Six Mile Creek Trail

City of Ithaca
February 2016
Background

This document was prepared by Matt Garron. I am a graduate of Cornell University with Bachelors of Science Urban and Regional Studies from the City and Regional Planning Department. I developed this work plan for an internship with the City of Ithaca. The internship was part of a public-private partnership between Cornell University, the City of Ithaca, and local developer, Mack Travis.

Prior to becoming a student at Cornell, I was involved with a number of community organizations in San Francisco, where I helped develop winning strategies for several successful local campaigns, including coauthoring and winning San Francisco’s Paid Sick Leave Ordinance, the first legislation of its kind in the United States.

The following document was prepared based on input from the following:

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This document is a work plan for the development of the Six Mile Creek Trail, a public-private partnership involving developers, the City of Ithaca Planning Division, and the Department of Public Works. The trail will boost the economic activity of downtown Ithaca by increasing Ithaca’s draw as a hub for unparalleled trail-based recreation. Moreover, it will encourage health and wellness of residents while reducing car dependency by delivering multiple entry points to the greater trails network.

The Six Mile Creek Trail will be a pedestrian connector trail that links Ithaca’s vibrant downtown core with the greater trails network of Tompkins County. The first phase of the trail, known as the downtown Creek walk, began in 2006, starting from behind the Tompkins County Public Library and continuing through to the History Center of Tompkins County. The Six Mile Creek Trail is the second phase of the trail and will follow the creek upstream beneath the walls of the glacially carved gorge to the Van Natta’s Dam, forming a critical link from downtown to the Mullholland Wildflower Preserve and the South Hill Recreation Way.

The trail will be built on top of a new water main that replaces the current water main built in 1903. The first phase of the water main was built in 2006 underneath the existing Creek walk, but cannot be used until this second phase is completed. On top of the water main, the trail will be made of crushed bank run to give it a smooth, hard finish or a compacted stone dust may be used.

The Six Mile Creek Trail will benefit local businesses because it weaves the scenic creek into the fabric of downtown as an amenity for all to enjoy. Additionally, residents of South Hill, East Hill, and the growing Collegetown Terrace area will benefit through new commuting opportunities to downtown. Similarly, residents of the Greater Southside area and downtown will be a skip and a jump from this picturesque natural area. Furthermore, everyone who visits downtown Ithaca, will gain admission to a seemingly never-ending series of spectacular landscapes in the greater trails network. If provided with funding, this second phase of the Six Mile Creek Trail and second phase of the 1903 water main replacement will begin construction as soon as 2017.
HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

In the early 20th century, the Six Mile Creek Trail was a remarkable park, with significant importance to Ithaca’s residents. At a time when Ithaca was still working to discover its tourism advantages, Robert H. Treman gave the City of Ithaca his land at Six Mile Creek in order to help develop Ithaca’s narrative as a destination for extraordinary natural beauty. Treman championed Six Mile Creek as the premiere gorge in the area. Resting on Treman’s gift to the city was the agreement that the tract be “set aside irrevocably for a park.”¹ The area near Six Mile Creek Gorge was known as Six Mile Glen Park. Treman’s vision included a hiking trail at this distinctive natural area that connected to Ithaca’s other hallmarks, including easy access to downtown and Cornell University. He was certain that the coupling of a park at Six Mile Creek and Ithaca’s other noted features was the key to drawing tourists to the area.²

“Community Day” on May 15, 1917 was sponsored by the Ithaca Board of Commerce. Photo taken by S.L. Sheldon, courtesy of the general photo collection, History Center in Tompkins County.
You know how greatly interested I am in the development of the ravines around Ithaca, and I want to do all I can to cooperate with the citizens in the development of Six Mile Creek as a playground and park reservation. I sincerely believe it can be made a very attractive feature of the city, and hope that the present interest that is being developed may continue.

Robert Treman, in a letter to the Board of Commerce. Published by the Ithaca Journal on September 20, 1916.

“Community Day” on May 15, 1917 was sponsored by the Ithaca Board of Commerce. Photo taken by S.L. Sheldon, courtesy of the General Photo Collection, History Center in Tompkins County.
In keeping with Treman’s vision, the trail will join the two greatest parts of Ithaca: our vibrant, walkable downtown and Ithaca’s beautiful iconic scenery. This attraction will give Ithacans and visitors an ideal entry point to the already vast network of stunning trails throughout Tompkins County. There is a recently built Creek walk that begins at the Ithaca police station and connects to the Gateway Plaza. The proposed trail would build on the existing Creek walk, connecting downtown to the Mulholland Wildflower Preserve, while providing a relaxing atmosphere full of stunning landscapes along Six Mile Creek. A recreational trail that connects to downtown is a great way to ensure that as development in the city continues, future residents will have access to Ithaca’s natural beauty.
A closer view showing the area of the proposed Six Mile Creek Trail. Map photo courtesy of the History Center of Tompkins County, S-174-a, Page 89.

Ithacans gathered during a talk on Community Day, May 15, 1917. Photo taken by S.L. Sheldon, courtesy the General Photo Collection, History Center of Tompkins County.

People walking across Six Mile Creek on Community Day, May 15, 1917. Photo taken by S.L. Sheldon, courtesy of the General Photo Collection, The History Center in Tompkins County.
VISION FOR A TRAIL DOWNTOWN & TOURISM BENEFITS

With close proximity to downtown, the trail will be an ideal amenity, connecting the heart of downtown to a scenic creek trail along Six Mile Creek. By providing direct access to the expansive network of trails, residents and tourists alike will be able to experience both our vibrant, walkable downtown and enjoy Ithaca’s natural beauty.

Van Natta’s Falls and the old hydropower plant. Photo by Matt Garron.
In 2009, when Labella Associates, P.C. was working on restoration of the Columbia Street Pedestrian Bridge, they also designed a conceptual layout of the trail. The 2006 Six Mile Creek Walk can be seen in red at the Gateway Plaza. The yellow dotted line area at the Gateway Plaza is where the Creek walk will be extended. The orange stars are the proposed locations of the bridge crossings. Labella proposed two options for the location of Bridge 1: The first is at the end of the Gateway Plaza parking lot, and the second option allows visitors to walk part of the trail before crossing to the south side of the creek. Just before the Columbia Street Bridge there is a short ditch about five feet deep and ten feet wide that sometimes fills with water and might require a small bridge for crossing while the creek’s water level is higher.
EFFORTLESS ACCESS TO THE GREATER TRAILS NETWORK

The Six Mile Creek Trail brings Tompkins County’s vast network of breathtaking trails to downtown Ithaca. The trail begins directly across the street from the Commons at the underutilized Creek walk. From the Creek walk, the Six Mile Creek Trail will connect the end of the Gateway Commons parking lot along the creek to the Mullholland Wildflower Preserve and the South Hill Recreation Way allowing for trail users to connect to the Black Diamond Trail.

With the Black Diamond Trail nearing completion, it is time to begin work on the next trail in the network. The Six Mile Creek Trail is an outstanding choice because it builds a downtown connection to the incredible collection of trails that all of Tompkins County has worked so hard to develop. This central link will ensure that everyone who lives in or visits downtown will gain admission to a never-ending series of spectacular landscapes across the trails network.

COMMEMORATING ITHACA’S NATIVE AMERICAN HISTORY AND HERITAGE OF THE CAYUGA NATION

The Native Americans who historically lived in Ithaca spent their winters along the Six Mile Creek Trail. The area where they would settle has been known as “Old Indian Campground” and is located on the north side of the creek at the proposed location of bridge 3. This section, inaccessible without crossing through the stream, is already flat and is an ideal clearing for a trail. The area is relatively undisturbed by humans, yet it is a naturally wide and flat plane, ideal for promenading.
Often referred to as the “Old Indian Campground,” this area along Six Mile Creek is an ideal clearing for a trail. This photo was taken on the north side of the creek, facing southeast. Photo by Matt Garron.

As mentioned on page 33 of the 1974 Ithaca Waterways study, “an historic marker should be erected on the site with a brief commentary about the Cayuga Indians.” In order to ensure that Ithacans and visitors observe the most accurate and respectful commemoration, it is recommended that the Cayuga Nation is involved in the historic marker that recognizes them and their ancestors. Indeed, this is a unique opportunity for the City of Ithaca to celebrate its Native American past.
The “Old Indian Campground” facing northwest. Photo by Matt Garron.
Ithaca’s Southside is an historically African-American neighborhood situated along Six Mile Creek southwest of downtown Ithaca. In 2006, The Greater Southside Steering Committee collaborated with the City of Ithaca and Cornell to develop neighborhood-based planning goals for Ithaca’s Southside. One of the priorities of the plan involved creating a linear park along Six Mile Creek. The Southside Community Center is only one-third of a mile from the existing Creek walk, providing Southside residents with close proximity to the Six Mile Creek Trail.

The trail will create an intimate link for downtown, South Hill, the growing Collegetown Terrace area, and the Greater Southside area. Furthermore, this is a unique opportunity to give residents of the urban core access to a breathtaking natural area. The Six Mile Creek Trail will give residents of these neighborhoods several entry points to this serene picturesque ravine.
ECONOMIC BENEFITS

Ithaca's Business Improvement District, the Downtown Ithaca Alliance (DIA) highlights the completion of the Six Mile Creek Trail as a pivotal action in the Downtown Ithaca 2020 Strategic Plan. The plan contends that the development of the trail is a critical piece in shaping downtown as the hub of trail activity. The DIA puts forward that the development of this exciting walkway would benefit both local residents as well as Ithaca's visitors.

In 2010, Chmura Economics and Analytics released a profile of visitors to Tompkins County, New York for the Tompkins County Legislature’s Strategic Tourism Planning Board. They found that 82% of all overnight visitors to Tompkins County are leisure travelers. If these overnight visitors have more activities within reach, they are more likely to extend their stay in town, leading to more dollars they will spend in Tompkins County. Ithaca’s booming downtown and the growing number of hotels in the urban core are creating a higher demand for recreation.

42% of Ithaca’s visitors pay a visit to the downtown Commons area and with the addition of new hotels downtown, that number is likely to grow. If we can give them more reasons to come downtown, the more they will spend at local businesses. By providing close proximity to recreational activities like trails, we can potentially increase their likelihood of extending their stay.

HEALTH AND WELLNESS

In the United States, obesity has reached an all-time high. This is largely related to inactivity, with 55 percent of adults failing to achieve the level of activity that is recommend by health experts. Inactivity also contributes to higher risks of diabetes, heart disease, and strokes. According to the Center for Disease Control released the New York State Nutrition, 26.7% of New York adults surveyed in 2013 recounted that they had not participated in any leisure time physical activity during the past month. In 2008, the Office of the State Comptroller reported that $7.6 billion was spent annually on adult obesity-related medical expenses (81% of which was paid by Medicaid and Medicare), which the NYS Department of Health attributes to a combination of physical inactivity and poor nutrition. By 2012, those costs rose to $11.8 billion
annually.\textsuperscript{10} The City of Ithaca can help fight physical inactivity by providing easy access to a recreational trail through an entry point in the heart of downtown.

**ENCOURAGING SUSTAINABILITY**

Once Ithaca’s trail network starts downtown, it can reduce dependency on vehicles that emit greenhouse gasses. By connecting to the South Hill Recreation Way and the Mulholland Wildflower Preserve, this trail will improve pedestrian access from downtown to the existing network of nearby trails. Ithacans can begin their hikes from their homes, tourists can begin their hikes from their hotels, and fewer cars will be needed to access the picture-perfect landscapes surrounding the heart of the city.

**COMMUTER’S TRAIL**

The Ithaca Comprehensive Plan calls for increasing transportation choices, including investing in pedestrian infrastructure.\textsuperscript{11} Residents of South Hill and of the growing housing complex of Collegetown Terrace will be able to use the trail to walk downtown. Additionally, the trail will advance the comprehensive plan’s objective to promote equitable access to alternative forms of transportation such as walking.\textsuperscript{12}

**CONTINUING THE WORK ALREADY STARTED**

In 2006, the City of Ithaca engaged in a public-private partnership with Mack and Carol Travis, the owners of the four acre Gateway Plaza project to develop the Six Mile Creek walk with attractive protective fencing. The Creek walk is a delightful, yet underutilized strip along Six Mile Creek that terminates at the end on an easement donated by the Travises.
The bridge crossings may be cable stayed wooden deck bridges, creating a similar aesthetic to this wooden suspension bridge goes over Fall Creek at the north end of the F.R. Newman Arboretum at Cornell Plantations. Photo by Mack Travis.

In 1903, the Ithaca Water Co. completed a water main that brings water down the hill from the Van Natta’s Dam following State Street to downtown. The same year, the city was hit by a massive typhoid epidemic, which affected a total of 1350 people, killing 85, including both locals and university students. The epidemic was generally attributed to unsanitary conditions during the construction of the Van Natta’s dam. In response, Ithacans voted for the city to take control of the water system to ensure that they received cleaner, safer water. On August 19th of 1903, the City of Ithaca completed construction of its own water filtration plant and began supplying water to Ithacans. That same water treatment plant has served Ithaca for over a hundred years and is in the process of being replaced with a new water filtration plant set to be in service in September of 2016.
There is also a need to replace the 1903 water main that runs down State Street. The City has already completed construction of the first phase in replacing the 1903 water main. In 2006, when the City was building the downtown Creek walk, it laid down the water main underneath the walkway starting from behind the Tompkins Public Library, which continues through to the Gateway Plaza, and terminates near the start of the Six Mile Creek Trail. The second phase of constructing the 1903 water main replacement will be built directly underneath the Six Mile Creek Trail, just as the first phase lies underneath the downtown Creek walk.

A major benefit of constructing the water main in conjunction with the Six Mile Creek Trail is to ensure that the city has access to the new infrastructure. Not only would the new water main be more structurally sound and safe, but it would be easier to maintain if it accessible through the Six Mile Creek Trail because city workers would have easy access to make repairs. Political difficulties can arise when the city has to go through people’s backyards to access public infrastructure. However, because the new water main will be easily accessible to city workers, the Department of Public Works would be able to walk or drive down the Six Mile Creek Trail to the section of the water main that needs maintenance or repair.

The new water main would follow the exact path of the Six Mile Creek Trail from the new water filtration plant and eventually connect to the Creek walk at the Gateway Plaza. The Six Mile Creek Trail would be a path laid on top of the new water main, just as it is at the Creek walk.
This water main under the Columbia Street Pedestrian Bridge is a visual example of what the new water main would look like. Photo by Matt Garron.

FUNDING BENEFITS OF JOINING THE WATER MAIN AND SIX MILE CREEK TRAIL

1. The construction costs will be reduced if both projects are built concurrently because the Six Mile Creek Trail will be on top of the new water main.

2. Additionally, by joining the two projects, the City of Ithaca will have greater opportunities when applying for grant funding. Laurie Moore of the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (NYS OPRHP) Southern Tier Region stated that the construction costs incurred from the water main can be counted as matched funds when applying for Consolidated Funding Application (CFA) grants. All CFA grants require that applicants find outside funding that will be matched by
the NYS OPRHP. Because the two projects are joined together, the funding used for
the water main will be able to count as matched funding for the requested grant
funding of the Six Mile Creek Trail. However, the two projects must be completed
during the same grant application year. This is a huge benefit because the City of
Ithaca would be able to use the construction costs of the water main replacement and
use those costs as matched funding for CFA grants such as the Environmental
Protection Fund (EPF) or the Recreational Trails Program (RTP).

ENDORSEMENTS

The impacts of the trail will greatly benefit the downtown stakeholders, residents that live
downtown as well as those that live near the proposed trail.

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A Six Mile Creek trail is a recommendation of the Downtown Ithaca 2020
Strategic Plan. It provides an outstanding recreational opportunity for
people who live in downtown as well as in the neighborhood abutting Six
Mile Creek gorge. It is a potential travel route for residents to access
downtown. And, it could be an amazing tourist amenity that helps our
visitors easily access one of our natural assets directly from downtown. The
DIA is most interested in seeing this project progress.

Gary Ferguson, Executive Director of the Downtown Ithaca Alliance

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The Six Mile Creek Trail would be a great amenity for all of us and all of
downtown. It would provide easy access from downtown to a unique
natural area, The Mulholland Wildflower Preserve. The trail would allow
Ithacans and visitors alike to experience the special beauty of this place and
would showcase the importance of nature tourism to the local economy.

Frost Travis, Travis Hyde Properties

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SUPPORTING REFERENCE DOCUMENTS
- **Comprehensive Plan (2015)** – The trail is shown as a “Planned Trail” on the Ithaca Parks, Natural Areas, and Trails map in Appendix C.

- **Ithaca Waterways Study (1976)** – On page 33, the study calls for the development

- **NYS Local Waterfront Revitalization Program: Cayuga Lake Waterfront Plan Final Report (December, 2004)** – Section D3, Map 20-B, pages 88, 97, 122. The document identifies the Six Mile Creek Corridor as a Recommended Waterfront project on Map 20-B. On page 122, it is proposed that there be *Six Mile Creek Corridor Improvements*. The document states, “Six Mile Creek connects the City Reservoir, Mullholland Wildflower Preserve, the downtown, and Inlet Island while passing through residential neighborhoods in the City. Plans are being considered for a trail to connect these destinations along this scenic natural corridor and to improve fishing and access to the creek.” Additionally, Policy 1.4 on page 88 says to “Maintain and enhance natural areas.” Policy 12 on page 98 gives the recommendation to “Enhance visual quality and protect outstanding scenic resources.”

- **City of Ithaca Trails Master Plan Draft (2015)**


- **Tompkins County Chamber of Commerce Wayfinding Plan (2014)**

- **Downtown Ithaca Alliance Strategic Plan (2010)**

- **Southside Flowering Neighborhood Plan (2003)**

- **NYS Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) (2003)** – A primary program goal of the 2003 SCORP on page 3-42 is to “Advance the development of a statewide system of interconnected trails and greenways and provide access to them.” The Six Mile Creek Trail is a critical link in connecting the greater trails network in Tompkins County.


- **Downtown Design Plan, Ithaca New York.** The document was prepared for the City of Ithaca while Benjamin Nichols was mayor. It was prepared by Roger Trancik, FASLA Urban Design Consultant.
POSSIBLE FUNDING SOURCES OR COST REDUCTIONS

- Environmental Protection Fund Grant at the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (NYS OPRHP) Southern Tier Region
- RTP Grant at the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (NYS OPRHP) Southern Tier Region
- Upstate Revitalization Initiative (URI)
- Natural Areas Commission for volunteer help with trail work.
- Park Foundation for Feasibility study grants
- Tompkins County tourism grant
- Piggybacking off of the water main project.

ESTIMATED COSTS

The estimates below were performed by the City of Ithaca Engineering Department.

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<td>$908,600</td>
<td>Total (Change to $1,005,950 if using federal aid)</td>
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ENDNOTES

2 Kammen, Carol. (2008). Ithaca: a brief history. Charleston, SC: History Press. On Pages 82 and 83, Kammen describes Treman’s belief that developing Ithaca’s scenic advantages was vital to boosting tourism and that developing Six Mile Creek was ideal for connecting these features.
12 Ibid.