



Trails and Public Access

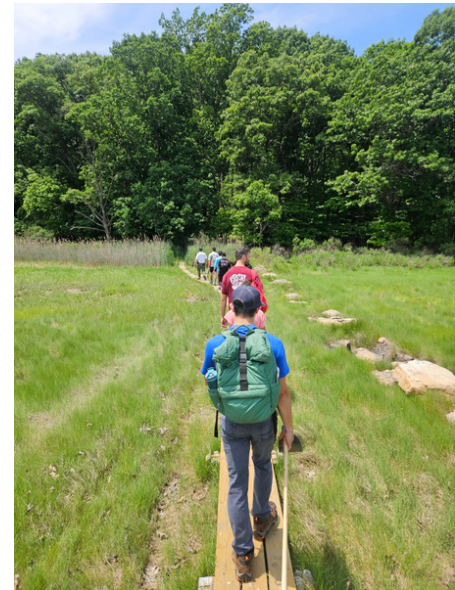
Urban Forested Natural Area Roadmaps



Introduction

The Trails and Public Access roadmap seeks to increase equitable public access to forested natural areas for city residents. For the purpose of this roadmap, access means being able to get to and into forested natural areas. This roadmap will also address accessibility for people with a wide range of abilities and proposes actionable steps that you can take to address both physical and social barriers to public access to natural areas.

The following are some key considerations for building trails and improving public access in urban forested natural areas. Your process may not occur in the order listed; this is a cyclical process with contextual considerations.



Urban Forested Natural Area Roadmaps

These roadmaps provide guidance for local organizations across the country to protect, restore, maintain, and increase access to millions of acres of urban forested natural areas. Informed by the experience of the [Forests in Cities Network](#), over 40 practitioners from 20 cities around the country contributed to their development.

To access the other roadmaps visit fic.naturalareasnyc.org.

Planning for Trails and Public Access

Define scale

Begin by determining your area of interest. For example, a specific forested natural area, a certain jurisdiction, or [the whole city](#). This may be determined by your resources and goals, though we recommend examining trails and public access for the whole city when possible.

- Determine your budget for both trails and studying barriers to access. This may shape the scope and scale of what you can accomplish.
- Creating and maintaining trails requires specialized skills. Determine who can do this work, including volunteers and academic partners (though they should not be a substitute for staff), and what training is required. Studying barriers to access also requires specialized skills.

Assess current access to forested natural areas

Important questions to evaluate before building trails or initiating programming to improve access include but are not limited to:

- Who lives near natural areas? Who has access via transit?
- Who is using them and who is not using them? What barriers (physical and social) stop people from accessing natural areas?
- How are people using them?
- How many people are using them?
- How do people feel about them and why?
- How do people get to trails?

Gather input from stakeholders

When determining goals for trails and public access, it is helpful to include community input from the beginning (including to answer the above questions). See the [community engagement and stewardship resources](#) for examples and more information.

Determine what areas should be accessible

Not all areas should necessarily be open to public access. For example, ecologically sensitive, historically significant, or physically dangerous areas may not be accessible. These choices should be made with the intention of making the most area available to the public as is feasible and safe.



Building Trails to Improve Public Access

Create a trail network

Formalizing a trail network is an important step in making natural areas more accessible. Though there may be formal or informal trails already, having a robust network of trails that are maintained and clearly marked will allow for public access. You can follow the steps below:

- Map existing trails using GIS and formalize them by determining which is an official trail and which is not.
- Design and build new trails as needed. Design is crucial for saving time and money in maintaining trails. For examples of trail design guidelines see the [resource library](#).
- Plan to provide opportunities for a range of abilities and interests. Pay special attention to any relevant mandates about accessibility. It is a best practice to provide opportunities for people with different abilities, including people with disabilities, to access forested natural areas. Accessibility or difficulty level should be clearly delineated and made public via signage.
- Create signage and maps so that you can provide updated information at trailheads and online available in languages that reflect the local community.

Activate your natural areas

Increasing public access entails creating programming that brings people into forested natural areas. See the [community engagement and stewardship resources](#) for examples and more information.



After Building Trails

Maintain your space and trails

Public perception is central to access. It is important that spaces look inviting and well maintained. Work with the community to determine what features will improve public perceptions of safety (lighting, signage, staffing, culturally relevant programming, and more).



Access the Other Roadmaps

- [Management Planning](#)
- [Mapping](#)
- [Ordinances, Laws, and Policies](#)
- [Community Engagement and Stewardship](#)
- [Assessing and Monitoring](#)