



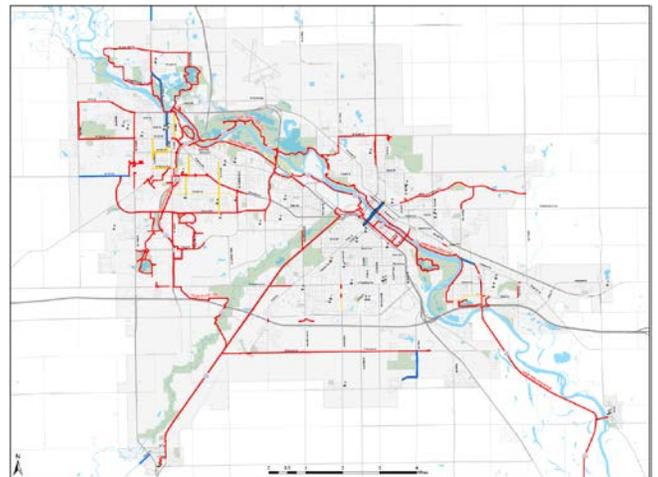
Regional Trail Network Wayfinding Signage Enhancements in Black Hawk County, Iowa

Challenge

Black Hawk County Metropolitan Area in Northeast Iowa has a population of 123,521,¹ along with an extensive regional trail network with upwards of 115 miles of trails and more planned for construction. However, the trail system was hard to navigate, and thus not being fully used by visitors and residents. Local communities and the region's association of local governments, [Iowa Northland Regional Council of Governments](#) (INRCOG), recognized that wayfinding signage would encourage use of the trail network, and make the region a more desirable place to live and work.

Solution

In 2016, [Principal Financial Group Foundation](#) offered a \$20,000 grant for local community projects. [Cedar Trails Partnership](#), a local nonprofit organization, won the grant to fund a trails and wayfinding signage project. The grant would cover funding for the signs themselves, and the Cedar Trails Partnership reached out to INRCOG for assistance with planning and implementation. INRCOG had the crucial role of coordinating the planning process, engaging the various stakeholders, designing the signs, and establishing locations for the signs. The local jurisdictions were responsible for sign installation. The grant covered only the cost of the materials such as the signs themselves, the steel posts, and hardware. INRCOG used an estimated \$28,000 in Federal Metropolitan Planning funds to develop and implement the project, for nearly 60 percent of the total project cost.



Existing Cedar Valley Trail Network. Image courtesy of INRCOG.

INRCOG worked with the various municipalities in the region and other stakeholders throughout the planning process including Waterloo, Cedar Falls, Hudson, Evansdale, Cedar Trails Partnership, George Wyth State Park, Cedar Falls Tourism, and the Black Hawk County Conservation Board. The team was able to work together efficiently throughout the process—from the time INRCOG learned about the grant, to when municipal employees picked up the first set of signs to install, just eight months elapsed. The local governments installed most of the signs by November 2016 and a second phase was later completed in 2019.

INRCOG set up a series of meetings to make sure all key stakeholders could participate in the planning process and weigh in on decisions along the way, from sign locations to final sign design components. INRCOG created Geographic Information System maps of all trail intersections in the area, and worked with stakeholders to develop a prioritized list of trail intersections at which to install the wayfinding signs. The stakeholders selected destinations very deliberately so that the signs would function as unified system, which was one of the group's main challenges and ultimate successes. If one sign shows a destination, each subsequent sign also includes that destination until the traveler arrives.

¹ Iowa Northland Regional Council of Governments 2014 estimate.

Creating more livable communities through transportation choices



The sign design process was also challenging—the trails already had a few inconsistent sign types throughout the network, and the group had to decide which logo or logos to include. INRCOG developed a series of logo and design options for the Cedar Valley trails, and presented examples from other communities across the country, such as [Milwaukie Bicycle Wayfinding Signage Plan](#). INRCOG surveyed the stakeholders on the sign design elements, including whether to include bicycle minutes, so that the selected design could be one that all parties support.

The group agreed to a consistent design and standards, such as always listing the closest destination first and then grouping destinations to the left and right together. INRCOG referred to the [Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices \(MUTCD\)](#), the National Association of City Transportation Officials (NACTO) [Urban Bikeway Design Guide](#), as well as wayfinding signage examples from other communities. To determine bicycle travel time, INRCOG found distance data, then used a formula that incorporated an average bicycle speed of 10 miles per hour.

Signs are located at trail intersections, diversion points, and other locations throughout Waterloo, Cedar Falls, George Wyth State Park, and other trails in the region. The grant funded a total of 159 larger wayfinding signs, 175 small wayfinding signs, and 130 maintenance signs. The larger wayfinding signs include three destinations, each with an arrow, distance, and bicycle travel time; small wayfinding signs are of a “bike route” with an arrow; and maintenance signs indicate how to get to the nearest self-service bike repair station.

INRCOG utilized marketing and public relation materials to spread awareness amongst local communities, including flyers, presentations to community members, outreach to [local media](#) and, the [Trails and Recreation Guide](#).



*New larger wayfinding sign on Cedar Valley Trails network.
Image courtesy of INRCOG.*

Conclusion

INRCOG and the other stakeholders received very positive qualitative feedback from trail users and local businesses. The wayfinding signs enhance the quality of life for visitors and residents alike, and encourage people to use the trail system for both recreational and transportation purposes. As businesses aim to retain the local workforce, these quality of life benefits can serve to attract and retain workers, thus enhancing local economic development. Further, residents can now more easily use active modes of transportation on the trail network as a low-cost, accessible commuting option within the region.

Every couple of years, INRCOG reviews and updates some of the signs to address the construction of new trails being added to the network. INRCOG also hopes to secure more funding to make the Cedar Valley wayfinding system even more comprehensive and easy to navigate.

As other communities consider making similar wayfinding improvements, INRCOG highlights the importance of maintaining a uniform design throughout any regional network and including only destinations of regional significance. Coordinating at a regional scale to ensure consistency in design and approach of the wayfinding signs throughout the trail network provides a better experience for trail users and enhances quality of life.

Federal Highway Administration: www.fhwa.dot.gov/livability

