds Point, Island and Taylorsville) and uses the Mad River and Great Miami trail bikeways. The trail is divided into 26 sections. The Troy section runs through Dayton. That section extends from Caesar's Creek in the south, along the Great Miami River through Dayton, up past Wright State, through Troy and into Piqua. Follow the trail further north toward Toledo, then navigate along the northern part of the state before breaking south near Akron. The eastern branch of the trail leads through some of the most scenic parts of Ohio, including Hocking Hills.

North Country Trail

The North Country Trail is one of 11 designated national scenic trails and keeps company with other well-known backpacking trails such as the Appalachian Trail, the Continental Divide Trail and the Pacific Crest Trail. The trail spans 4,600 miles and seven states. Originating in North Dakota, it zigs through Minnesota and Wisconsin before trekking through both the Upper and Lower Peninsulas of Michigan. It crosses into Ohio east of Toledo, then traces for miles along the Buckeye Trail through Dayton, Cincinnati, Hocking Hills and points east. The trail crosses into Pennsylvania, navigating through the Allegheny National Forest before shooting upward into New York, where it terminates near Lake Champlain and the Vermont border. Only the most adventurous hikers complete the entire trail in one span, although one such hiker, who goes by the trail name Strider, has been hiking since spring and is slated to pass through Dayton around Aug. 1.

Where did these trails come from?

The connectivity of these trails all started with a simple 8-mile bike loop along the Great Miami River in the 1970's. To understand the region's bike paths is to understand Dayton history. Recall that Dayton and bicycling have gone hand-in-hand at least as far back as the Wright brothers, who owned a bike shop while working on their airplanes. About 40 years ago, Horace Huffman, owner of Huffy bicycles in Centerville, decided that the region needed a bike path.

Huffman worked with other key players to fund and create the region's first bikeway, affectionately called the "Original 8" to designate the length of the trail. The trail ran down Stewart Street by the University of Dayton, traversed both sides of the river to Helena Street, then moved over to Webster Street, just east of what is now Riverscape. To make the path a reality, Huffman and crew worked with regional stakeholders such as the Miami Conservancy District to utilize greenways created by the levy system after the Great Flood of 1913.

Over time, the simple loop branched out, adding additional miles of bikeways in small increments throughout the years. A similar effort was taking place in Xenia, where bikeways began to radiate from that city. The building of the Creekside Trail years later, which extends from Eastwood MetroPark through Beavercreek to Xenia, eventually linked to two trail networks. That effort became the first truly regional bikeway in the area.

The two hiking trails developed independently of the bikeways. However, these trails, both looking for easy paths through the state, saw the availability of a paved set of non-motor vehicle trails as an easy way to extend and maintain their own trail system. Leaders from the Buckeye Trail and North Country Trail associations began working with the bikeways groups to combine efforts.

A modern miracle of cooperation

The bikeways and hiking trails connect the community, both literally and figuratively. The physical connectivity between neighborhoods, cities and regions along the pathways comes from a spirit of cooperation between all of those groups. Interestingly, no one group owns or maintains the entire trail network. Instead, the trails are built and managed through a variety of groups working together.

The core network of trails was built using federal dollars that are state-distributed through the Ohio Department of Transportation (ODOT). ODOT works with metropolitan planning organizations (MPO) throughout the state to design, fund and build a variety of transportation projects. One of those projects is the Miami Valley bikeway.

The MPO for this region is the Miami Valley Regional Planning Commission (MVRPC). This group oversees all of the transportation-related planning for Miami, Montgomery and Greene counties, as well as the cities of Carlisle, Springboro and Franklin. Bike transportation falls under MVRPC's purview. It is this group that eventually took over the leadership of the bikeways committee Huffman founded in the 1970s. And in 2008, the group created the Comprehensive Local Regional Bikeways plan, which codified a set of 10 goals for the bikeways in this area.

However, MVRPC does not work alone in executing these goals. Rather, their role is to set direction and help with funding. The real work in building and maintaining the paths happens at

the local level. MVRPC works with representatives from local cities, municipalities and park districts to make these paths a reality.

Leaders from park districts like Five Rivers MetroParks and the Miami County Park District, cities like Dayton and Xenia, and townships like Centerville-Washington Township meet quarterly to discuss ongoing concerns, review current projects and plan for new ones related to the region's bikeways. Although new paths are not built in each location every year, members of the committee understand that by working together, everyone benefits.

In addition, the local groups work together for maintenance plans along the pathways. For instance, a path might be built in Dayton, but it may be close to a maintenance facility operated by Five Rivers MetroParks. That agency may agree to maintain the section of the trail because it is more cost effective for them to do so. Dan Sahli, the outdoor recreation coordinator for Five Rivers MetroParks who oversees much of that agency's work on the bikeways noted that, "It's really all about relationships and who you are able to call [to help]."

In fact, trail maintenance even extends to volunteer groups. Andy Niekamp is the section coordinator for the Troy section of the Buckeye Trail and founder of DaytonHikers.org, a 1,200-member group dedicated to hiking the region's vast trail network. Niekamp's group assists in trail maintenance where the bikeways and the Buckeye Trail co-exist. Niekamp echoed Sahli's sentiment: "We realize in DaytonHikers that to have a strong outdoor recreation community in Dayton, all of our different groups need to partner and work together."

Future of the bikeways

In addition to the widespread community cooperation associated with building the trails, another interesting aspect is how pervasive and entrenched the trails have become in the region's mindset. Despite changes in the economy over the past 40 years, the trails have remained a priority for the region.

Matt Lindsay, Manager of Environmental Planning at MVRPC, heads up much of the work the group does related to the bikeways. Lindsay explained that since the building of the Original 8, bikeways have been cherished and prioritized by the community. As a result, Lindsay noted, "Over the years, MVRPC has found a way to make sure that these major trail pieces of the network were priorities that got funded through these regionally-controlled dollars, with a local match in every case and to make sure the network continued to build."

That commitment can be seen in the new trail sections available this year. The recent opening of the 3.6-mile Mad River extension is one such example. The new trail connects Wright-Patterson Air Force Base with downtown Dayton. The commitment can also be seen in the new Dayton/Kettering Connector, which is slated to open in early to mid-August and connects the University of Dayton with Oakwood, Patterson Park and Kettering. And it can be seen in the soon-to-be developed Austin Landing/Medlar bikeway, which broke ground in June and will connect Miamisburg with the new Austin Landing development.

So, where do we go from here? As Lindsay explained, the blueprints lie in the Comprehensive Local Regional Bikeways plan developed by MVRPC in 2008 and with local governments. "The vision of that document in 2008 is that we are going to continue as MVRPC to prioritize these major regional connections that link community to community, county to county, but we want

that to be merely the spine of a much more comprehensive network of bikeable local trails that we wouldn't have any role in funding – but would be funded by a local city or a county or a park district – that connects to bikeable streets ... so that you have a fully viable transportation network choice.”

Lindsay sees a time where bike travel becomes even more prevalent in the area, becoming a more dominant mode of transportation. He shared his vision: “You can roll out of your house on a bike, get on a nice comfortable complete street which leads to you a local trail which might lead you to a regional trail that will take you to the next town. And you reverse the process – get on a local trail, then on a complete street to reach your destination. And that facilitates that mode shift away from always having to drive. Because not everyone can drive and not everyone wants to drive.”

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