

CHEESE COUNTRY TRAILS:

The Economic and Community Impact for Lafayette County



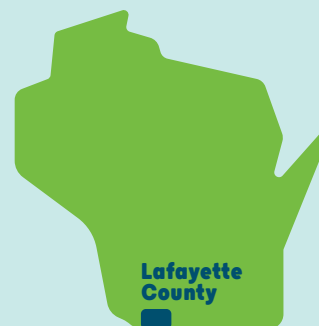
Executive Summary

The Cheese Country Trails in Lafayette County are a critical asset, offering recreational opportunities and significant economic benefits. This trail system is vital in attracting visitors, boosting local tourism and supporting a wide range of businesses.

Understanding visitor usage patterns and spending habits is crucial for the sustained success of the trail system and for implementing the county's broader economic development goals. By studying the economic impact of trails, the county can gain insights into how visitors engage with the trails, what activities they prefer and their economic contributions, while also offering information to assist with strategic planning efforts to maintain the long-term viability of the trails.

Preliminary findings indicate that visitor spending on activities such as dining, lodging and trail-related services directly supports local businesses and generates tax revenue. Understanding these spending patterns is essential to estimating the trails' economic impact on the community and helping guide future investments and improvements. By understanding the economic impact of the Cheese Country Trails, Lafayette County can ensure the continued success of the trails and their benefits for residents and visitors alike.

**The Cheese
Country Trails
bring in more
than \$7.2 million
to Lafayette
County**



The Cheese Country Trails

The Cheese Country Trails in rural southwestern Lafayette County are a multi-use recreational trail system primarily known for its popularity with ATV/UTV riders and snowmobilers. Spanning over 47 miles, this expansive trail network weaves through scenic landscapes, connecting several small towns in Lafayette, Green and Iowa counties, providing both residents and visitors with access to year-round outdoor adventures.

Originally developed from a converted railroad corridor, the Cheese Country Trails have grown into a vital recreational asset, drawing tens of thousands of visitors annually. The trail network supports local tourism and plays an essential role in boosting the county's economy by generating income for businesses such as restaurants, gas stations and lodging providers.

This study was supported by several key partners, including the Tri-County Trails Commission, local government bodies and various ATV and snowmobile clubs that help maintain the trails and ensure they remain safe and accessible. With their combined efforts, these stakeholders ensure the Cheese Country Trails serve as a vital resource for outdoor recreation and economic development in the region.



Attracting Visitors

The Cheese Country Trails attract a diverse group of outdoor enthusiasts, with the average trail rider being 53 years old. Survey data indicates that 42% of trail users hold a secondary degree, and the majority (79%) are non-local visitors traveling from outside Lafayette County to experience the trail system. Visitors typically fall within an annual household income range of \$75,000 to \$150,000, suggesting that many trail users are well-established professionals or retirees.

Visitors typically discover the trail through word of mouth from family and friends, social media, online searches and ATV/snowmobile clubs. Most visitors come in small (2-4) to medium-sized (5-7) groups, often riding with friends, family or recreational groups.

Riders primarily visit the trail to explore its unique outdoor recreation opportunities – 70% of visitors come specifically to ride the Cheese Country Trails or other trails in the region. While enjoying the trails, they often participate in additional activities such as dining at local restaurants and bars, attending nearby festivals or events and shopping at area businesses. This combination of trail use and community engagement demonstrates the trails' role in promoting both recreation and local economic activity.

About Trail Users



79,800 users

(Memorial Day -
Labor Day 2024)

79%
non-local
visitors

**70% came to
ride the Cheese
Country Trails
or other trails in
the region**

**58% are between
45 and 64 years old**

**42% have
a secondary
degree**

2024 Cheese Country Trails User Survey

Supporting the Local Economy

The Cheese Country Trails have a substantial economic impact on the Lafayette County region. During the summer of 2024, the trails attracted an estimated 63,000 non-local users whose spending supported more than \$7.2 million in local economic activity and 106 local jobs. All told, 79,800 local and non-local trail users spent \$11.5 million at Lafayette County businesses during the peak season, Memorial Day through Labor Day, in 2024.

Visitor spending flows through the community, benefiting a variety of local businesses. Nearly a third of all visitor dollars were spent to purchase food and drink at local restaurants and bars, and additional spending for lodging, shopping or entertainment support other local businesses, too. These establishments see a marked increase in revenue during peak trail riding seasons.

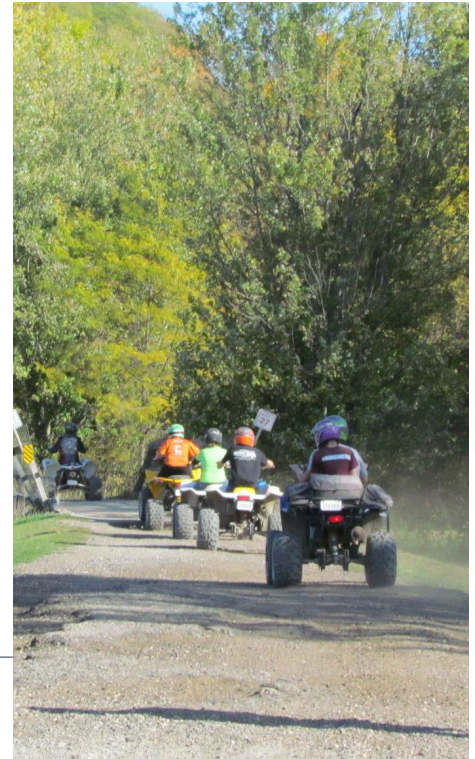
The trails' economic ripple effect extends beyond direct spending, fostering job creation in hospitality, retail and trail maintenance areas. The Cheese Country Trails are a vital driver of tourism and economic development, ensuring a continued flow of revenue and job support for the community.

Serving the Community

Beyond their economic contributions, the Cheese Country Trails offer significant health, environmental and quality-of-life benefits for Lafayette County. The trail system promotes outdoor recreation, enhancing residents' and visitors' physical and mental well-being. Activities like ATV/UTV riding, snowmobiling and hiking encourage an active lifestyle, reducing stress and improving cardiovascular health.

The trails also play a role in environmental conservation by repurposing a former railroad corridor into a sustainable recreational asset. By providing a designated space for motorized and non-motorized outdoor activities, the trails help preserve surrounding natural areas and reduce the environmental strain on other parts of the county.

The Cheese Country Trails foster a sense of community and connection. They draw visitors and residents to participate in outdoor activities, creating a shared space for recreation and socialization. Studies from similar trail systems show that well-maintained trails enhance property values, attract new residents and boost local tourism. For Lafayette County, the Cheese Country Trails are more than just a recreational asset – they are a vital contributor to community well-being and environmental stewardship.



“Without the Cheese Country Trail and campground in Darlington, our summer revenue would be significantly less than it is. We are lucky enough to be placed in a great spot for both ATV traffic in the summer and snowmobile traffic in the winter. Not to mention all the great people we get to meet and converse with from all over the tri-state area.”

Cody Bredeson,
Co-owner of The Spot Tavern
in Darlington, WI

The Economic Impact of Non-local Trail Users

During Peak Season, Memorial Day to Labor Day 2024



63,000
non-local
trail users



\$7.2 million
in economic impact



106 jobs
supported

Looking Ahead

The future of the Cheese Country Trails in Lafayette County is focused on enhancing the visitor experience and ensuring the long-term sustainability of this key community asset. One of the top priorities is maintaining trail conditions, particularly grooming and maintenance, to ensure the trails are safe and enjoyable for ATV/UTV and snowmobile riders. Regular maintenance is needed to address wear and tear caused by heavy use and seasonal changes, ensuring year-round accessibility. Large infrastructure projects involving streambank protection and bridge and culvert maintenance will rely on grant funds to preserve the trail against the threat of flooding.

Upcoming projects aim to improve trail signage, enhance access points and expand parking facilities to accommodate growing visitor numbers. Additionally, the Tri-County Trail Commission plans to collaborate with ATV/UTV clubs, snowmobile clubs, local businesses and community groups to promote special events, attracting new visitors and providing more reasons to explore the trail network.

The Tri-County Trail Commission and local partners remain committed to maintaining and improving the trails through continued investments in infrastructure and fostering community engagement. By ensuring the trails remain a high-quality recreational asset, Lafayette County will continue to benefit from increased tourism and economic growth.



“Enjoyed the trails yesterday! From Belmont to Calamine to Darlington to Gratiot to Shullsburg, it was in very good shape! Thank you all for all the trail maintenance so we can enjoy the trails.”

Sandra Sampson of Cuba City, WI



Methodology & Data Sources

This analysis used data from an online trail user survey conducted in the summer of 2024, gathering input from both residents and out-of-county visitors. The survey was accessible via QR code flyers posted at trailheads and throughout nearby communities and was also distributed through social media and local outdoor recreation groups. The survey results helped estimate visitor spending and the ratio of local to out-of-county visitors. The number of trail users was estimated based on figures from Lafayette County’s 2012 Motorized Recreation in Trailside Communities¹, which were updated using data on the growth in out-of-state (66% from 2016-2023) and resident riders (35% during the same time period) in Wisconsin, combined with a 20% increase in Wisconsin ATV and UTV registrations from 2019 to 2023². Based on these data, it was determined the Cheese Country Trail 2012 summer trail user figure could be increased by 40% to estimate 2024 visitation.

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.

The number of jobs supported was estimated using the ratio of visitor spending and local jobs reported by Travel Wisconsin for the economic impact of tourism in Lafayette County in 2023.

¹ Carper C, Guth J, Kakde E, Marcouiller D, Ohlrogge P, & Wolfe L. (2013). Motorized Recreation in Trailside Communities. (Cooperative Extension Publication #G3965). Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin.

² Lee D. (March 14, 2024). The Economic Impact of the Industry and ATV UTV Riders in Wisconsin.



OutdoorRecreation.wi.gov



LafayetteCountyWi.org/Trails



LafayetteCountyWi.gov

THE HARBINGER
CONSULTANCY



HarbingerConsult.com

This report was produced by Lafayette County with support from the Wisconsin Office of Outdoor Recreation and The Harbinger Consultancy as the result of a nine-month effort guided by the Office’s pilot Do-It-Yourself Economic Impact Report program in 2024.