Omaha Recreational Trails:
Their Effect on Property Values and Public Safety

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Partial Funding Provided by:
Challenge Cost Share Grant Program
Rivers and Trails Conservation Assistance
National Park Service
(402) 221-3350

June 2000

This report may be used by anyone, but it is requested that acknowledgements are given to Dr. Greer receive as the author and that the National Park Service provided assistance.

Table of Contents

Photographs, Maps & Figures 2

Background 3

Methodology 5

Survey Results
- Trail Use 8
- Economic Impact/Property Values 10
- Public Safety 12
- Neighborhood Quality of Life 13

Conclusions 14

Discussion 15

References/Related Publications 17

Photographs, Maps, & Figures

Photograph 1 – West Papio Trail 3
Photograph 2 – Field Club Trail 14
Photograph 3 – Roberts Park along side Keystone Trail 16

Map 1 - Omaha Trail System Map 3
Map 2 – West Papio Trail 5
Map 3 – Keystone Trail 6
Map 4 – Field Club Tail 7

Figure 1 – Households With a Trail User 8
Figure 2 – Households Using Trail Daily or Weekly 8
Figure 3 – Type of Trail Use Reported 9
Figure 4 – Factors Discouraging Trail Use 9
Figure 5 – Impact of Trail on Sale of Home 10
Figure 6 – Impact of Trail on Selling Price 10
Figure 7 – Trail Impact on Home Sale – Three Trails 11
Figure 8 – Influence of Trail on Home Purchase 11
Figure 9 – Has a Trail User Ever Stolen/Vandalized Your Property? 12
Figure 10 – Changes to Property 12
Figure 11 – Trail Impact on Quality of Life 13
Figure 12 – Impact on Quality of Life – Three Trail Comparison 13

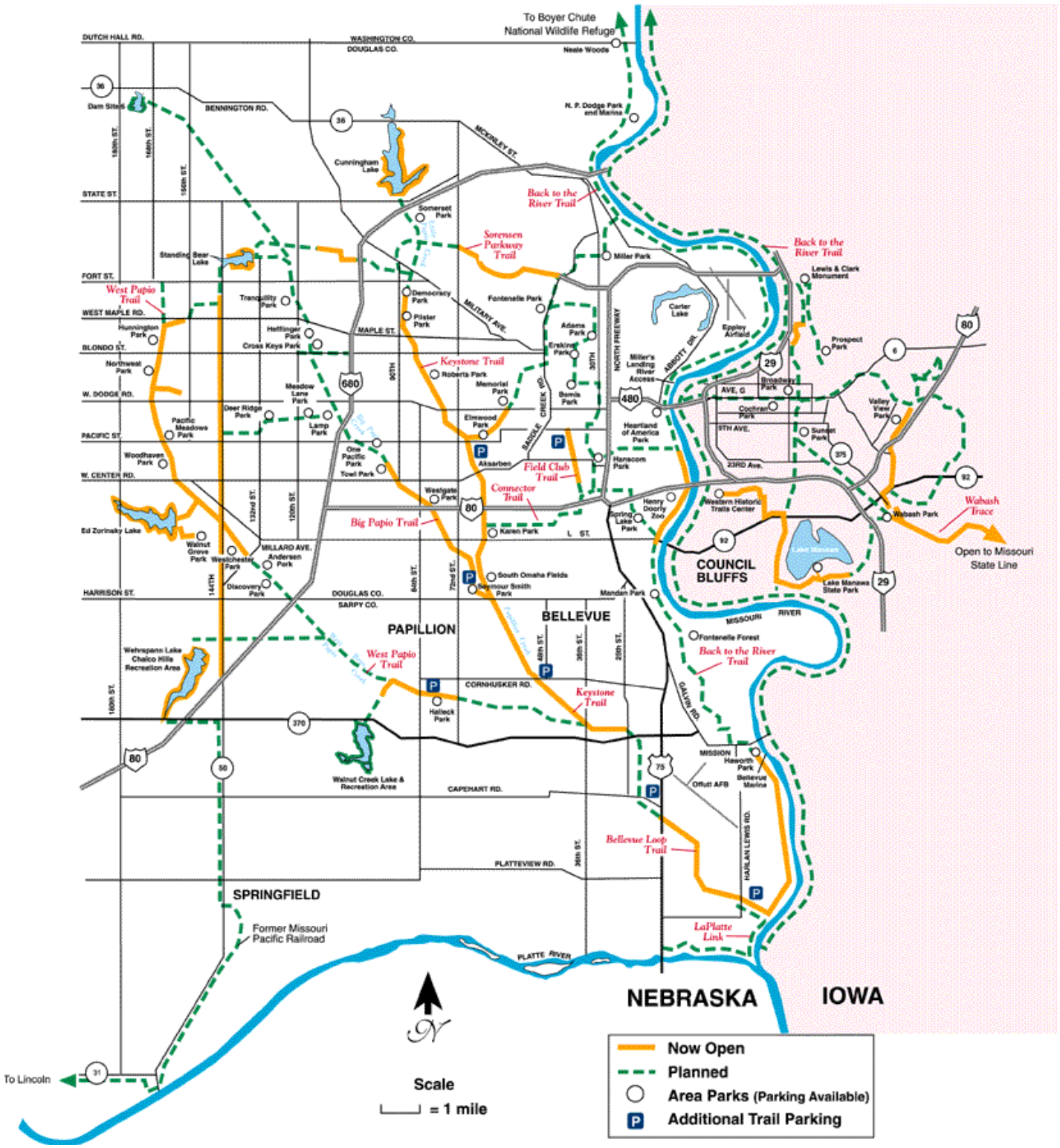
BACKGROUND

During the past decade, few metropolitan areas have developed their recreational trail systems as rapidly as Omaha, Nebraska. From a complete absence of recreational trails and greenways in early 1989, Omaha has developed a system that today contains approximately 67 miles of paved recreational trails (see Map 1). Another 35 miles of trails are scheduled for completion within the next eight years, and trail planning has become a continued feature of the urban and suburban park master planning process.

Resources for this rapid development have come from a variety of sources, including the City of Omaha, Douglas County, and the Papio-Missouri Natural Resource District.

Photograph 1. Bikers on West Papio Trail

Despite increased promotion of trails for health and recreation, critics of new trail development continue to raise questions about the suitability of trails in neighborhoods. Concerns often focus on the impact of trails on property values and public safety and the effect trails can have in different types of neighborhoods.



Map 1 – Omaha's Trail System

METHODOLGY

To address these concerns, this research sought to examine the impact of the existing trail system, focusing on residents living within one-block of each of three targeted trail segments. Trail selection was accomplished by consulting with the Omaha Parks and Recreation Department. Criteria included the desire to examine trails in areas of the city with old and new housing, short versus long term existence of the trail, and trails that are connected to the system versus trails not yet connected.

Following the method of much previous trail research, a survey was designed addressing three distinct issues of interest: property values, public safety, and trail use. Using both telephone and mail survey methodology, we asked residents living near the most heavily populated segments of the West Papio, Keystone, and Field Club Trails about the trails' impact on public safety, property values, and general neighborhood quality of life. Recognizing that all households in these areas might not be trail users, we also included questions about the frequency and type of trail usage by household members.

Resulting Target Trail Segments

Trail	Housing	Connected	Length
West Papio (Dodge to Pacific)	New, Relatively High-End	Partially	Medium
Keystone (Cass to north end)	Older, Modest Price	Fully	Long
Field Club (Center to Gold)	Older, Modest Price	No	Short

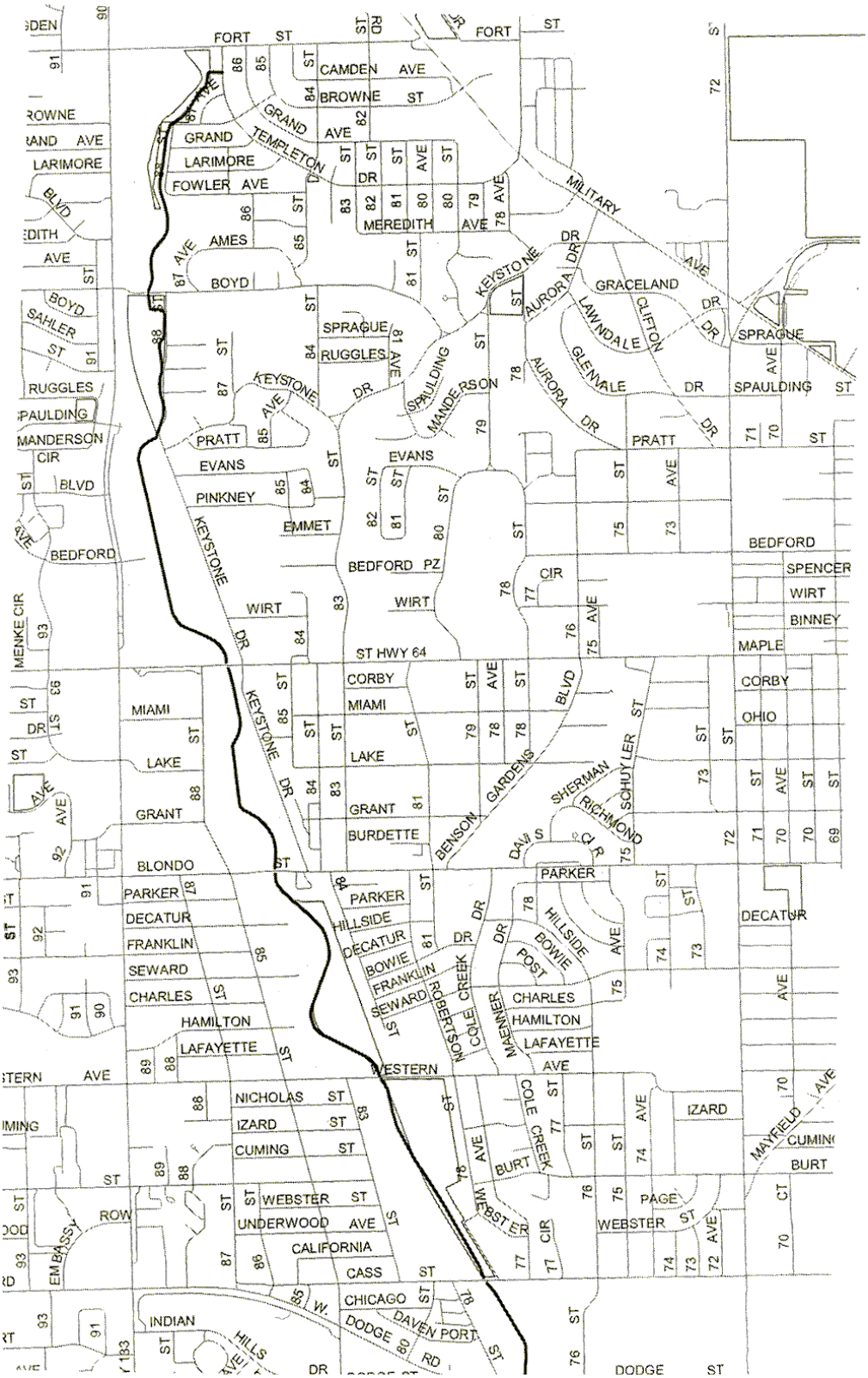
Results

Responses were obtained from a total of 149 households, for a 61 percent response rate. Most surveys were completed via telephone, with residents near each of the three trail segments represented about equally. Results in graphic form are given for all households responding unless stated otherwise.

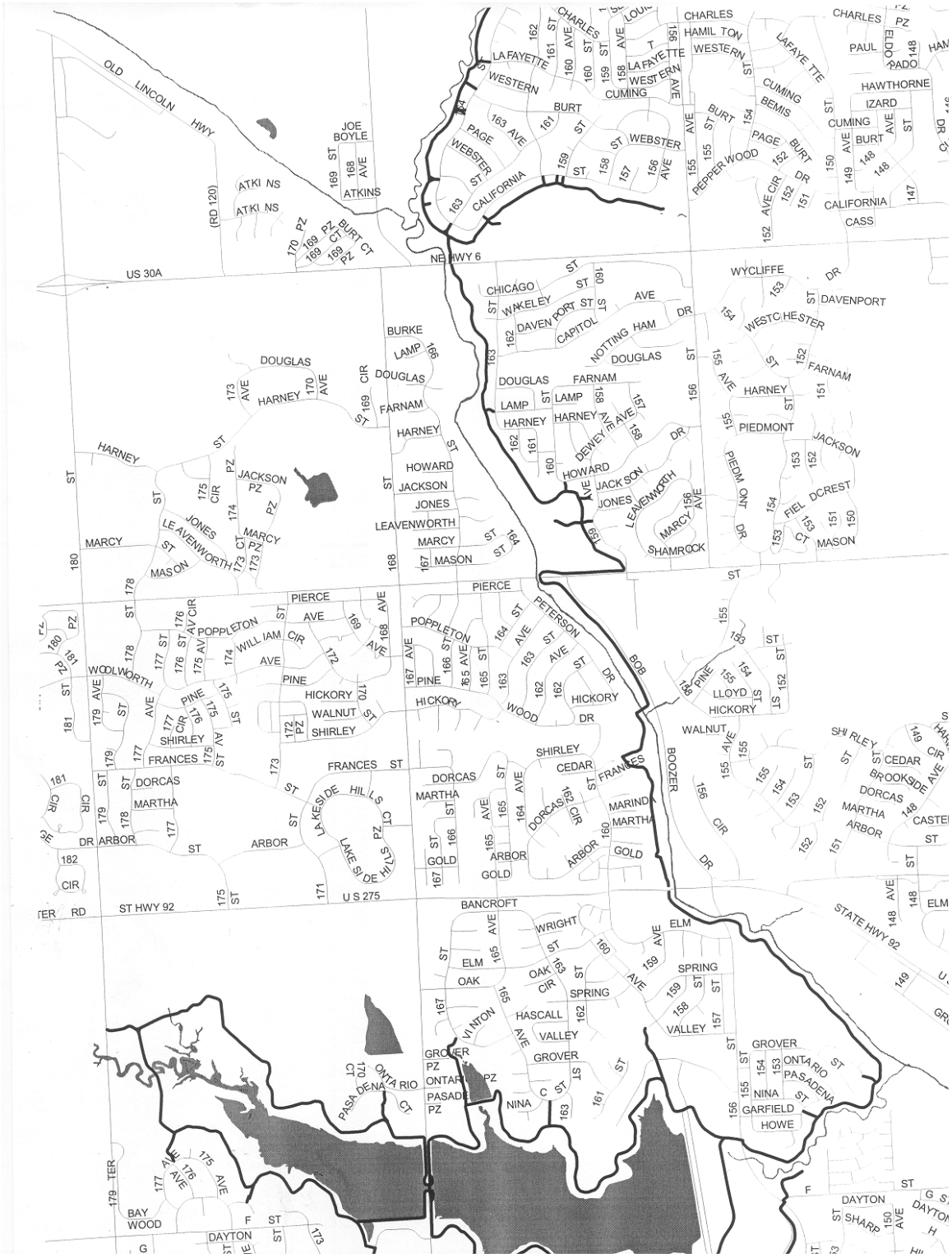
Respondent Overview

Of the 149 households contacted:

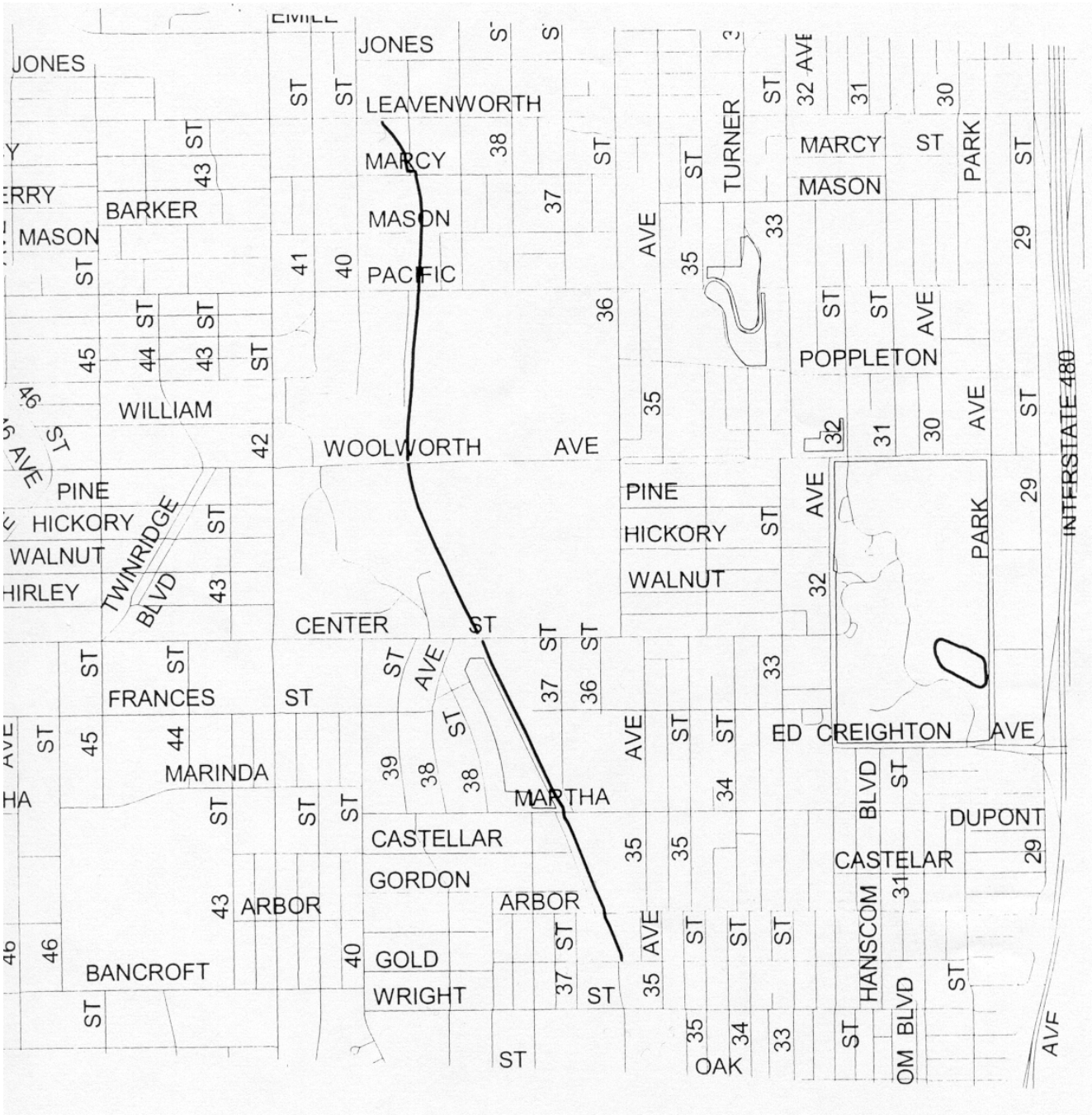
- 94% lived within one block of the trail
- 99.3% were single family homes
- 90.5% were homeowners rather than renters
- 63.0% were female



Map 2. Keystone Trail



Map 3. West Papio Trail



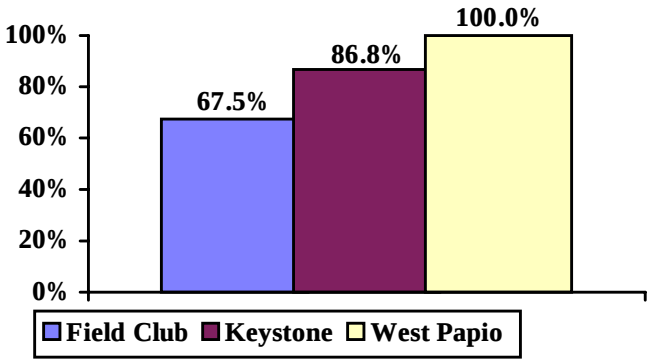
Map 4. Field Club Trail

Survey Results

Trail Use

All three trails had high percentages of households who had at least a member who used their local trail.

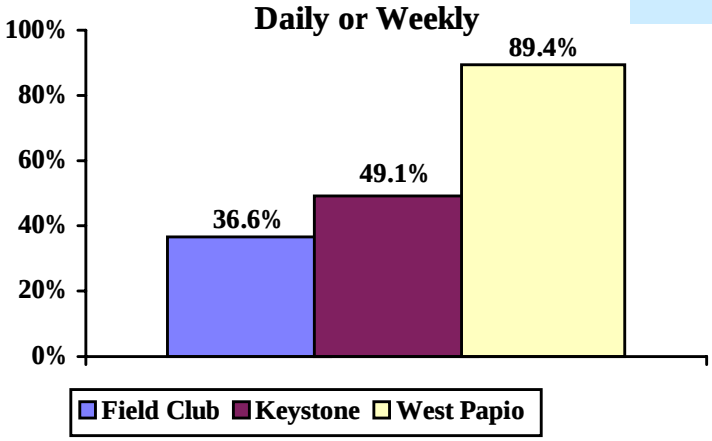
Fig. 1 Households with a Trail User



Frequency of Trail Use

85% of all surveyed households had a member use their local trail daily or weekly with the highest use on the West Papio Trail.

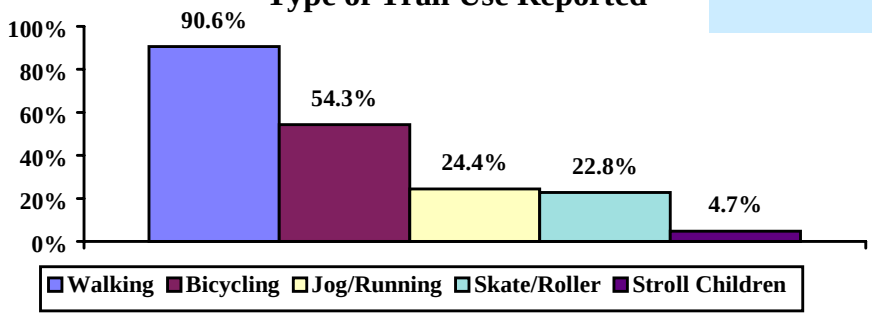
Fig. 2. Households Using Trail Daily or Weekly



Type of Trail Use

Walking (90.6%) and bicycling (54.3%) were by far the most frequent types of trail use. Respondents could give multiple answers.

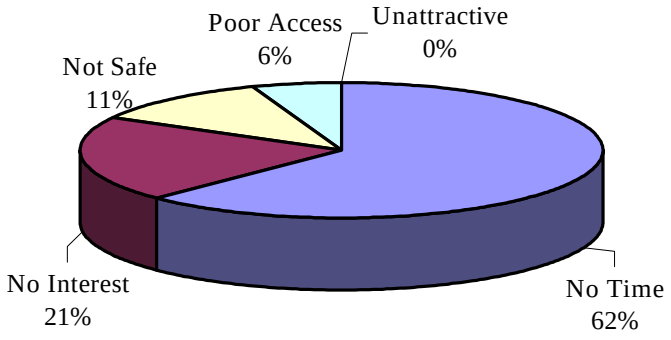
Fig. 3.
Type of Trail Use Reported



Factors Discouraging Trail Use

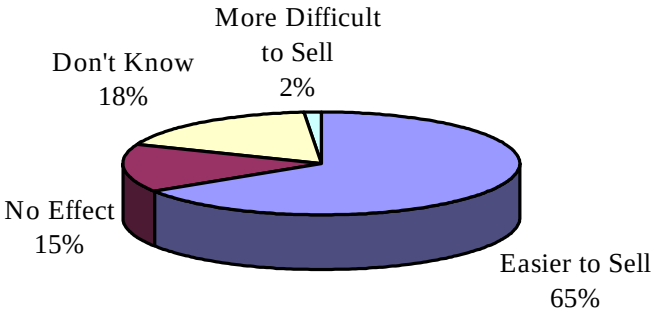
Amount of trail use had more to do with the interests and orientations of the respondents themselves (i.e. time availability and interest), and rarely included trail-related issues such as safety, accessibility, or attractiveness.

Fig. 4. Factors Discouraging Trail Use



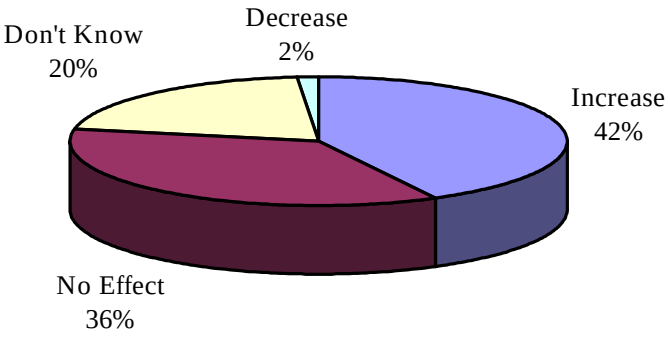
Economic Impact

Fig. 5. Impact of Trail on Sale of Home



81% surveyed felt that the nearby trail's presence would have a positive effect or no effect on the ease of sale of their homes.

Fig. 6. Impact of Trail on Selling Price



The clear majority of residents (63.8%) who bought their homes after the construction of the trails reported that the trail had positively influenced their purchase decision.

West Papio showed stronger results than the other two trails on property values, ease of home sale, and quality of life. The differences may possibly be due to neighborhood demographics and characteristics of the trail themselves.

Fig. 7. Trail Impact on Home Sale
Three Trails

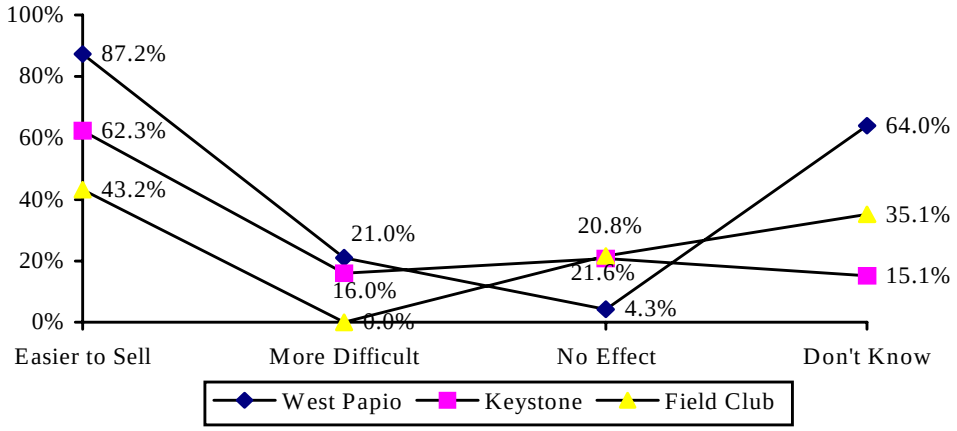
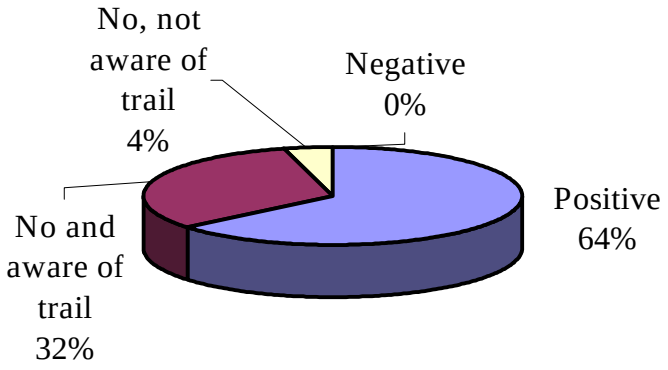


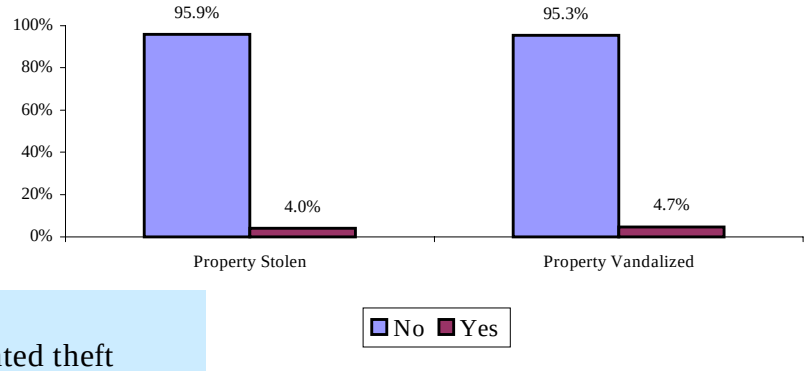
Fig. 8. Influence of Trail on Home Purchase



Of the respondents who purchased their home after the trail existed, 63.8% indicated that the trail positively influenced their purchase decision.

Safety

Fig. 9. Has a Trail User Ever Stolen/Vandalized Your Property?

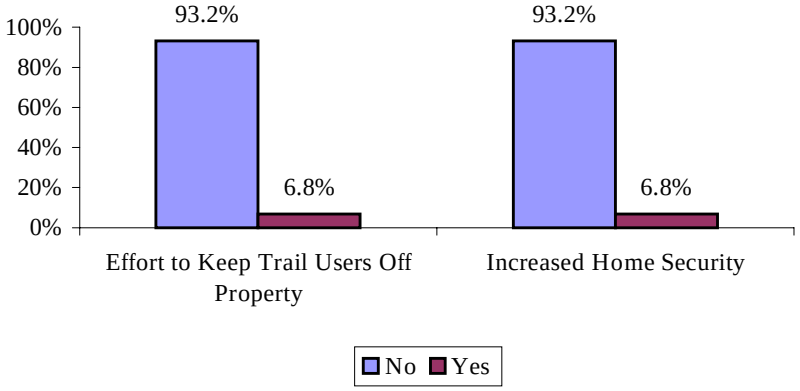


Experiences with trail-related theft (4.0%) and property damage (4.7%) were reported infrequently by respondents and most of these incidents were of relatively minor nature.

Most security improvements mentioned consisted of building privacy fence or installing security lighting around the home.

These security measures were deemed successful in all but one of the reported cases.

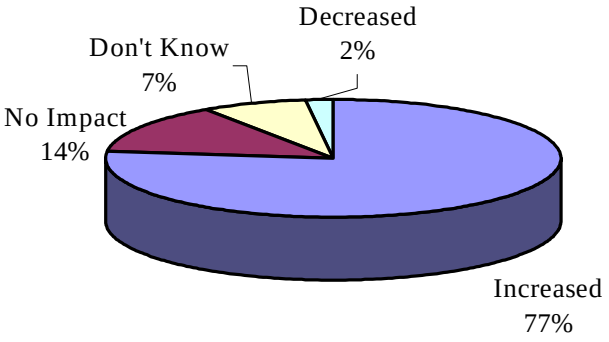
Fig. 10. Changes To Property



Only one respondent out of 149 wanted to see the trail along their property closed. Only two have ever considered moving but these two also the same respondents who did not care for an adjoining skateboard facility.

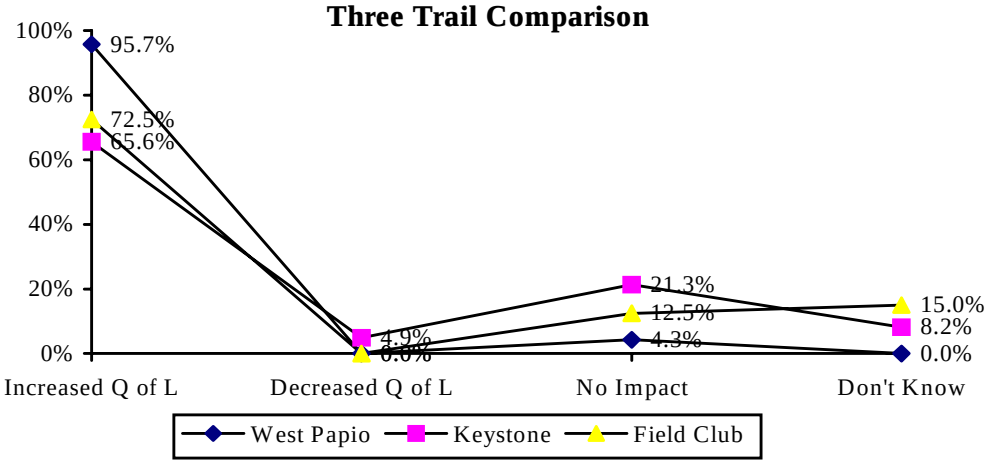
Neighborhood Quality of Life

Fig. 11. Trail Impact on Quality of Life



It is especially interesting to note that little uncertainty was expressed by respondents (i.e. "don't know").

Fig. 12. Impact on Quality of Life
Three Trail Comparison



Residents expressed the opinion that the trails had improved life in their neighborhoods. There was little indication of a harmful impact except for three respondents, all located on the Keystone Trail, who reported a decline in the neighborhood due to the trails. Their resentment appeared to be associated with the development of a controversial skateboard facility in a park adjacent to the trail.

Conclusions

- The Omaha recreational Trails are used often by nearby residents. Over half (58.4%) of the responding used the trails daily or weekly.

- Omaha trails are generally perceived by nearby residents as an economic benefit. Almost two-thirds of those surveyed felt the trails would increase the selling price of their home.

- Property owners do not appear to have a widespread concern for their safety. Trespassing, theft and vandalism by trail users were relatively infrequent events.

- Very few residents in the sample had increased home security, considered moving or wanted the trail closed.

- Residents living along the trails appear to perceive there to be a positive relationship between the trails and neighborhood quality of life (75%).

- There are noticeable differences between trails (or neighborhoods) in residents' reaction to Omaha trails. All neighborhoods reacted positively to the trails, but the responses were higher among residents living near the West Papio Trail.

Photograph 2. Field Club Trail

Discussion

These data leads us to conclude that trail development in Omaha, Nebraska has been well received by residents who live adjacent to the trails, the very group who would be most directly affected by trail-related problems such as crime and declining property values.

Results were not dissimilar to the findings of previous comparable studies.

By-and-large, the trails seem to be viewed as desirable quality of life enhancements that, despite their occasional problems, make homes and property more desirable and improve the quality of neighborhood life. Even so, there were signs in our data that the use and acceptance of recreational trails may differ depending on the demographic characteristics of the surrounding neighborhood.

The most positive responses to Omaha trails were found in the neighborhoods surrounding the West Papio Trail. Trail development has occurred more or less simultaneously with the construction of newer housing, and where home prices are higher and the educational and occupational backgrounds of residents are likely to be higher. The average age of adult household members may be lower, and the number of children per household may be somewhat greater, in that region of the city.

In the older sections of Omaha near the Keystone and Field Club Trails, we found that the trails generated a more guarded optimism. This may be attributable to a number of factors. For example, homes in these areas are generally very modest in size and price, reflecting lifestyle trends that are decades old. Owners of these properties may well recognize that the future marketability of their properties is somewhat limited, no matter what amenities are added.

The Keystone Trails, the oldest and most well connected and highly used trail in the Omaha system, undoubtedly generates greater congestion and more recreational traffic from outside its adjacent neighborhoods, so the presence of “outsiders” may be a limiting factor.

An issue related to this is the development of specialized trail and park-related facilities such as the skateboard area at Roberts Park. Such facilities may generate pockets of resentment, however limited in scope, that dampen enthusiasm for the trails among some residents of those areas. These challenges should be kept in mind by those involved in the planning and promotion of future urban recreational trails.

Limitations

Although we have gone to some length to achieve acceptable methodological rigor in this investigation, a few of its limitations should be mentioned in closing.

The purpose of this investigation was not to establish an absolute or "true" increment of value that results when residential property is located next to a trail. Rather, we only sought to determine whether or not a subjective effect on property value exists in the minds of residents. This finding is consistent with the results of other recent surveys in Omaha and Council Bluffs (Omaha Master Planning Survey, 1998; Council Bluffs Master Planning Survey, 1999). Findings showed a substantial number of randomly selected respondents reported that they would pay more for residential property located near public parks and recreation facilities. [1]

Finally, a decision that may strike some as a significant limitation was the selection of our sample to cover only residents living in close proximity to the target trails. We can defend this decision on a number of grounds. Persons living near trails, whether users or nonusers, are the most likely to be aware of the safety and economic issues that were central to our purpose.

Photograph 3. Roberts Park, which has a skateboard facility, bordering Keystone Trail.

[1] Unpublished survey results, Omaha Parks and Recreation Department and Council Bluffs Parks and Recreation Department.

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