

THE USEFULNESS AND MEANING OF RURAL GREENWAYS: USER EXPERIENCE AT THE TANGLEFOOT TRAIL IN NORTHEAST MISSISSIPPI

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1 **ABSTRACT**

The Tanglefoot Trail is a 43.6-mile greenway in rural, northeast Mississippi. The trail follows a portion of a now abandoned railroad corridor and consists primarily of a multi-purpose pathway that connects six, small communities with a total population of just over 20,000. Community advocates from the area first met in 2005 to begin discussing the idea of the trail. In ensuing years, supporters of the Tanglefoot Trail secured federal and state grant funding to construct the asphalt trail as well as a series of “whistle stop” rest facilities for trail users. The trail was completed in 2013 and is currently used for hiking, biking, running and associated community events. The Tanglefoot Trail was a multimillion-dollar investment. Trail supporters tout the trail’s “transportation, health, environmental and economic benefits” (Interpreting the Trail, n.d.). Recent literature on urban greenways suggests that recreational benefits may outweigh the cost of construction and maintenance (Lindsey, Man, Payton, & Dickson, 2004), that trails may increase the value of surrounding property (Nicholls & Crompton, 2005), and that trail expansion is economically justifiable in some situations (Crompton, 2012). As a result, urban greenways have a fairly straightforward argument. For rural trails, the case is more difficult. The lack of surrounding density and services means that rural greenways are likely to have far fewer users. The health benefit argument may also be more difficult as a recent study of a metropolitan greenway was unable to demonstrate an improvement in the physical activity behaviors of proximate users (West & Shores 2015). All of this may make it challenging to defend a rural greenway’s expense against skeptics. This raises the question: What is the usefulness and meaning of a rural greenway? Anecdotal evidence suggests that the Tanglefoot Trail is highly appreciated by its users, some of whom travel vast distances to use the trail. If rural greenways have a worth beyond simple quantification, perhaps the answer lies in the social and experiential aspects of such trails or their increased significance to a smaller number of users. This paper explores these issues through examination of the results of an online survey of Tanglefoot Trail users; the survey examined user preferences, their motivations for using the trail, and what they found meaningful about the experience. This information is intended not only to increase overall understanding of rural greenways, but also to provide advocates and designers with data useful in their promotion, design and improvement.

1.1 **Keywords**

Rural Greenways, Rails-To-Trails, User Experience, Walking, Biking, Active Living