WHAT LESSONS HAVE WE LEARNED?

Time spent outdoors plays an essential role in our lives, and although social distancing guidelines have limited our time outside the home and reduced close contact with family and friends, the current pandemic has reinforced how time in our parks and on our trails provides critical opportunities to exercise, connect with nature, and “unplug” from devices and the daily news cycle. In fact, usage of county trails increased dramatically during the Commonwealth’s stay-at-home order, with an estimated increase of 200 percent on some county trail segments. These recreational and natural amenities have proven to be an effective counterbalance to the isolation and confinement experienced during the pandemic.

Adhering to social distancing guidelines and limiting virus transmission have required behavior modification and physical changes to park and trail facilities to enhance public safety. For example:

- Signs such as the one above were placed along Montgomery County trails to encourage positive health habits and social distancing measures among trail users.

- Pennsylvania published a series of guidelines for the public on spending time outdoors, which focus on limiting exposure to “high touch” public facilities, such as restrooms and play equipment, and avoiding group gatherings. At Evansburg State Park, picnic tables were dispersed across a large open space to meet social-distancing recommendations.

- In Portland, OR, the city chose to keep all parks open for pedestrians and bicyclists but closed all park roads to cars to create more space for these non-motorized users.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Open space and recreational amenities, such as trails, remain essential for residents of Montgomery County during the pandemic.

- Every effort should be made to keep parks and trails open during the pandemic without sacrificing public health.

- Both behavior modification and physical changes to recreation and open space resources are required to facilitate the safe use of parks and trails.
“ Trails have proven themselves as vital connections to our communities—to grocery stores, doctors’ offices, essential jobs and more. Trails make us healthier and happier, are important parts of our transportation system, and will play a critical role in our economic recovery and resilience.”

– Ryan Chao
President of Rails-to-Trails Conservancy

When guidance has not altered people’s behavior and modifications to park facilities have proven ineffective, access to parks has been severely limited—and in some cases—completely forbidden, or physical facilities have been modified to discourage or prevent people from gathering and risking transmission of the virus. Philadelphia found it necessary to remove basketball hoop rims from several from several parks to discourage groups from congregating, and other communities closed public restrooms, picnic pavilions, and parking lots to limit concentrated use of park facilities. Parking specifically for trails and trailheads, on the other hand, has largely remained available for trail users who are less vulnerable when mobile on a trail. Closing parks and other facilities should be the last resort when all other public health considerations and strategies have proven challenging.

When debating whether to close or severely limit access to a park or open space area, decision makers may consider:

- Offering access to facilities with more than one entrance/exit
- Dispersing and fixing in-place internal facilities (e.g., picnic tables)
- Providing temporary access to on-street parking
- Keeping popular parks open through queuing and occupancy limits (similar to grocery stores)
- Providing clear public messaging on which facilities are open and available

Consideration should also be given to equity issues, which impact how different communities may tend to use various types of recreational facilities. Closing certain facilities used primarily by one demographic group, even when performed for the sake of public health, may inadvertently result in an inequitable impact to certain age or minority groups.