



ATC Conservation and Trail Management Policy Trailheads and Parking

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The Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC), a §501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, works closely with Appalachian Trail volunteer maintaining clubs (“Clubs”) and other public and private partners to ensure the protection and stewardship of the natural, cultural, and experiential resources of the Appalachian National Scenic Trail (known as ANST, A.T., or “the Trail”). Approximately fifty federal, state, or other public agencies have authority or jurisdiction over lands and resources within the protected A.T. corridor. ATC has a central management role by virtue of its Cooperative Agreement with the USDI National Park Service and its close working partnership with the USDA Forest Service and other agencies.

ATC's Trail management and conservation policies are meant to provide guidance for (a) dissemination to the public; (b) use and implementation by the ATC and the Clubs; and (c) recommendations for land-managing and other agencies. It is the agencies who work within their defined procedures to propose, administer, and enforce public policy. ATC policies are recommendations developed to support appropriate, coordinated Trailwide management.

Overview

This policy is intended to encourage the development of small, simply designed Trailhead facilities in areas where use patterns clearly indicate need.

Careful planning of Trailheads is important for two main reasons: (1) location of Trailheads is a powerful tool for controlling where and how much use the Trail receives; and (2) Trailheads are the most visible evidence of the Trail for the general public and provide the first impression of the Trail to its visitors.

Planning, design, and monitoring of Trailheads can determine whether hikers and Trail neighbors find a clean, safe, well-marked scene or are confronted by a littered area that is hazardous to traffic leaving, entering, or passing by.

Informal Trailheads tend to spring up almost anywhere the Trail crosses a road, especially where wide shoulders or cleared areas exist. Many are unnecessary or unsafe or encourage environmental abuse. Not all road crossings are suitable for Trailheads. Many existing ones cause management problems.



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If parking lots need to be developed, special planning considerations are required. Parking areas must use or cross highway rights-of-way and permits from the state or county will probably be needed to create new access from a public road. Concerns for public safety, particularly on roads that handle a significant amount of traffic or less-traveled winding roads with minimal sight distances, must be addressed.

Vandalism is also a problem when parking areas are not visible from the roadway, and adequate provisions must be made for keeping the area free of litter. If a Trailhead cannot be maintained by the Trail club, agency partner, or someone else on a regular basis, then the Trail is probably better off without a Trailhead at that location.

Policy

The following guidelines are presented in *Appalachian Trail Design, Construction, and Maintenance*:

Study existing hiking patterns—Document use levels along 5- to 15-mile sections of trail by counting parked cars on average and peak weekends. Look at the whole trail system. Remember, trailhead development is not required at all road crossings. Several key road crossings may be all that need development.

Check with local residents—Local police, municipal or county officials, the state transportation officials, and local residents can help you avoid or correct potential problem spots. Your concern will be appreciated.

Look for good spots—Inquire or field-check locations that might accommodate parking without additional construction. Wide-shouldered roads, picnic areas, state waysides, sections of old roadbed, and old gravel pits often provide ample space for parking.

Evaluate motor access safety—Seek advice from highway safety engineers and local residents to evaluate the safety of access to the roadway, pedestrian crossings, and the local impact of any proposed lot.

Adhere to standards—Use the standards followed by most highway departments for parking access. On blind hills and curves, parking is unacceptable. On all roadways, clear lines of sight must extend down the roadway, usually 200 to 500 feet, depending on the speed limit.



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Avoid overused areas—Plan to keep parking space to a minimum if an area is fragile or threatened by overuse.

Consider landforms—Choose well-drained sites above the 100-year floodplain, without steep banks, on slopes of less than five percent grades; otherwise, the sites may be costly, impractical, or require excavation to develop.

Let highway planners or designers handle parking lot design—Urge them to keep lots small and simple, usually for four to six cars. Lot capacities should never exceed the needs for existing use, unless safety requires that all cars be parked off the roadway, even on peak weekends. To retain a simple road crossing for the trail, consider locating parking lots a short distance down the road, with a short side trail connecting to the Appalachian Trail

Acquire necessary permits—A driveway permit may be needed to access public roads.

Discourage vandals—where necessary, make policing for vandalism easy by locating parking lots where they are clearly visible from the main road.

Consult with ATC's for resources on planning a trailhead kiosk.

NPS Policy—Trailheads, and trail access points from which trail use can begin, will be carefully tied into other elements of the park development and circulation system to facilitate safe and enjoyable trail use and efficient management. Parking areas should be located so that they do not unacceptably intrude, by sight, sound, or other impact, on park resource values. When deemed necessary, they should be limited to the smallest size appropriate (sections 9.2.2.8 and 9.2.4 of the 2006 NPS [Management Policies](#)).

In addition, the park superintendent needs to be involved in development of any parking lot or trailhead facility within the boundaries of a national park. In most cases the National Park Service will need to conduct an appropriate level of environmental review. A categorical exclusion or environmental assessment is required on lands administered by the Appalachian Trail Park Office if the facility is intended to provide parking for more than 10 cars.



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Considerations for Planning

Inventory—The first step in planning Trailhead facilities is an inventory of existing Trailheads, including informal roadside pull-off areas. The inventory should note key features, including location, number of parking spaces, safety, and vulnerability to vandalism. The list can be attached to the local management plan as an appendix.

Setting Trail Club Policy—The Trail club should form its policy around the real issues at the local level, whether vandalism, inadequacy of existing Trailheads, safety, or whatever other problems are priorities for local management. Coordination with state and local officials should be recognized.

Action Plan—Most Trailhead-construction projects require long-range planning and close coordination with state and local officials. Begin by identifying all Trailhead projects in the club's Trail assessment.

Once the club is ready to begin actual design and construction, assign a project leader to work with state and federal partners. Agency partners and ATC may provide financial and technical assistance.

For questions related to this policy please contact the Appalachian Trail Conservancy at www.appalachiantrail.org, or P.O. Box 807, Harpers Ferry, WV, 25425-807.

The Appalachian Trail Conservancy's mission is to protect, manage, and advocate for the Appalachian National Scenic Trail.