

IMPACT100 TRAVERSE CITY 2026 FINALIST

Focus Area

Environment, Preservation, and Recreation

Friends of the Betsie Valley Trail

<https://betsievalleytrail.org>

INITIATIVE

Betsie Valley Trail – Trail Access Accessibility Project

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

(from Meet the Finalists)

This project involves accessibility improvements at an existing trailhead parking area on the accessible portion of the Betsie Valley Trail. The project includes: relocating the entrance drive; resurfacing of the existing gravel parking lot; construction of four concrete ADA-compliant, van-accessible parking spaces; an asphalt access pathway connecting the accessible parking spaces to the trail; and replacement of the existing non-accessible vault toilet with an ADA-compliant accessible vault toilet building. The parking lot resurfacing will use compacted aggregate to stabilize the existing surface and support accessible vehicle maneuvering.

The Benzie Area Chamber of Commerce, Disability Network Northern Michigan, Benzie County Parks and Recreation Commission, and The Maples extended care facility have all submitted letters of support affirming the community need. Joy-2-Ride Benzie, a program serving individuals with disabilities through adaptive cycling, relies on this trail and specifically needs this trailhead accessibility upgrade to allow their participants to access the trail independently.

The following sections contain information from the application, as written by the applicant. While detailed financial information has not been provided here due to its confidential nature, each applicant submitted an initiative budget and supporting financial documents as part of their application. Each proposed initiative and the supporting financial documentation has undergone a thorough review and the initiatives proposed by our finalists have met our eligibility requirements.

ORGANIZATION'S VISION STATEMENT

A world-class trail in Benzie County that connects healthy and active communities.

ORGANIZATION'S MISSION STATEMENT

Facilitate the continued development and accessibility of the Betsie Valley Trail, eventually linking with a growing network of Michigan trails. We accomplish this by creating awareness, raising funds, and coordinating efforts of individuals, civic groups, local businesses, and government entities.

DESCRIPTION OF ORGANIZATION AND ITS HISTORY

The Friends of the Betsie Valley Trail (FBVT) is a Michigan nonprofit corporation formed in 1993 to advocate, promote, and encourage the development and successful operation of a recreational trail on the former Ann Arbor Railroad corridor in Benzie County. The Betsie Valley Trail is owned by the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and is operated and maintained by the Betsie Valley Trailway Management Council (TMC), established by the Benzie County Board of Commissioners, to facilitate and fund operation and maintenance of the trail. FBVT is a benevolent friend of the trail and works closely with the Trailway Management Council — it supports the efforts of the DNR and the County to ensure the trail is maintained and enjoyed by the public. FBVT is governed by a volunteer Board of Directors and is supported by a dedicated corps of volunteers who staff the trail crew, coordinate maintenance, manage communications, organize fundraising events such as the annual Brew-to-Brew Trail Day, and perform stewardship work along the trail. These 100+ volunteers logged more than 800 hours serving the Betsie Valley Trail community in 2025. The organization maintains an annual budget dedicated to trail maintenance and improvements and partners regularly with local civic groups, businesses, and nonprofits — including Joy 2 Ride Benzie, the Benzie Area Chamber of Commerce, Crystal Mountain, Munson Healthcare's Paul Oliver Memorial Hospital, and The Maples (Benzie County Medical Care Facility) — to expand access to the trail. The populations FBVT serves are diverse. Most directly, the organization serves the residents of Benzie County — a rural northern Michigan community whose population is aging, increasingly experiencing mobility challenges, and which highly values outdoor recreation, as documented in the Benzie County Recreation and Cultural Plan (2026–2031). Beyond Benzie residents, the trail draws users from across northwest Michigan and beyond — including families with strollers, individuals using mobility aids, recreational cyclists, runners, walkers, and visitors who contribute to the local tourism economy. Through its partnership with Joy 2 Ride Benzie, FBVT specifically serves elderly individuals, people with permanent or temporary disabilities, and others who are physically unable to cycle independently, who participate in piloted adaptive cycling rides on the trail. FBVT does not collect demographic information from trail users, but the trail's location in Benzie County — which has a higher-than-average percentage of older adults and a meaningful population of disadvantaged and underserved residents — means the organization's work disproportionately benefits these groups. Improving accessibility at trailheads is a direct response to these demographic realities.

COMMUNITY TO BE SERVED

The Trail Accessibility Project is located in Benzie County, Michigan, with two project sites along the Betsie Valley Trail. The River Road trailhead is in Benzonia Township, approximately 3 miles east of Elberta, and shares access with a Michigan DNR boat launch on the Betsie River. The Elberta/M-22 trailhead is in the Village of Elberta, adjacent to Betsie Lake and a short walk or ride from the village center. The Betsie Valley Trail itself runs 22 miles from Frankfort through Elberta and Beulah to Thompsonville, all within Benzie County. The communities served by this initiative include the residents of Benzie County and the broader population of trail users from across northwest lower Michigan and beyond. Benzie County is a rural northern Michigan community of approximately 18,000 year-round residents, with seasonal population swelling significantly in summer months. The Benzie County Recreation and Cultural Plan (2026–2031) documents that the county's population is aging and increasingly experiencing mobility challenges. The county also includes a meaningful percentage of disadvantaged and underserved residents, as noted in letters of support from regional employers and partners. Several specific populations are served and stand to benefit directly:

- Older adults and people with mobility limitations — a growing share of Benzie County's population — who currently cannot reliably reach the trail's paved surface from either project site.
- People with permanent or temporary disabilities, including individuals using wheelchairs, walkers, hand-cycles, and adaptive cycling equipment.
- Joy 2 Ride Benzie participants. Joy 2 Ride is a 501(c)(3) that offers free, inclusive piloted-cycling experiences along the Betsie Valley Trail using specially designed wheelchair bikes. The program serves the elderly, people with disabilities, and others unable to cycle independently. Joy 2 Ride relies on the paved section of the trail and specifically needs accessible staging at River Road (where FBVT has already installed a storage facility intended to house their equipment) and at Elberta.
- Residents of regional senior care and medical facilities, including residents of The Maples (Benzie County Medical Care Facility) and patients of Munson Healthcare's Paul Oliver Memorial Hospital, both of which have submitted letters of support describing the value of accessible trail experiences for their populations.
- Families with strollers, young children, and members of the public who benefit from accessible design even without a formal disability.
- Visitors and tourists from across northwest Michigan and beyond, who use the trail and contribute to the regional economy by patronizing local restaurants, lodging providers, outfitters, and retail businesses. The Benzie Area Chamber of Commerce and Crystal Mountain (one of the largest employers in Benzie and Manistee counties) have submitted letters of support documenting these economic linkages. While the project is sited in Benzie County, the trail's regional draw means trail users from all five Impact100 Traverse City counties — and well beyond — will benefit from the improvements.

NEEDS OF THE COMMUNITY TO BE SERVED AND GAPS IN EXISTING SERVICES

The core need is straightforward: the Betsie Valley Trail's paved surface is accessible, but two primary trailhead parking areas are not. The gaps prevent people with mobility challenges from using a trail that has been deliberately built and paved to accommodate them. At the River Road trailhead, the existing parking area is gravel — over 20 years old, deteriorated, and lacking defined accessible spaces. There is no ADA-compliant pathway connecting parking to the trail surface. The existing vault toilet at the site is also more than

20 years old and does not meet current accessibility standards. At the Elberta/M-22 trailhead, the parking area lacks any ADA-compliant parking spaces or accessible pathway to the trail. For Joy 2 Ride Benzie, these gaps translate into direct service limitations. Joy 2 Ride operates piloted adaptive cycling rides for the elderly and people with disabilities along the paved section of the trail. River Road would be the ideal staging point — FBVT has already installed a storage building there with the intent of housing Joy 2 Ride's adaptive equipment — but without accessible parking and pathways, equipment still has to be hauled in for every ride, and patrons cannot independently access the staging area. As Joy 2 Ride's founder describes in her letter of support, current conditions force the program to use the Elberta gravel lot for staging, and even that is significantly harder than it would be with the proposed paved spaces. Because riders typically cover only 2–4 miles per outing, staging from Elberta leaves the trail's most scenic sections — east of River Road — out of reach. For older Benzie residents and individuals living with permanent or temporary mobility limitations, the absence of accessible parking is the single barrier between them and a paved trail experience. The Benzie County Recreation and Cultural Plan (2026–2031) confirms what local providers see directly: the population is aging, increasingly mobility-limited, and highly values outdoor recreation. The entire 22-mile Betsie Valley Trail has seen significant prior and pending investment in paving and accessibility (see attached BVT Map with Trail Projects Overview). A recently completed Michigan DNR Spark Grant project paved 1.1 miles south from Beulah to Case Road. An MNRTF-funded project will pave approximately 1 mile north from Thompsonville in 2027, and an additional 6-mile section has a conditional MDOT TAP commitment for 2027 construction. A further TAP application submitted in February 2026 would complete paving of the entire trail. Meanwhile, the Village of Thompsonville's Area Revitalization Project includes a new trailhead. These investments have made strong progress on producing an accessible trail surface but left key trailheads short of accessible access — leaving the public investment incomplete in a way that disproportionately excludes the residents who would benefit most. This proposed project closes the gap and is the missing link that converts a partially-accessible asset into a fully-accessible one.

SUSTAINABILITY OF THE PROPOSED INITIATIVE

Long-term sustainability of the Trail Accessibility Project is built on three pillars: a durable, low-maintenance physical design; an established multi-party operations and maintenance framework; and a 30-plus-year track record of organizational stewardship. First, the improvements have been engineered to minimize ongoing maintenance. Concrete parking pads, an asphalt access path at River Road, a concrete access path at Elberta, and a precast concrete, accessible vault toilet are all durable, weather-resilient materials with multi-decade service lives. The site design also retains existing vegetation, the existing split-rail fence at River Road, and minimizes new impervious surface — reducing both maintenance burden and stormwater impact. Second, operation and maintenance are governed by an existing, formal framework. The Betsie Valley Trail Management Agreement among the Michigan DNR, the trail's owners, and the Betsie Valley Trailway Management Council (a body established by the Benzie County Board of Commissioners) is the operating instrument for the trail. FBVT works closely with the TMC and Benzie County to facilitate and fund ongoing operation and maintenance. The new accessible parking areas, pathways, and vault toilet at River Road and Elberta will be maintained under this same agreement, with FBVT taking primary responsibility for the accessibility improvements

through its existing maintenance partnership with Benzie County. A maintenance plan and budget are included with this application. Third, FBVT has the demonstrated organizational capacity to sustain this work. Founded in 1993, FBVT has stewarded the Betsie Valley Trail for more than three decades. The organization maintains a dedicated annual budget for trail maintenance and has a proven track record of successful fundraising from individuals, businesses, and foundations to advance trail interests. Once construction is complete, the project does not require ongoing programmatic funding. It requires only routine maintenance, which is already covered under the existing trail maintenance agreement. There is no recurring staffing cost, no programmatic operations budget, and no risk that the improvements will lapse if a particular funding source is not renewed. This is the defining advantage of a well-scoped capital project: the work is done once, and then maintained.

