

EAU CLAIRE:

The Economic Significance of the City's Paved Trails and Public Art



Executive Summary

As the largest city in western Wisconsin, Eau Claire focuses on building quality of life for its 70,000 residents and visitors. The city of Eau Claire has invested in over 17 miles of unpaved recreational trails and 57 miles of paved trails that wind throughout the city. The trail network spurs spending at local businesses, provides access to waterways and public art and contributes to the area's broad outdoor recreation appeal that attracts new residents. To further enhance quality of life, the local visitors bureau, Visit Eau Claire, has installed free outdoor public art along the trails, in the downtown area and beyond, bringing vibrancy to the city.

These quality-of-life investments create significant impacts. Users of paved city trails support \$4.1 million in local business activity through their spending at restaurants, coffee shops and other downtown businesses. The results also found that the trail network appeals to a wide age demographic and encourages most trail users to engage with other amenities such as area parks. Additionally, from a summer 2024 survey of residents and trail users, 29% of respondents who moved to Eau Claire from more than 40 miles away cited outdoor recreation as a key factor in their decision.

Trails and art not only support local businesses but also strengthen the community by providing accessible, year-round recreational opportunities that enhance residents' quality of life and attract new visitors and residents to the city.

Studying how Eau Claire's trails are used illuminates the benefits of investing in outdoor recreation and public art. It also points to ways to continue fueling additional outdoor recreation infrastructure while maintaining existing high-quality opportunities and assets for residents.

Eau Claire trails generate over \$4.12 million for the area's economy



Eau Claire Trails

Eau Claire is a city of clear water, bridges and bike trails. Eau Claire welcomes all kinds of outdoor enthusiasts to experience the city’s diverse outdoor experiences, including the 70-plus miles of recreational trails that connect scenic nature destinations to downtown life and everything in between. From the everyday paved city trails to exhilarating mountain biking trails and even serene cross-country ski routes, Eau Claire caters to all kinds of trail users all year round.

Trails are a key part of Eau Claire’s identity, and their economic impact has drawn attention from both the city of Eau Claire and Visit Eau Claire. By analyzing surveys of visitors and residents conducted in the summer of 2024, as well as trail counter data, they calculated average spending by residents and visitors on trail days, revealing the significant role trails play in the local economy. This data not only provides valuable insights to area businesses on the value of trails, but it helps bridge the gap in how stakeholders think about the relationship between outdoor recreation and economic development.



A Gateway to Businesses

The Eau Claire trail system is well-used and loved by locals. Trail counters registered over 232,000 users in 2024, and trail user and visitor surveys indicated 99% of respondents lived within 40 miles of the city. The highest percentage of users are between the ages of 36 and 55 (42%), followed by those over 55 (32%) and younger adults aged 21-35 (24%). Trail use is relatively balanced between genders, with 52% female and 44% male participants. Most respondents have been Eau Claire residents for 10 or more years (57%), reflecting a long-term community engagement with the trails.

Users typically visit the trails in small groups or alone, spending 1-2 hours per visit, with walking/hiking (93%) and biking (70%) being the most popular activities. The trails also serve as gateways to other local attractions, with 84% of users also visiting area parks, and over half enjoying wineries, festivals, kayaking and wildlife viewing. Among the many activities set up along trails are the Eau Claire Sculpture Tour and ColorBlock mural program, with 37% of respondents reporting intentionally seeking out Eau Claire’s free public art by way of trails. Trail users often spend money at local businesses, with 56% visiting restaurants, 55% frequenting coffee shops and 35% visiting downtown businesses on trail days.

Outdoor recreation is an essential part of life in Eau Claire, driving not only individual wellness but also supporting the local economy through frequent trail-related spending.

About Trail Users



Respondents were:

Female 52%
Male 44%

Top Trails Visited

Paved City Trails . . . 90%
Loves Creek 60%
Putnam Trail 53%

Trail Use Frequency

71% use the trail daily or weekly
Daily 26%
Weekly 44%

73% spent 1-2 hours for each trail visit

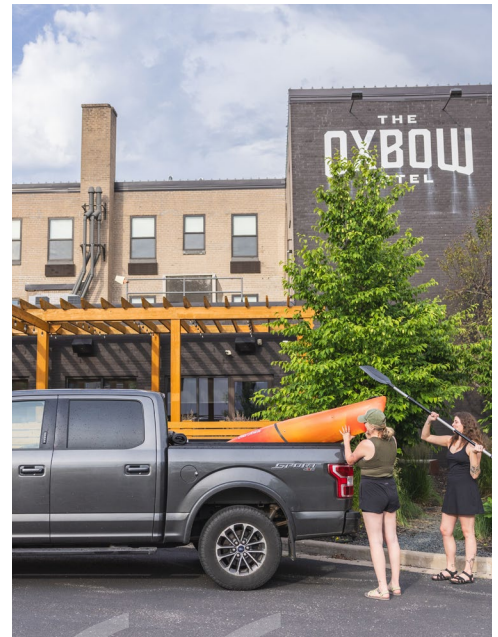
37% use the trails to view Eau Claire’s free public art, including the Eau Claire Sculpture Tour and ColorBlock mural program

2024 Visit Eau Claire Trail User and Visitor Surveys

An Economic Driver

The Eau Claire paved trail system plays a significant role in the local economy, attracting some 232,963 users from September 2023 through August 2024. Money spent by trail users supported an impressive \$4.1 million in local economic activity. Their spending directly benefits local businesses such as restaurants, coffee shops, gas stations and retail stores. For example, 56% of trail users report dining out on trail days, while over half stop at coffee shops and gas stations. Over 66% of trail users report spending between \$1 and \$25 on each trail day, with 31% spending between \$11 and \$25.

In addition to direct spending, the trail system supports jobs in hospitality, retail and outdoor recreation services. The city's paved trail system drives spending that supports 56 local jobs and over \$1.9 million in labor income. As trail users also engage in nearby activities like visiting parks, attending festivals and exploring wineries, their spending ripples throughout the community, enhancing revenue for a variety of businesses. This interconnected flow of money from outdoor recreation demonstrates the trails' broader economic impact, supporting both small businesses and the city's larger economic health.



Key Community Benefits

The Eau Claire trail system offers significant benefits beyond its economic impact. First, it contributes to the health and well-being of residents by promoting regular physical activity. With 71% of respondents reporting they use the trails weekly or daily, and 93% using them for walking or hiking, the trails encourage a healthier, more active community. Numerous studies have shown that regular outdoor exercise reduces the risk of chronic diseases and improves mental health.

Environmentally, the trails provide access to natural spaces while reducing vehicle traffic as more residents opt to walk or bike. This helps reduce emissions and fosters a connection to nature, promoting stewardship of local ecosystems.

Quality of life is another key benefit. Respondents emphasized the importance of outdoor recreation, with 94% stating it is moderately to extremely important to them. Trails also enhance the city's cultural appeal, with 53% of trail users reporting free public art is moderately to extremely important to them, integrating outdoor recreation with art and culture. Together, these benefits make the Eau Claire trail system a vital community asset, improving health, the environment and overall satisfaction of residents.

"We see customers stopping into our retail store every day from the nearby trail. The trails are a vital part of the culture of our downtown. They're not only great for the people using them, but even just seeing trail users and folks on bikes, scooters or even just running - it all has a recreational 'relaxation' effect on our shoppers that helps create economic impact in a way many don't often consider. Trails benefit the economics of the businesses near them on many levels."

Nick Meyer, owner of Volume One, The Local Store, Eau Claire E-Bike and E-Scooter Rental, and co-owner of The Oxbow Hotel

Economic Significance



232,963
annual
trail users



\$4.1 million
in economic
activity



56 jobs
supported



\$1.9 million
in labor income
supported

A Vision for the Future

Based on community feedback, the Eau Claire trail system is poised for several improvements. Priorities identified include enhanced maintenance like resurfacing, improved snow removal during winter and increased safety measures such as more lighting and better enforcement of leash laws. Improved signage and wayfinding were also highlighted to improve trail navigation. Better connections between neighborhoods and business districts could create more opportunities for outdoor recreation.

With the Chippewa River State Trail weaving through the heart of Eau Claire, expanding the 78-mile Chippewa Valley State Trail network to link nearby municipalities would significantly enhance regional connectivity and accessibility. Recommendations to add trails that cater to a variety of users, from casual walkers to advanced bikers and hikers, as well as incorporating inclusive trail designs would ensure accessibility for everyone.

Trails and assets, such as public art installations and trail-side amenities, attract more visitors, encourage longer stays and support local businesses like bike rentals, cafes and outdoor gear shops. Investments in additional developments would foster community pride and healthier lifestyles and stimulate economic growth by channeling spending into the local economy and increasing tourism revenue.



To expand this report's findings, future investments in trail counters across the city and county will provide comprehensive data on trail usage for various trail systems. A future survey will target visitors to ensure a broader perspective on their significant contribution. By capturing a wider range of outdoor activities and a clearer picture of local versus nonlocal users, city leaders can better understand the overall economic impact of the Eau Claire area's various trail systems.

Commitment to these improvements involves partnerships between local government, Visit Eau Claire and businesses to ensure the trails remain a vibrant, accessible and well-maintained resource that enhances the quality of life and economic development in Eau Claire.

Methodology & Data Sources

This analysis employed results from two online surveys which collected data from local residents and out-of-town visitors. A trail user survey and a separate outdoor recreation survey were open from mid-June through September 2024. The trail user survey was posted as QR code flyers at trail heads throughout the city and in nearby communities, and the outdoor recreation survey was administered through various methods including social media, local outdoor recreation user group organizations, Visit Eau Claire's partner newsletter and as QR code flyers at several downtown businesses. Automatic counters on paved city trails provided data used to estimate the average number of trail users each month and annually.

The economic contributions of trail user spending to the local economy were estimated using a sales area multiplier calculated using the formula provided by Wen-Huei Chen in "Variations in multipliers and related economic ratios for recreation and tourism impact analysis" (Michigan State University, 2001) and applying a conservative capture rate of 70% to reflect the proportion of visitor spending that is retained in the local economy.

Other impacts (jobs and labor income) were estimated using ratios between visitor spending and local jobs and visitor spending and labor income reported by Travel Wisconsin for the economic impact of tourism in Eau Claire County in 2023.



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