



Best Practices for Hosting Group Rides

Group rides are great for engaging with community members and strengthening relationships. VMBA Chapters may decide to host group rides on their networks or occasionally on networks managed by other Chapters. In doing so, the following should be considered when planning and implementing a successful group ride.

Definition of a Group Ride

*A Group Ride is an organized ride by an entity that gathers public members to ride on a designated route; typically led by Ride Leaders/Volunteers. The Group Ride is publicized and open to the public. If a Group Ride has an official registration process or a cost to participate, it qualifies as an *Exhibition* for insurance purposes and requires both additional Participant Accident Insurance coverage and a Special Event Waivers are to be created and signed by all participants.*

Insurance for Group Rides

All VMBA Members sign a VMBA General Waiver during enrollment, which covers volunteer workdays as well as certain Group Rides, specifically those that do not have an official registration process or fees to participate. If either of these cases is true, you will need to provide event details to the VMBA office in advance to obtain Participant Accident Insurance coverage and you will need to customize a [Special Event Waiver](#) to be signed by all participants in advance. For more information on Event insurance and pricing, please see our [Event Insurance Information Sheet](#).

Permissions or Permits

VMBA Networks are hosted by a variety of landowners, including municipalities, the State of Vermont, the US Forest Service, and private landowners. Additionally, the Chapter that maintains the network should be made aware of the organized group ride at least two weeks in advance.

Specific permission and/or permit requirements include:

USFS Land (Green Mountain National Forest)

Per the [USFS Special Use Authorization Guidelines](#), there are certain instances where a permit is required to conduct organized recreational activities on USFS Land. Commercial Use of the land is considered:

- When an entry or participation fee is charged

- The primary purpose is the sale of a good or service

If the organized activity is considered commercial use and/or there are 75 or more people involved in the activity, a Special Use Authorization is needed. Learn more on the [USFS website](#) on how to apply for a permit. For most Group Rides, a permit or special authorization is not required.

State Land

For group activities on land owned by the State of Vermont, specific triggers cause the need for a Special Use Permit. The two most relevant triggers are:

- Group activities that involve more than 10 people
- Guided recreational activities

As a result, larger group rides on State land must apply for a Special Use Permit (SUP) well in advance of the event. For more information and to apply to obtain a Special Use Permit, visit the [VT FPR](#) website. Note that Chapters that manage trails on State land may have special arrangements that allow them to hold group events on the trails they steward without an SUP - another good reason to contact the host Chapter well in advance.

Municipality

Permit requirements and the associated thresholds vary with each municipality. Check with your town contact or online to see if you will need a permit for any organized activity and what the specific triggers may be.

Private Landowner

Best practices for maintaining positive landowner relationships are to notify or ask permission from landowners when you plan to have organized activity, especially if it is expected to have high attendance. Minimally, the Chapter responsible for managing the trails must be made aware of the group ride well in advance (at least two weeks) to allow them to notify the landowner, identify any concerns they may have, and convey these to the Group Ride Organizers. Do not, under any circumstances, engage with Landowners in networks managed by other Chapters; host Chapters should always be the primary contacts with Landowners in the networks they manage.

Ride Leaders/Sweeps & Group Management

Group Ride Leaders are crucial to ensuring the safety of participants and providing a fun and positive environment. For 'no-drop rides, there should be a Ride Leader in the front and a Sweep in the back to ensure the group stays together. If the Group Ride is intended to be a 'drop' ride and not remain together, this must be communicated to all participants in advance, and participants must be aware that they are responsible for their navigation. It is best practice for Group Rides to have a 1:6 ratio.

When identifying Ride Leaders, VMBA suggests considering:

- Individuals who know the network and route
- Individuals who have had experience leading group rides
- Skilled riders who can ride, at minimum, at the level to which they are leading

It is the responsibility of the Ride Leader to:

- Stay in the front of the group, setting an appropriate pace for the group's skill level.
- Be familiar with the trails, stopping at trail junctions, or challenging features.
- Continually check in with participants and ensure everyone is comfortable with the pace.

Group Ride Sweeps are a great opportunity for those who want to eventually lead group rides to start with understanding how to effectively lead a group ride. It is the responsibility of the Group Ride Sweep to:

- Remain last in the group to ensure nobody is left behind.
- Observe participant behavior and communicate to the Ride Leader if pace is too high
- Enforce group breaks that provide sufficient recovery for all riders in the group

To best prepare Ride Leaders and Sweeps, it may be worth considering:

- Hosting training for all of the Chapter's Ride Leaders at the start of the season on how to effectively lead a group ride
- Ensure that at least a Ride Leader or Sweep has First Aid/CPR
- Outlining Ride Leader & Sweeps expectations while representing the Chapter. This can include:
 - Being respectful to participants and other trail users
 - Encouraging Leave no Trace and proper Trail Etiquette
 - Refraining from the consumption of alcohol before or during the ride
 - Creating a positive environment for all participants
 - Not riding on closed or unsanctioned trails

Identifying Routes

It's important to think about the skill levels that will be attending the Group Rides and what route is appropriate for that skill set. From a liability perspective and regardless of skill, no Group Ride routes should be chosen that have mandatory drops or other high-risk features.

For beginners, it is typically best to stick to green trails and expect to go a shorter distance with less elevation.

Intermediate routes for riders are more variable and will depend on where a group stands between beginner and advanced. Typically, blue trails are the best option, though it is worth considering whether trails are flowy versus technical, any trail features, and the overall length of the route. A best practice is to have a few route options in mind and speak with participants to determine the most appropriate one for their ability and fitness level.

Advanced group rides are encouraged to explore black and double black trails, though it is important to communicate any mandatory technical features and to avoid mandatory drops or high-risk features. It is also recommended to have options, particularly regarding length, and to finalize the route based on participant fitness and skill.

Registration

Registration helps organizers understand how many people expect to attend the group ride, even if it is a free ride. This will ensure that there are enough ride leaders and sweeps to break out into groups by skill level and a manageable size. Ideally, group ratios never exceed 1:6.

Registration can be done through Eventbrite and at no cost to Chapters.

If the Chapter chooses to forego registration, it is important to ensure there are enough ride leaders and sweeps to accommodate the expected attendance.

As a reminder, events with Registration will require Participant Accident Insurance Coverage, which is obtainable through the VMBA office, typically at no cost. It will also require you to customize a Special Event Waiver for your ride and ensure all participants sign beforehand. A major benefit to participants is that this is “no-fault” coverage, meaning participants can receive compensation for injuries or damage without having to sue VMBA.

Marketing

The best way to have a great turnout for any organized activity is through effective marketing. VMBA suggests to spread the word by:

- Creating a Facebook Event, ideally four weeks in advance
- Posting to Social Media Regularly
- Adding to VMBA's [Event Calendar](#)

In our experience, the more specific the events are with respect to the experience they intend to provide, the stronger the turnout. Whether a Ladies Ride, Technical Tour, Beginners' Night, or Endurance Epic - specifics are what get folks excited to come and ride with those interested in a similar experience.

Safety Management

It is important to consider the following before the Group Ride to reduce risk exposure, both for the sake of participants and for our organizational liability:

- Consider collecting emergency contact information in case of an accident or injury
 - This can be done either through pre-registration or a sign-in sheet
- Waivers need to be signed by all participants.
 - All VMBA Members sign a general waiver when they become a VMBA Member
 - VMBA Waivers can be found [here](#) and may be used if your group ride does not have formal registration or any fees to participate
 - A parent or legal guardian must sign for any participants under age 18
 - If you do have registration and/or charge fees, you must create and use a Special Event Waiver
- First Aid Kits should be readily available either at the trailhead or with Ride Leaders. Consider providing each Ride Leader with a kit, either for their vehicle or to carry with them. Note: participants are assuming all risks as part of the waiver process. Only have Ride Leaders or Sweeps administer care if they are trained and comfortable to do so. In some cases, moving an injured rider, for example, can result in additional injury.
- An Emergency Response Plan should be shared with all Ride Leaders. This includes areas of known cell coverage, contact information for emergency medical assistance, and an evacuation plan.

Best practices to ensure the safety and enjoyment of riders throughout the ride include:

- Challenging Terrain: Before approaching a challenging portion of the trail, regroup and explain what is approaching and how to navigate it safely. Do not, under any circumstances, force or encourage an individual to ride a feature if they are not comfortable.
- Communication: It's important to have open and transparent communication about other trail users, water/snack breaks, challenges, questions, etc.
- Stop at all major intersections
- Group breaks only begin when the last rider arrives

Post-Ride Follow Up

- Stay connected with participants by following up with future rides/events and other ways to stay engaged with your Chapter
- Share a post-ride feedback survey to both participants and Ride Leaders/Sweeps
- Share on social media photos from the group rides, encouraging the community to attend future group rides/events
- Send a thank-you email to all the volunteers or sponsors who helped make the group ride happen