R 2012 / VOL 102 NO 4
US $7 CAN $9

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THE MAGAZINE OF THE AMERICAN SOCIETY OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS

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COUNT WHEELS, DIVIDE BY TWO

A SIMPLE RECORD-KEEPING SYSTEM BRINGS SAN JOSE MILLIONS IN FUNDING FOR ITS TRAIL SYSTEM.

BY LYDIA LEE

ABOVE
An annual event: A volunteer counts users along San Jose's Guadalupe River Trail in September 2011.

It all started with a group of extremely grumpy bicyclists: In July 2005, the Silicon Valley metropolis of San Jose, California, launched an auto race through downtown. The city shut down major roads but also closed a key bike route. The Department of Parks, Recreation & Neighborhood Services got an earful.

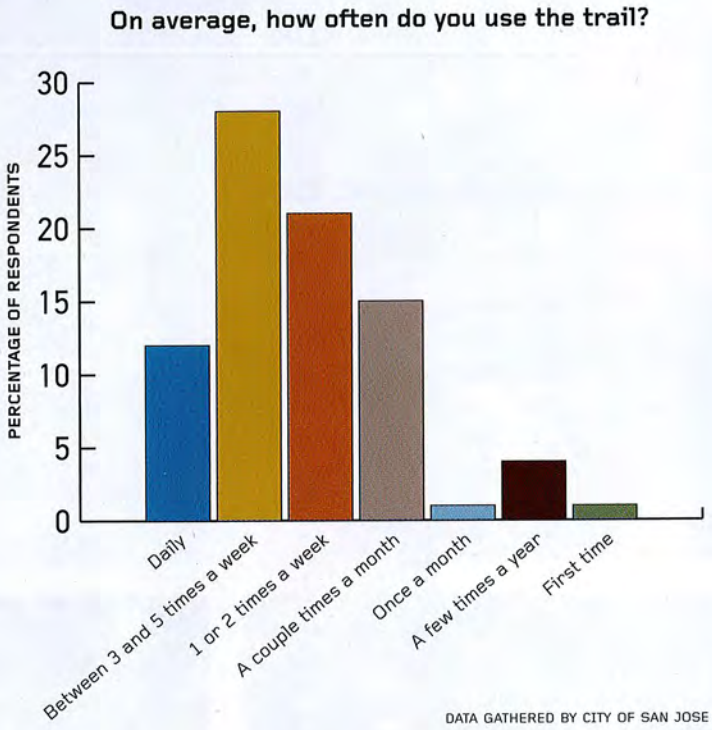
"We didn't warn people ahead of time, and the bicycling community was really upset," says Yves Zsutty, the trail manager for the department. "We knew that some people were biking from their homes in south San Jose to their places of employment in north San Jose, but we didn't know how many."

The experience prompted Zsutty to start the city's Trail Count program to help learn how integral the trails were for transportation. In the fall of 2007, he organized a group of volunteers to count all the passersby at two points along the Guadalupe River Trail, an 11-mile north–south route that connects San Jose's downtown with surrounding residential areas. Taking stock for the entire day, they counted 1,000 people using the city's main trail and found out that more than half of them were commuters.

Zsutty has organized the count every year since. The detailed Trail Count reports have been used to bolster the city's grant applications to local, state, and federal sources, and have helped it gain an average of $1.2 million per year for trail development.

Nationwide, just over half a percent (0.53) of commuters use bicycles daily, according to the 2010 American Community Survey by the U.S. Census Bureau. In San Jose, that figure is slightly higher—0.6 percent. Portland, Oregon, leads the nation's large cities with 6 percent of commuters on bicycles. The census has collected information on commuting methods for many years, but until recently, there have been few fine-grained attempts to measure how many people were biking along

ABOVE
To help ensure trail safety, the city has installed yellow mile markers that provide 911 operators with location information.



DATA GATHERED BY CITY OF SAN JOSE

certain trails. San Jose and Portland are among the first major cities to institute yearly counts.

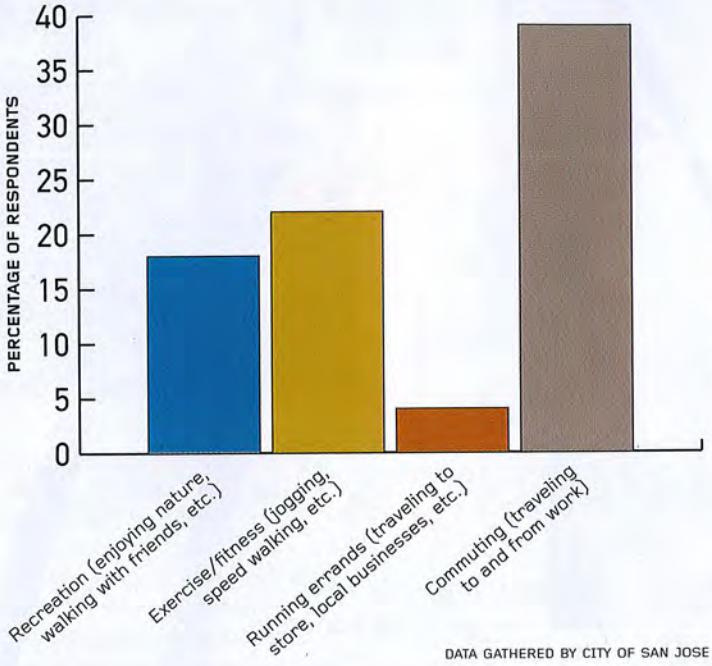
Zsutty was hired as San Jose's trail manager in part because of his experience in transportation. He is a civil engineer by training and had previously worked for the city's Department of Transportation and Department of Public Works. In 2002, the city created a brand-new position to oversee the development of its trail network. "I was able to sell myself as someone who knew how to develop a transportation system," Zsutty says. "Traffic engineers use data in everything they do, which is a little different than how Parks and Rec traditionally operates. I always felt that if we could prove that what we were doing was working, we'd be in a better position."

San Jose's new general plan calls for expanding its existing 53 miles of trails to 100 miles by 2022, which will give it one of the nation's largest urban trail networks. It's an ambitious plan to promote alternative forms of transportation in a sprawling area where some companies run their own shuttles in the absence of decent public transit. "Those trails are all within the urban core: It's not one long trail, but a network of trails that—if we develop them right—will look more like a road network," Zsutty says. To reach this goal, the city will need to secure funding from a variety of sources; 60 to 70 percent of the trail budget depends on securing competitive grants.

Richard Rendon is the grant supervisor for the recreational trails program at California State Parks, where he helps to select which trail projects the state will fund. San Jose has received significant funding through this program. "One of the questions we ask is projected numbers of users," Rendon says, "and if they've gone the extra mile to do a count and have hard data to back up their application, it strengthens that application."

Portland has also used its counts to help attract additional funding. The trail count program for its Intertwine network started in 2008; now, more than a dozen agencies in the metro area work to count and survey users of 25 trails. In a report that summarized the 2008 to 2010 results, Mary Ordal, the project manager for the city of Hillsboro, just to the west of Portland, wrote that "the trail use data helped us secure nearly $800,000 in grants in the past year." When the city found that 30 percent of trail users dashed across an arterial street

What was your primary reason for using the trail today?



DATA GATHERED BY CITY OF SAN JOSE

TRAIL COUNTS CAN HELP CITIES DECIDE ON THE SHAPE AND DESIGN OF A TRAIL.

during rush hour, it helped strengthen arguments for a safer midblock crossing. "The surveys have given trail users a voice," Ordal noted.

The counts are starting to catch on elsewhere. To promote trail counts, the National Bicycle and Pedestrian Documentation Project (NBPD) was launched in 2004 by Alta Planning + Design, a consulting firm in Berkeley, California, that specializes in trail planning, in conjunction with the Institute of Transportation Engineers' Pedestrian and Bicycle Council. To date, the project has data from approximately 100 areas on 600 trails. "We work to encourage communities to do counts of pedestrians and bicyclists, to help understand patterns of activity," says Jennifer Donlon-Wyant, the NBPD's project manager.

To make regular data collection easier, Donlon-Wyant often recommends that communities consider automatic counters, which cost $1,500 to $3,000. Infrared counters, from companies like Eco-Counter and TrailMaster, count anything that breaks the path of an infrared beam. Other options include pads for pedestrian-only trails and magnetic loop detectors for bicycle paths. Parks & Trails New York, a statewide advocate for parks and trails, recently secured funding for automated trail count equipment from the state's Department of Health to help monitor the efficacy of its "Healthy Trails, Healthy People" program.

Another option is to recruit volunteer groups to help with the counting, as San Jose and Portland have done. This method also enables the city to survey trail users about their satisfaction and suggestions. San Jose and Portland both follow guidelines created by the NBPD, one of which is conducting its counts in September each year, a time when the weather is temperate across the country. In San Jose, about three months before the date, Zsutty works with local volunteer groups to recruit about 50 people to count. He identifies five to seven counting stations along major trails, at strategic points where the department is thinking of building out the trail. Some trails are counted only during peak commuter hours; others are counted for a full 12 hours. The volunteer counters also give out postcards with a link to an online survey, with questions that ask about everything from how safe people feel on the trails to their interest in making charitable donations to support trail expansion.

Trail counts can provide information that shapes the design of a trail. "It might make sense to extend a trail in a very linear way," Zsutty says, "because it's mostly used by commuters and we need to give them a fast route; or it might be better to create a dual route, so that there's an option that meanders with lots of stops to enjoy nature." What he would like to avoid is implementing a trail with many S curves that is consequently overrun by cut-through traffic.

Brian Fletcher, ASLA, a principal at Callander Associates Landscape Architecture, has worked on several San Jose trails and has seen what their simple reports have done to gain support for trails. "Trail counts are hugely important," he says. "I tell other clients, you really need to think about this when you're planning trails in order to build support in your own community." ●

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