

Working with Private Landowners to Create Trail Systems: How we did it. The Methow Valley Sport Trails Association

By Danica Kaufman

The Methow Valley of Washington State is home to the second largest nordic trail system in the country, with over 200 kilometers of interconnected trails, which also happen to pass through 130 parcels of private land.

The trail system started with a few isolated trails created by local lodging establishments in the late 1970s and early 80s. The Methow Valley was already a summer destination, but basically unknown to winter travelers. In 1976, Don Portman, a local cross-country ski enthusiast convinced the owner of a summer-only dude ranch to stay open for the winter months and groom trails. REI bussed in groups of people from Seattle to ski, and they've been coming ever since. Since then, that dude ranch has developed into Sun Mountain Lodge, and the Methow Valley has become known as a world-class nordic ski area.

Portman's vision coincided with the possibility of an Aspen-style downhill ski resort that was being planned for the Valley. Large tracts of land and planned developments were suddenly available. John Hayes, a Methow local who was involved in the permitting of many of the planned developments, saw the opportunity for a trail system as an alternate industry to compliment the downhill area, and integrated the trails into the deals he was negotiating. After a drawn-out political battle, the downhill project fell through, but the nordic ski trails remained - still in isolated areas around the Valley. Local trail advocates who had traveled to and skied in Europe wanted to bring the town-to-town ski tradition back to the Methow. The push to connect was on.

"Landowners were reluctant at first" says Jay Lucas, executive director of the Methow Valley Sport Trails Association (MVSTA). "That was the original motivation for creating a non-profit trails organization, to lend credibility to our efforts". People used to wonder what was in it for them, but as more agreements were established, the benefits became more clear. Being on the trail created income for lodges and rentals, and added land value for landowners. It is often reported that proximity to trails is the most sought after attribute in second homes nation-wide, higher than waterfront and views. A 2005 economic analysis conducted by MVSTA and the Methow Conservancy found that "People buying homes and real estate in the Methow Valley are on average willing to pay 11.5% more per acre for properties near trails (within ½ mile)."

Today, new landowners who inherit trails with a land purchase, or have the opportunity to offer an easement, are generally unfazed and agreeable to partnering with MVSTA. "Now people come to us, asking if we can put a trail through their property.", says Lucas. Trailside landowners receive free annual

trail passes (four per family, each valued at \$275), and the pleasure of walking out their back door onto one of the finest cross-country ski trails in the world.

Trail development suggestions from MVSTA

- Come up with a design for the physical layout early on, and build from a vision, taking advantage of opportunities as they arise. Linear trails are less expensive to maintain than loops.
- Make it easy for landowners to work with you. Start with a seasonal agreement and then get it legal once they realize the benefits. Don't ever force yourself on landowners – burning bridges can lead to mistrust.
- Start with larger tracks of land, and then connect them by smaller tracts. The fewer landowners involved the simpler.
- Start the trails where the people are already staying (lodges and rentals) and build out from there. People don't want to drive to the trailhead.
- Be flexible with landowners and communicate often.