

Several trails and expansions open around the state promote a myriad of benefits

By Arianna Hunt, TheStatehouseFile.com

The B&O Trail, which connects westside communities in Marion and Hendricks counties to downtown Indianapolis, opened a 1.9-mile expansion earlier this month.

Trails for walking and bicycling have been on the rise in Indiana in recent years, primarily due to community advocates and efforts from lawmakers. One of those efforts is the Indiana Legislative Trails Caucus, a bipartisan group of legislators from both the Indiana House and Senate [“committed](#) to creating a statewide trails network that provides significant health, economic and other quality of life benefits for all Hoosiers,” which activated in 2020.

"We lobbied hard for funding and were able to help secure the first-ever legislative designation of funding for trails," said Rep. Carey Hamilton, D-Indianapolis, co-chair of the caucus. That original designation was \$60 million and later another \$30 million, Hamilton said.

There are a few key reasons why Hamilton says she works on trails and why it was so easy to gain bipartisan support for the Trails Caucus.

"It's because of the direct quality of life benefits to our communities and health benefits both mental and physical," said Hamilton. "When the pandemic hit, pretty quickly there was strong support in the community to have more outdoor outlets because that was really how people could get out and recreate safely."

There is also a significant economic incentive to building trails, she said.

"Economic quality of life—and when I'm talking about the quality of life, I'm talking about creating amenities in our environment that people want to live near," Hamilton said.

Hamilton said there is evidence that young families want to live in communities with access to trails and "employers want to be where employees want to live." Trails also increase property values and offer people a way to conveniently get to businesses like restaurants or shops without a car.

The B&O Trail in particular resulted from thousands of volunteers donating tens of thousands of hours over multiple decades advocating and fundraising, according to a press release.

"Everyone came together to make this project happen. It's been an incredible experience," said Ashley Duncan, a consultant for the Central Indiana Community Foundation.

"The very first thing we did was reach out to the communities that were going to be impacted by this project and asked if this was something they wanted and confirmed this has been an amenity that the community has been including in strategic plans and comprehensive long-term master community plans," she said.

The Marion County Public Health Department first identified the need for a trail on the near west side, said Duncan, because of the pedestrian crash rate there. The health department's recommendation was for an off-street corridor.

It took roughly two years for the B&O Trail team to acquire the land they needed to build. "We had the opportunity to pay the adjacent property owners for the property that they had rights to, and they all were willing and supportive, and we bought 83 parcels," Duncan said.

Although the B&O trail has taken decades, Duncan says it may be easier to make trails now because there is a greater appreciation for them.

"People now value trails, so I think that momentum is why you see the funding because there's no pushback anymore," said Duncan. "People recognize that these [trails] are an asset."

Indiana has more than 4,200 miles of [public trails](#), according to the Department of Natural Resources.