

INVESTING IN NORTHFIELD'S OUTDOORS

AN OUTDOOR RECREATION ECONOMIC IMPACT STUDY, COMMUNITY STORY, AND VOREC IMPACT REPORT

OVERVIEW

In 2022, the Town of Northfield was awarded \$123k from the Vermont Outdoor Recreation Economic Collaborative (VOREC) to invest in their community outdoor recreation infrastructure and support their goal of making outdoor recreation more welcoming and inclusive. This funding came after related investments from Central Vermont Regional Planning and the Vermont Better Connections program, which helped the community document their goals of building an improved outdoor recreation experience for the community. The 2022 VOREC grant funded trail restoration, invasive species removal, a wayfinding masterplan, trailhead kiosk installation, parking space designation, and outdoor gear lending through the public library. The trail restoration projects were complete by 2022, but damaged again in the summer flooding of 2023. Wayfinding design was complete by 2023, and installations are anticipated by fall 2024.

This report informs the public and the VOREC about the positive economic, health, and quality of life impacts felt by recent investments in Northfield's trail system and public lands. Through business owner interviews, business customer and trail user intercept surveys, and trail count data, this report tells a quantifiable story about the value of Northfield's trails, parks, and open lands, and their interrelatedness to local economic development. An accompanying slide deck is provided with the report to help the Town of Northfield distribute the results of the data collection.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Each of these categories is explored in depth in this report, but these lists summarize the key findings of this study. The main takeaway - users love Northfield's Trails!

"The trails at Paine Mountain are a wonderful asset and a big reason I chose to live here. The Town should invest in these resources as much as possible." Trail Survey Respondent

Drawing Connections Between Local Businesses and Recreation:

- Local residents shop local
- Outdoor recreation is important to locals
- Recreation and business success go hand in hand

Examining Trail User Experience:

- Northfield trails are a regional hub for recreation
- Trails are social and shared among locals
- The trails are used in all seasons
- Shaw outdoor center is a primary access point
- Trail users support local business

Looking at Trail Count Data

- There is a steady, but variable number of trail users each month
- There is no obvious "weekend tourism" pattern
- Data points to growth in trail use
- Trail counts need continued collection to provide additional insights

Hearing public suggestions for improvement

- Signage and maps
- Parking, safety, and accessibility
- Trail maintenance
- Trail development

DRAWING CONNECTIONS BETWEEN LOCAL BUSINESS AND RECREATION

A. LOCAL BUSINESS CUSTOMER SURVEY

Local residents shop local

A simple local business customer survey was used to estimate how many local patrons know about Northfield’s outdoor recreation. The survey, which achieved a 55% completion rate with 49 responses, predominantly gathered data from customers of the Northfield Farmer’s Market in July 2024. This sample represents a more general segment of the population, as opposed to the hikers, bikers, and naturalists surveyed on the trail.

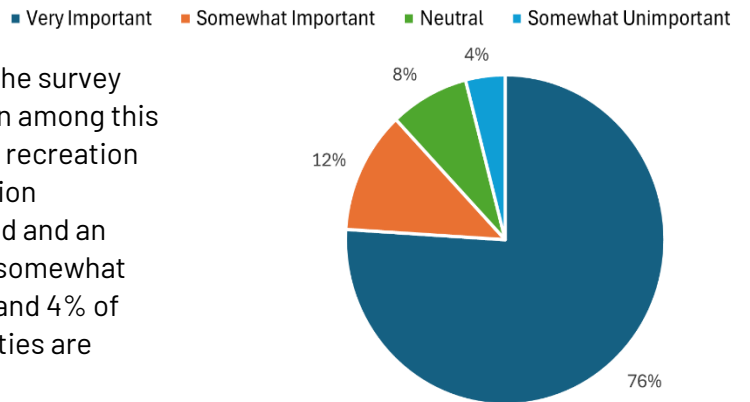
With 68% of respondents identifying as Northfield residents and 32% of respondents as visitors, Northfield attracts many regional customers. Of these visitors, 16% live within 30 minutes of Northfield, and 16% live over 30 minutes from Northfield, with only three respondents visiting from outside Vermont.

An overwhelming 96% of respondents indicated they support local businesses on a frequent basis (multiple times a month or more), suggesting a robust engagement with local businesses and the Northfield Farmer’s Market. In addition, 20% of respondents reported visiting multiple businesses during their trip to Northfield that day. This data supports the previous statement that customers are committed to engaging with local businesses.

Outdoor recreation is important to locals

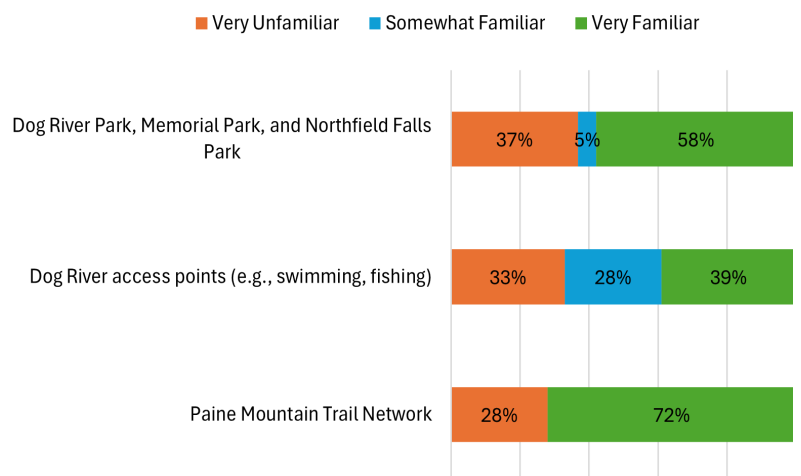
While the extent to which local customers recreate in Northfield is unclear based on the data, the survey highlights a significant interest in outdoor recreation among this group. When asked to what extent they find outdoor recreation important to have in Northfield, 76% believe recreation opportunities are very important to have in Northfield and an additional 12% believe recreation opportunities are somewhat important. Of survey respondents, 8% were neutral and 4% of respondents said that outdoor recreation opportunities are somewhat unimportant to have in Northfield.

Perceived Importance of Outdoor Recreation in Northfield



However, while the majority of respondents believe outdoor recreation opportunities are important to have in Northfield, many respondents were not aware of some of Northfield's recreation opportunities. 37% of respondents were very unfamiliar with Dog River Park, Memorial Park, and Northfield Falls Park; 33% were unfamiliar with Dog River access points; and 28% were unfamiliar with the Paine Mountain Trail Network. This data indicates a potential gap between the perceived value of outdoor recreation and the actual engagement or awareness of these opportunities among typical locals living in and around Northfield.

Level of Familiarity with Northfield Recreation Resources



Recreation and business success go hand in hand

Most notably, when asked if outdoor recreation supports local business in and around Northfield, 68% of respondents said “yes.” This suggests that local patrons, residents, and businesses notice a relationship between outdoor recreation and local business within Northfield.

B. LOCAL BUSINESS INTERVIEWS

The Town of Northfield interviewed key business owners in the community to gauge perspectives on the influence of outdoor recreation. Three short-form interviews took place, each highlighting that the quality of outdoor recreation opportunities in Northfield is important to local business success. Summaries of each interview are below.

Margaret Holland Inn

The Margaret Holland Inn began operations in Northfield in October 2023. During the interview, the inn acknowledged the importance of outdoor recreation for its success. However, although the inn promotes local outdoor activities to its customers, it does not directly engage in outdoor recreation-related services or sponsor related events. Being new to the area, the interviewee was uncertain about how the town could further support outdoor recreation to benefit the local economy. The inn noted that the business climate in Northfield is perceived as old-fashioned and resistant to change. To support the inn, the interviewee suggests that an official town Facebook page could help by promoting local businesses, events, and activities without local biases.

Falls General Store

Falls General Store, operating in Northfield for 10 years, offers a range of services including a country store, food to go, and a small dining area. While outdoor recreation in Northfield helps attract customers to the store, it does not significantly impact staff attraction or retention. The store promotes outdoor recreation by providing picnic tables for customers to enjoy their purchases. The interviewee did not describe any additional ways the town could support outdoor recreation or their business. The store does not sponsor recreation-related events or sell outdoor gear. Describing the local business climate as moderate to slow, the interviewee acknowledges the town's efforts and appreciates the support provided during challenging times.

Carrier Roasting Co.

Carrier Roasting Co., operating in Northfield since 2015, offers coffee, baked goods, and café space. The interviewee noted that the quality of outdoor recreation in Northfield is crucial for the business, as it attracts visitors who become customers. While outdoor recreation indirectly helps in attracting and retaining staff by enhancing the town's appeal, it is not perceived as a direct factor. The business actively promotes outdoor recreation by sponsoring and promoting various local events and supporting teams and groups, including events like Vermont Overland, The Ranger, and The Alleycat. However, the interviewee suggests that the town could improve marketing and organization of outdoor events to boost local visitation. The interviewee describes the business climate in Northfield as relatively strong and believes that increased proactive marketing and event hosting in Northfield, along with involving local businesses in the marketing process, could further support their bottom line.

EXAMINING TRAIL USER EXPERIENCE

TRAIL USER INTERCEPT SURVEY

A simple intercept survey was used to understand the experiences, comfort levels, and demographics of trail users on the Northfield trail system. Flyers with QR codes were posted along the trail system encouraging trail users to complete an online survey. The survey had 128 responses with a 67% completion rate. This high response rate with an optional intercept survey indicates strong community involvement and interest in the Northfield Trail System.

Northfield trails are a regional hub for recreation

Based on the survey response data, several key insights emerge. About 23% of respondents are from Northfield, and a substantial 33% live within 15 minutes of the trail system, with another 32% residing within 15-30 minutes. This data indicates many residents from nearby towns are looking to Northfield for their recreation. Notably, these users are mostly repeat users with only 4% of visitors reporting that this was their first visit to the trail system.

The trails are social and shared among locals

Most visitors tend to hike in groups, with 64% of survey respondents reporting that they were visiting in groups of two or more people. This data indicates that users view the Northfield trails as a shared space and are often participating in socially oriented activities.

Most users discover the Northfield trails through family, friends, or neighbors (68%). Other sources of information include trail apps (17%), the Town of Northfield (13%), and local businesses (4%). Of the 19% of respondents who replied "other," multiple respondents noted that they have lived in town for many years, used the trails since they were young, or have a connection to Norwich University from which they learned about the trails.

The trails are used in all seasons

The trail system sees consistent use throughout the year, with 85% of visitors frequenting the trails several times a month with 38% of those respondents visiting several times a week. Winter usage is slightly lower, but still strong, with 57% of users visiting several times a month.

While hiking stands out as the most popular activity across all seasons, a full list of reported activities for each season in order of popularity can be seen below.

Summer activities:

1. Hiking
2. Mountain biking
3. Running
4. Birdwatching
5. Dog walking
6. Gravel biking
7. Looking at Plants

Winter activities:

1. Hiking
2. Backcountry skiing/snowboarding
3. Snowshoeing
4. Cross-country skiing
5. Dog walking
6. Fat biking
7. Sledding

Shaw Outdoor Center is a primary access point

When it comes to accessing the trail, over half of trail users start at the Shaw Outdoor Center. This data implies that the Shaw Outdoor Center is a key location to address any future access efforts, including disabled access, wayfinding, and signage.

However, respondents reported additional trail access points such as:

- Prospect Street
- Lybrand Trail
- Kingston Road
- Forest Road

Trail users support local business

Supporting the findings of the business customer intercept survey and the business interviews, the trail user intercept survey found that users frequently engage with local businesses during their visits. A significant 81% of trail users stop for food or drink in Northfield, 62% visit a gas station, and 42% check out other retail shops within town.

LOOKING AT TRAIL COUNT DATA

The Town of Northfield has a set of TRAFx infrared trail counters that were placed on various trails in the Northfield trail system from June 13, 2023, to August 18, 2023, and from May 30, 2024, to August 18, 2024. These counters cannot distinguish between trail user types but can provide estimates of trail use patterns in a given location.

While TRAFx can provide very reliable estimates of trail use patterns, sensor placement can produce inaccuracies in the data, including inflated values due to wind moving vegetation and other environmental factors. In addition, it is important to note that data reflects all passes, which can count an individual climbing and descending the same trail.

Based on these conditions, the 2023 trail count data for Byam Hill, Slate Ave, and the Red Trail appears reliable. However, it is important to account for the effects of the July 2023 flooding when interpreting the data from that month. In 2024, trail counts were only conducted for Byam Hill and the Red Trail. Since data was collected for 12 more days in June 2024 than 2023, and August data shows significant, unexplained differences in values, only July data for the Red Trail should be used to draw any monthly use comparisons. In addition, while the 2023 Byam Hill data is trustworthy, the 2024 counts for Byam Hill are unusually and unexplainably high and should not be used for comparison.

Trail Count Data

	May	June	July	August	Totals
Red Trail 2023		748	1,426	1,787	3,961
Red Trail 2024	135	2,660	2,095	123*	5,013
Byam Hill 2023		171	348	273	792
Byam Hill 2024	1,788*	15,882*	33,023*	757*	51,450*
Slate Ave 2023		240	224	109	573

* Denotes data discrepancies

There is a steady but variable number of trail users

Even when accounting for data collection discrepancies, the data indicates that each trail sees some level of usership each day of the week throughout each month. 2023 data can provide some reliable estimates of trail usership on each of the recorded trails. The Red Trail appears to be the most popular with a count of 3,961 over the data collection period. Byam Hill is the second most popular with 792 recorded counts over the data collection period. While the lowest overall observed count, Slate Ave also sees a significant user base of 537 users in the 2023 data collection period. The daily average for these three trails in 2023 over the 3-month observation period is shown below in comparison to two other local trails - the Montpelier Recreation Path and the Cady Hill Forest Trail in Stowe. The comparative data, however, is with paved multi-use paths, that are more high-use paths than any trail on Paine Mountain. For a more direct comparison, data from Strava Metro was used to compare mountain bike usage on specific trails in Northfield, Montpelier, and Stowe during July 2024. This data was provided courtesy of the Montpelier Area Mountain Bike Association 501c3. Since this data only shows trips from Strava users who uploaded rides, the numbers are not reflective of total trail count; however, the data offers a realistic proportional comparison between the different trails. It should also be noted that data was taken from a specific segment of a trail, and does not represent ridership along the entirety of that trail.

Average Daily Use Comparisons

	Average Daily Use
Red Trail 2023	59
Byam Hill 2023	12
Slate Ave	9
Comparison to Other Trails	
Montpelier Recreation Path	310
Cady Hill Forest Trail (Stowe)	623

Strava Metro Trail Comparison (July 2024)

	Total Strava Trail use in July 2024
Northfield Orange/Advanced Use	120
Montpelier Sapsucker Trail	235
Stowe Flo-rence	6120

Despite data collection discrepancies, the 2024 data seems to support the more reliable 2023 subtotal data for peak trail use times. Peak trail use time is around 2:00pm on the Red Trail between both years, around 2:30pm and 7:00 pm on Byam Hill, and multiple peaks throughout the day on Slate Ave (only recorded in 2023).

There is no obvious "weekend tourism" pattern

As stated above, the data indicates that each trail sees some level of usership each day of the week throughout each month. While there are some weekends every month that have higher counts than during the week, this is not consistent throughout the different months. This use pattern indicates that this is a local trail system. Often, high weekend usage can indicate many visitors coming from further away when they have time on the weekends. Consistent usage throughout the day and week implies that locals are accessing their nearby trails.

Data points to growth in trail use

In comparing user count on the Red Trail between July 2023 and July 2024, there is an increase of over 660 users from 2023 to 2024, accounting for a 40% increase in trail use over the one-year period. While part of

this increase may be due to the impacts of flooding in July 2023, the June 2024 value seems to follow a similar growth trend when accounting for the difference in days of data collection between the two years.

Trail counts need continued collection to provide additional insights

Despite the data collection inconsistencies, trail counting is an important way to understand potential trail use and impact. The Town of Northfield is encouraged to continue using trail counters in the following years to provide more reliable estimates and comparisons.

Permanent locations of TRAFx should be considered to help reduce data fluctuations and inconsistencies. Areas facing towards a building or large rock can help reduce infrared errors that might occur with moving vegetation.

PUBLIC INPUT – WHAT COULD BE BETTER?

While the business customer and trail user surveys both demonstrate a profound amount of support and love for the existing Northfield trail system, many survey respondents offered suggestions for improvement based on their experiences. These suggestions mainly revolved around Improved infrastructure, better management practices, and enhanced safety and accessibility for trail users.

Signage and Maps

Many responses emphasize the need for improved signage and trail maps. Suggestions include better trailhead maps, "you are here" signs, clearer directional signs, and improved marking of trails and access points.

Parking, Safety, and Accessibility

Respondents frequently mention issues with parking, highlighting the need for more parking areas, especially close to trailheads. There is also a focus on making trails more accessible for people with limited mobility, suggesting parking improvements at key locations like Cheney Field.

Issues related to trail safety are mentioned, including the need for designated uphill routes for skiing and the importance of controlling dogs on trails to prevent incidents

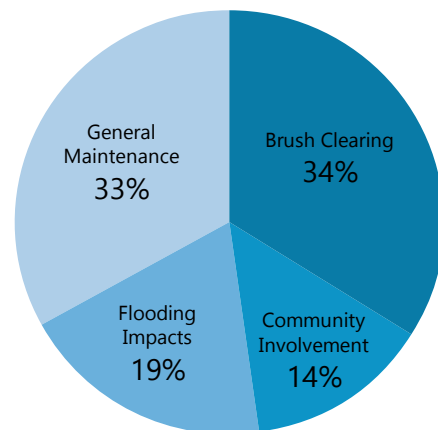
Trail Maintenance

There are numerous calls for regular trail maintenance, including clearing overgrowth, repairing damaged trails, managing drainage, and addressing erosion issues. Specific suggestions include maintaining bike trails, refreshing downhill trails, and reinforcing water bars.

Trail Development

Several comments advocate for expanding the trail system, particularly for mountain biking. This includes adding more trails, creating connections to other networks, and including features like bike jumps and bring back the old pump track.

Specific Trail Maintenance Suggestions



SUPPORTING ONGOING INVESTMENT IN NORTHFIELD'S OUTDOORS

The results from the business customer intercept survey, business interviews, trail user intercept survey, and the trail count data all suggest that not only are local community members utilizing this recreation resource, but they are engaged, interested, and supportive of its continued development.

Since this data has been collected, exciting progress has already been made to address some areas of concern and improve the trail system.

WHAT'S ALREADY BEEN DONE?

- Selectboard approved \$40k to put towards trail maintenance
- TFSC has scheduled additional trail workshop days for increased community involvement
- New signage, including kiosks and maps, are coming in Fall 2024
- Existing examples of businesses connecting with local outdoor recreation opportunities:
 - o Carrier Roasting Co. sponsoring events like Vermont Overland, The Ranger, and The Alleycat
 - o Weekly run groups starting from Good Measure Brewery

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

- Keep collecting trail count data for improved visitation numbers
 - Continue conversations with local businesses to understand their needs
 - Explore additional events that can foster connections between local business and recreation users.
 - Support Northfield's role as a local recreation hub in Central Vermont
 - Address trail improvement suggestions
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LINKS TO FULL DATA REPORTS

- A. [CUSTOMER SURVEYS](#)
 - B. [BUSINESS INTERVIEWS](#)
 - C. [TRAIL USER INTERCEPT SURVEY](#)
 - D. [TRAIL COUNT DATA 2023](#)
 - E. [TRAIL COUNT DATA 2024](#)
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