

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSIONS AND SUMMARY

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The Pinellas Trail Impact Study entailed a literature review, property value assessment, evaluation of crime, and surveys of residents, homeowner's association officers, and local realtors specializing in areas within one-quarter mile of the Pinellas Trail. The study yielded a number of interesting conclusions. Chief among them was that trail usage is a strong indicator of a person's perception of the Pinellas Trail. Residents who have used the trail, even infrequently, are more likely to perceive its benefits than non-users. While the trail is generally seen as a community asset, the neighborhoods that are the most concerned about the Pinellas Trail are those who perceive inequities between communities in the way that the trail is constructed, maintained, and policed. The residents' survey included a number of creative suggestions that could be implemented along the existing and proposed trail segments. Serious crimes have occurred along the studied Pinellas Trail segments; however, those crimes that can be attributed directly to the trail occurred less frequently than once a month for the studied years (1993, 1995, and 1999). Because specific crime locations could not be pinpointed in St. Petersburg, a statistical analysis was performed which indicated that crimes do not occur more frequently along trail tracts. Other major study conclusions are summarized below.

Literature Review

The literature review concluded that multiuse trails have a deterrent effect on crime, a neutral or slightly positive effect on property values, and bring new money into the local economy. Residents report that multiuse trails are an asset to the communities they serve. The studies also conclude that the popularity of multiuse trails may deter crime simply due to their level of activity throughout the day. As far as property values are concerned, most surveyed property owners reported that living near the trails was better than they had anticipated and better than living near the unused railroad lines. They also reported that their proximity to the trails had not adversely affected their property values. One study also found that multiuse trails

increased tourism and brought between \$300,000 and \$600,000 of “new money” into the local economy annually depending upon the trail.

Property Values

The property value study concluded that property values follow local sales trends initially and then increase a few years later. As an example, St. Petersburg trailside and countywide home prices declined at the same rate between 1990 and 1995. However, St. Petersburg trailside home prices recovered quickly and escalated faster than countywide or for any other trail segment by 1998. For all trail segments, the median sale prices adjacent to the trail are escalating faster than countywide and the rate of increase is most significant in St. Petersburg, Seminole, and Palm Harbor. The median price of trailside homes in St. Petersburg and Seminole is higher than citywide prices. These results indicate that, rather than negatively impacting property values of adjacent homes, the Pinellas Trail may in fact contribute to increasing adjacent property values.

Crime Statistics

A comprehensive analysis of Pinellas County, St. Petersburg citywide, and St. Petersburg trail tract sample dataset crime statistics concluded that the presence of the Pinellas Trail does not contribute to an increase in crime in adjacent areas. Detailed analysis of St. Petersburg data sample using descriptive statistical analysis determined that crime rates for “trail tracts” were not statistically significant or different from citywide crime tracts. Generally, it was concluded that peaks in crime rates along the trail seemed to be related to the character of the surrounding area rather than to the existence of the Pinellas Trail itself. For example, there was a peak in shoplifting crimes in the St. Petersburg trail tracts near the Tyrone Square Mall as well as other trail tracts traversing retail commercial areas. Upon further examination, the study team determined that there were similar shoplifting crime peaks occurring in non-trail tracts throughout the City when they were near or abutting non-residential areas. External factors seem to be better indicators of crime rates than the presence of the trail.

Residents Survey

There are several important findings from the residents survey. Residents are concerned about crime, privacy, and noise, whereas the homeowners association officers ranked crime, loitering, and landscaping most important among trail-related concerns. Roughly two-thirds of the surveyed residents are using the trail to exercise at least once a week. Residents are exercising more than they did before the trail opened. While the trail-related concerns should not be overlooked, there is a significant community benefit associated with such an amenity used by 66 percent of surveyed residents at least once a week.

The most negative perceptions of the trail are held by infrequent trail users as well as the small number of residents who have never used the trail. Infrequent users were primarily concerned about the trail's adverse impact on crime, privacy, and noise. As a group, they still rated the trail as having a positive impact on property values, accessibility, and neighborhood acquaintances. Daily users had the highest composite rating of the trail; however, they were still marginally concerned about crime and privacy. Clearly, the single strongest indicator of trail perceptions is trail usage and, because of the high use of the trail, the overall perception of the trail is positive.

Homeowners Association Telephone Survey

The study also included a telephone survey of homeowners association (HOA) officers designed to identify how the Pinellas Trail impacts neighborhood quality-of-life. The survey was too small to justify quantitative results; however, the survey findings do support and clarify the findings of the realtors and residents surveys. More than a third of the HOA officers said that their boards had not discussed the Pinellas Trail or trail concerns. They ranked crime, loitering, and landscaping most important among trail-related concerns. The most notable was concerning the lack of attractive landscaping, consistent provision of amenities, amount of buffering and the quality of landscape maintenance along certain portions of retail. HOA officers are most disconcerted by perceived inequities and disparities in trail quality between communities.

Eighty-seven percent of HOA Officers said that they used the Pinellas Trail for recreation and exercise rather than for commuting, shopping, and visiting friends. These trends are similar to the residents' survey. Fifty percent of the HOA respondents said that the Pinellas Trail had increased property values "somewhat" while 25 percent were "unsure" and the remainder said that it had had "no impact" on property values. Notably, no respondent stated that property values had declined. These responses are consistent with the realtors and residents survey and with actual sales data findings.

Some trail opponents asserted that trailside homes were less marketable than other homes. However, a telephone survey of local realtors in conjunction with the home value study found that the presence of the trail increased homebuyer interest and contributed at least slightly to increased home sales. The realtors emphasized that lifestyle, more than household demographics, was the best indicator of trail approval and this finding was confirmed by the residents' survey.

More than 80 percent of the realtors concluded that the trail is either "somewhat" or "very" important to singles, married couples without children, and families with children. Conversely, the trail was not considered to be as important to retired homebuyers and families with older children. These perceptions are consistent with the residents' survey, which indicates that all groups frequently use the trail, but of the few who do not use the trail, many are either parents of older children or retirees.

Residents, realtors, and HOA officers agreed that the trail was more popular in Seminole, Palm Harbor, and Dunedin than in St. Petersburg. The HOA Officers seemed to think that older segments of the trail did not have as many amenities and were not as attractively landscaped or maintained as the segments further north. All three sets of respondents said that the trail could be improved by adding landscaping along selected segments. Although families with young children, newer residents, and Dunedin residents were more likely to use the trail, it is clear that geography, tenure, employment, and family status are not the best indicators of trail perceptions.