

# Framework

## Part 2 of a Starter Guide for the US Great Lakes Waterfront Trail (US GLWT)

Prepared for:  
Council of State Governments Midwest  
National Parks Service - Rivers Trails and Conservation

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# How to Use the Decision-making Framework

## Who this Framework is for

The School for Environment and Sustainability Great Lakes Waterfront Trail (SEAS-GLWT) Decision-making Framework (also referred to as Framework) is intended for anyone passionate about improving trails in the Great Lakes region. This means residents of a local community, members of grassroots community organization, municipal governments, non-profits, and any other individual or group that comes across this report and is interested in trails designed for communities.

## Decision-making Framework

The GLWT partners cover a wide breadth of geographic space and federal, state, and local agencies. Partners hold monthly roundtable meetings with 40+ participants. A collaboration of this scale must overcome potential challenges like large-scale coordination, preserving individual state identities, and possible funding disruptions.

To handle these challenges, the SEAS-GLWT decision-making framework aims to help GLWT stakeholders navigate trail design decisions and consider various priorities at local and multi-state levels. The framework provides a starting point, tools, and resources for other Great Lake communities as they work on further developing their trail design.

This framework seeks to bridge the gap between local residents who care about their local trails and the governmental agencies that manage the trails.

**This framework is intended to break down different aspects of the US GLWT proposed trail planning and design process in an easy-to-understand way.**

## Framework Goals

Users of the framework should be able to:

- Understand the considerations and processes that go behind trail design
- Understand how to utilize the accompanying resources to further the trail planning process
- Be prepared to approach local planning, environmental, and governmental bodies with trail design options and ideas to further local trail improvement

## Framework Sections

To achieve these goals, the SEAS-GLWT framework report provides the following deliverables:

- **Decision-making Framework** (also referred to as Framework): A 5-step process guide that 1) guides the user through the trail development process, 2) outlines the scope, mission and vision of the US GLWT initiative, and 3) helps users articulate desired trail characteristics and envision what a potential trail project can look like
- **Trail Planning Worksheet** (also referred to as Worksheet): A worksheet that guides users through each step of the Framework and organizes relevant information for groups to consider in the trail design process

# 1. Decision-Making Framework to Guide US GLWT Trail Design

## Decision-Making Framework at a Glance

**Figure 1.**  
*Decision-Making Framework Diagram.*  
Created by Emily Carra.



The Decision-making Framework (also referred to as Framework) is a 5-step process that outlines different considerations for trail design. Each step of the process builds on the previous step. However, the Framework is also meant to be an iterative process, where each step can be revisited to ensure it remains aligned with the current direction of the project.

The five steps of the Framework are as follows:

- 1. Envision:** build a guiding vision for the entire project
- 2. Define Goals:** define SMART goals for better environmental outcomes
- 3. Define Stakeholders:** determine who all could care about this project and narrow to who makes the most sense to interact with
- 4. Analyze:** determine site-specific features, local priorities, and previous projects to shape how the project can be realized
- 5. Design:** begin using tools and resources to decide on relevant aspects of the trail, like trail types, standard trail dimensions, and native plants

### 1.1 Envision

**Visioning is the first step, and a continuous step, because visions continue to get revised and shared and built and elaborated and made more rich and more true.**

**- Donella Meadows (Meadows, 2012)**

Envisioning the end goal is instrumental in setting the direction of a project. The envision step helps trail advocates think big picture towards the long-term direction of the project.

By the end of this step, Framework users should have:

- Clearly defined vision and mission statements
- A set of project values

## Vision and Mission Statements

Vision and mission statements work together to guide decision-making and communicate the motivations behind a project. Each statement is typically 1-2 sentences and provides the “why” and “how” for projects (Piscopo, 2023).

**Vision statements** guide the long-term outlook for trail advocates to stay aligned on the big picture, even if smaller issues arise. They inspire people by answering the questions, “What change do we want to create? Why do we want to achieve this project?” (RMC Learning Solutions, 2023)

**Mission statements** explain the process for how to achieve the vision. It answers the questions, “how can we achieve this vision? What can we do today to make it happen?” (Piscopo, 2023)

For example, the US GLWT guiding vision is: “All residents and visitors of the eight Great Lakes states are connected to and benefit from world-class freshwater, wildlife, recreation, and history through the U.S. Great Lakes Waterfront Trail.” (U.S. Great Lakes Waterfront Trail, 2024)

An example of a possible mission statement could be: Fill gaps between regional trails, connect Great Lakes communities with walking and biking trails, and share what makes the Great Lakes region special.

### US GLWT Vision (U.S. Great Lakes Waterfront Trail, 2024)

“All residents and visitors of the eight Great Lakes states are connected to and benefit from world-class freshwater, wildlife, recreation, and history through the U.S. Great Lakes Waterfront Trail.”

## Values

Effective values inspire people and to provide guidance for making difficult decisions (Gibson, 2023). They can be short and concise and shown in a bulleted list.

**Values** are foundational beliefs and core principles that guide a project and can shape everything related to how the project happens (Gibson, 2023; Rosales, 2025).

For example, supporters of the original US GLWT proposal agreed on the following values (U.S. Great Lakes Waterfront Trail, 2024):

- Acknowledge and seek collaboration with Tribal Nations
- Support and connect local trails with a unifying regional brand, while respecting individual local trail identity, ownership, and management
- Build on existing infrastructure and connections from bicycling and pedestrian experiences, and assist with bridging gaps
- Seek equitable access to the region’s natural amenities
- Encourage cross-border and binational connections
- Aspire to be an entirely off-road, non-motorized bicycling and pedestrian trail, without prohibiting other local trail uses
- Promote Great Lakes outdoor recreation, ecotourism, and regional history
- Support conservation, sustainability, and environmental education

## 1.2 Define Goals

**If we haven't specified where we want to go, it is hard to set our compass, to muster enthusiasm, or to measure progress.** - Donella Meadows (Meadows, 2012)

Project goals define the outcomes a project will achieve (Neumeyer, 2018). Goals provide the direction for achieving the vision and are more specific than vision and mission statements.

This step includes short term, long term, and legacy goals. By the end of this step, project teams should have:

- A clear understanding of the differences between short term, long term, and legacy goals
- A clearly defined set of short term, long term, and legacy goals

**Short term goals (0-3 years)** (Nurture Nature Center, Inc., n.d.; Together Mentoring Software, n.d. ) are specific, measurable actions that can be achieved over the short term for more immediate and urgent needs. Short term goals can be seen as the first steps to building momentum and determining long term feasibility of the project.

Examples: define project vision, identify priority trail segments, conduct site analysis and stakeholder engagement, and develop guiding frameworks and design standards

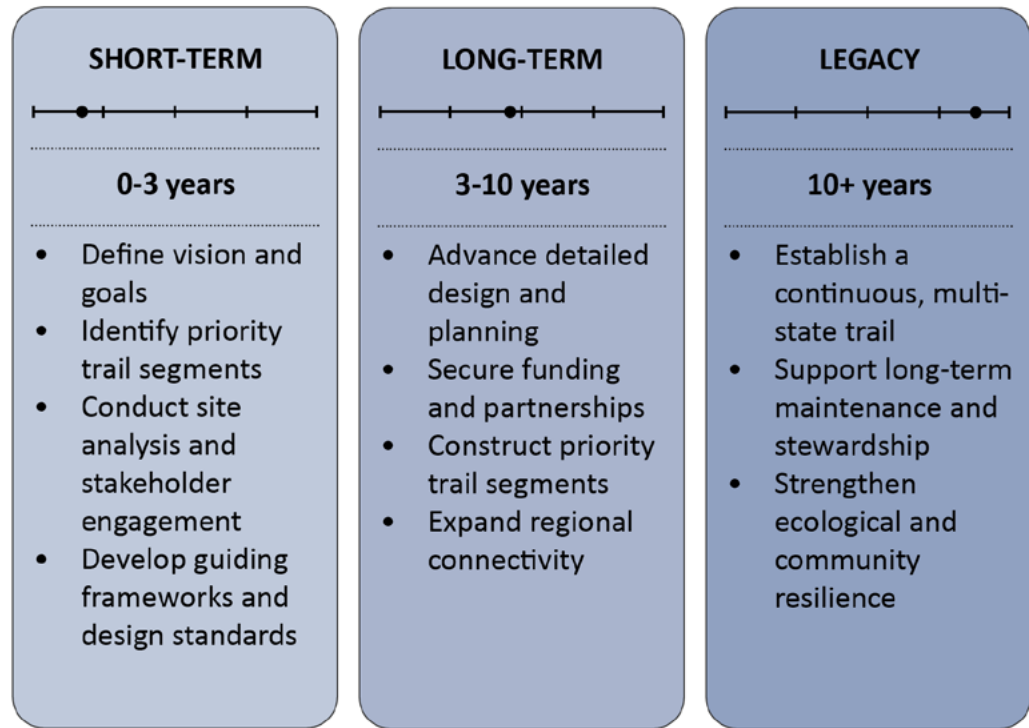
**Long term goals (3-10 years)** (Together Mentoring Software, n.d. ) are broader, more ambitious aims that focus on more complicated efforts and may require multiple phases. They require longer term commitment, planning, and funding to be implemented.

Examples: advance detailed design and planning, secure funding and partnerships, construct priority trail segments, and expand regional connectivity.

**Legacy goals (10+ years)** (D. Meyer, personal communication, 2025) are the goals with the longest impacts, meant to last generations and establish what the overall project legacy is meant to be. Similar to vision statements, they can help trail advocates envision the future. However, they are more specific than vision statements, focusing on different aspects of how to achieve the vision.

Examples: establish a continuous, multi-state trail, support long-term maintenance and stewardship, and strengthen ecological and community resilience.

**Figure 2.**  
*Short-term, long-term, and legacy goals*  
 Diagram.  
 Created by Emily Carra.



### 1.3 Define Stakeholders

Successful trail initiatives depend on understanding who is involved, who is affected, and who has the capacity to influence outcomes. Stakeholders are defined as people who are either affected by or can affect a trail project (Rabinowitz, n.d.).

This section focuses on identifying and organizing the individuals and groups necessary to move a project from vision to implementation. Another way to describe it is community engagement, defined by Rails to Trails (n.d.-a) as “a process intended to give those who are affected by an issue a say in the decision-making around it.”

By the end of this step, project teams should have:

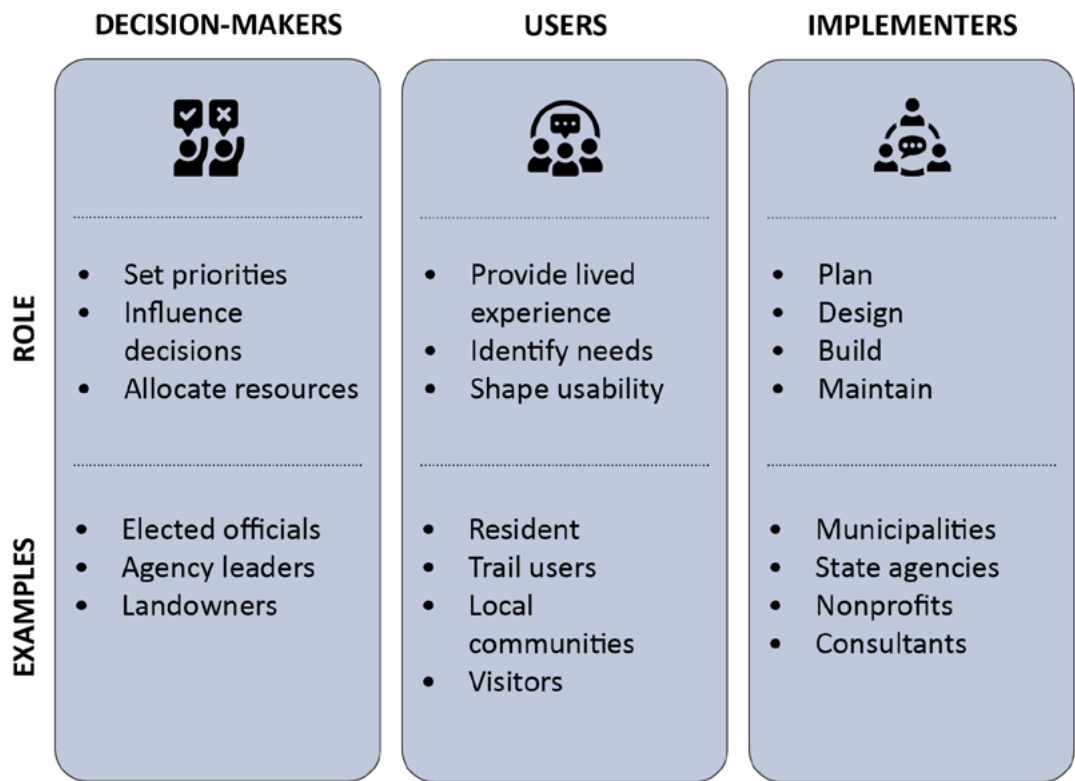
- A clear understanding of the different stakeholder groups involved (decision-makers, users, and implementers)
- An initial list of potential stakeholders representing a broad range of perspectives
- A refined group of key stakeholders who can actively contribute to planning, decision-making, and implementation

### Stakeholder Groups

Trail planning typically involves three primary groups (adapted from these: Rabinowitz, n.d.; Rails to Trails Conservancy, n.d.-a):

- **Decision-makers:** individuals or groups with a direct interest or influence on the project. They set priorities, influence decisions, and allocate resources for the trail project. Examples: elected officials, agency leaders, and landowners.
- **Users:** residents and people who use the trail. They can provide lived experience, identify trail needs, and shape the usability of the trail. Examples: residents, trail users, local communities, and visitors
- **Implementers:** institutions or organizations who implement the trail project. They are responsible for planning, designing, building, and maintaining the trail over the long term. Examples: municipalities, state agencies, nonprofits, and consultants.

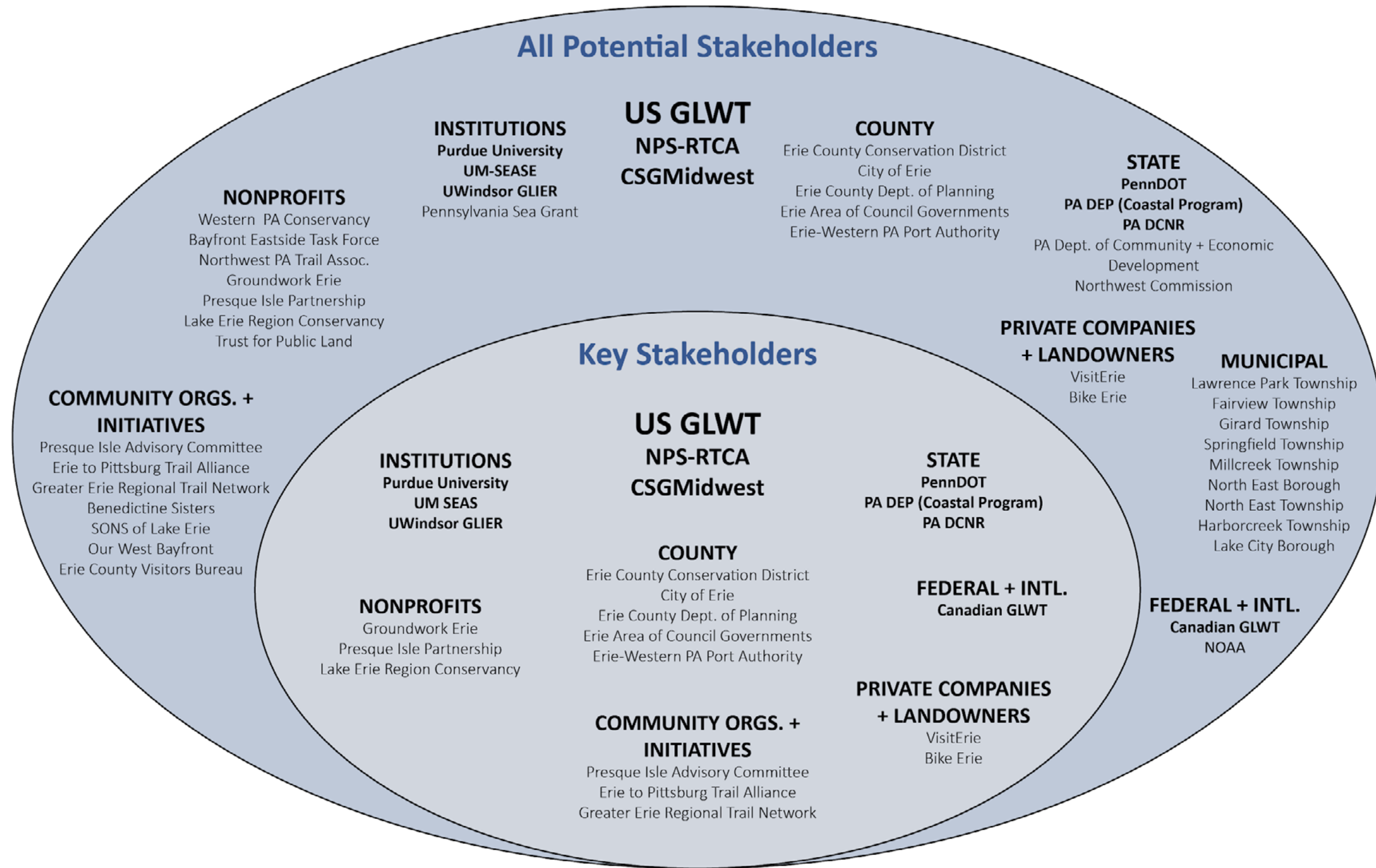
**Figure 3.**  
Stakeholder Groups  
Diagram.  
Created by Emily Carra.



Stakeholder Diagram

**Figure 4.**  
*Define the Audience for Erie, Pennsylvania.*  
 Created by Emily Carra.

Note. A map diagramming project partners. The project is centered around the NPS-RTCA (National Parks Service - Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance), CSGMidwest (Council of State Governments Midwest) along with the US GLWT SEAS project team. Surrounding them are the Pennsylvanian organizations the project consulted with.



## Identify All Potential Stakeholders

The first step is to identify all people or groups who can possibly be affected by the project. At this stage, casting a wide net to list potential stakeholders helps ensure that all relevant perspectives are considered.

Potential stakeholders may include:

- Local residents and community groups
- Tribal Nations and historically underrepresented communities
- Municipal departments and regional agencies
- Advocacy groups and nonprofits
- Schools, universities, and public institutions
- Local businesses and major employers

It is also important to be aware of and make efforts to include “hidden stakeholders.” Hidden stakeholders are people who typically depend on a natural resource for income or livelihood but may not usually be considered in the decision-making process (Vogler et al., 2017). Examples of hidden stakeholders include: hunters and fishers.

## Defining Key Stakeholders

After identifying all potential stakeholders, the next step is to refine this group into a set of key stakeholders. Key stakeholders are people or organizations who have influence over the project or are otherwise important figures within the community (Rabinowitz, n.d.). Narrowing the list of all potential stakeholders to a smaller, more focused list of key stakeholders ensures that the most relevant and influential figures are involved from the beginning.

When refining, consider:

- What expertise or resources each group brings
- Where decision-making power is distributed
- How to balance power and equitable representation

How different perspectives will be incorporated over time. Examples of refinement decisions:

- Selecting a core working group (e.g., city planner, parks representative, community leader, advocacy group member)
- Ensuring representation from both technical experts and community voices
- Balancing large institutional partners with smaller, local organizations

In addition to identifying stakeholders, we also recommend building coalitions that unite people by a shared vision (Rails to Trails Conservancy, n.d.-b). For a more in-depth process in coalition building, learn more at [The Rails-to-Trails Conservancy: Coalition Building website](#).

## Stakeholder Diagram

## 1.4 Analyze

Analysis focuses on gathering the necessary information needed to begin design and to better understand the trail design sites. The goal is to learn how a site's specific context can affect the trail design process and ensure that the necessary materials, resources, and data are gathered. The Analyze step pulls together information needed to move into the last and final step, Design.

By the end of this step, project teams should have:

- An understanding of site analysis and its implications for trail design
- An understanding of how to assess local priorities
- Gained a baseline knowledge for current and past trail projects
- Gathered the necessary information to use the Trail Design Toolkit in the Design step

### Site Analysis

Site Analysis is the process of examining the various aspects of a chosen site, from patterns in sunlight to land use to public and private spaces (Abady, 2024). Through site analysis, trail advocates can better understand the context and feasibility of a chosen project site.

Though there can be many components to site analysis (Studio Carney, n.d.), this framework focuses on those most relevant to the Trail Design Toolkit in the next step:

- 1. Physical Features:** all physical aspects of the site including land contours and elevation changes and existing structures like trees or buildings
- 2. Circulation:** how people move through, to, and around the site (including nearby roadways and public transportation routes)

### Physical Features

Physical features of a site include its topography, soil type, and structures like trees and buildings within the site's boundaries. Local government and community organizations may already have some of this information. For the Erie County pilot site, many topographic maps were easily accessible via the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation's GIS websites (Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT), 2024). If local resources are not available, the [National Map Viewer](#) by the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) (2022) provides topographic maps for different regions around the country.

### Circulation

Circulation is the movement of people through, to, and around the site. This includes all modes of travel from walking to cycling to driving. The Trail Design Toolkit in the Design step evaluates information like traffic volume, traffic speed, and roadway dimensions to determine the most relevant trail type. This information can be found through local transportation, parks and recreation, or environmental departments' websites such as the [State Departments of Transportation GIS Website](#).

Traffic volume, speed, and dimensions can be found as layers within transportation maps. Examples of how the SEAS-GLWT project team planned for circulation can be found in the SEAS-GLWT Report Appendix C and pages 11-14 of the Trail Design Toolkit.

## Local Priorities

Local stakeholders drive many of the projects at the regional and municipal levels. Connecting with local expertise is crucial in order to gain buy-in and ensure a project is accepted and wanted by residents. Local stakeholders often have key insights that can greatly improve a project (Sustainability Directory, 2025).

In assessing local priorities, it is important to ask the following questions:

- How can I represent the needs of my community?
- When assessing community needs, who is helped? Who is harmed? Who is missing? (Ezell, 2022 p. 1).

**How can I represent the needs of my community?** Community residents can have very diverse perspectives, and representing all of them can be very difficult. Just as hidden stakeholders should be considered, so too should the various perspectives available within the community. From the key stakeholders identified in step 3, determine what their priorities are for the trail project and what other perspectives may exist.

**Who is helped? Who is harmed? Who is missing? (Ezell, 2022)** These three questions have the power to shape trail projects by better defining the “why” behind project motivations. By considering all the people who can be affected (and those missing or otherwise excluded), projects can become much more effective with greater stakeholder buy-in.

## Literature Review

Many state, county, and local governments have master plans relating to the building and planning of trail networks. Local municipality and state websites often have these community plans. These plans “inventory their existing trail network and create a set of criteria to guide its development and expansion” (Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, n.d.-c).

Reviewing past and previous plans can help identify potential funding sources, types of collaborators, and help align trail goals with previous and current trail initiatives.

Examples of plans include, but are not limited to:

- Long Range Transportation Plans
- State Transportation Improvement Plans
- City Master/Action Plans
- Outdoor Recreation Plans

Examples of how the project team reviewed current and planned work can be found in the SEAS-GLWT Report, Section 2.4 Literature Review.

## 1.5 Design

This section moves into the design phase of the trail design process. At this point, trail advocates may refer to the Trail Design Toolkit, part 3 of the SEAS-GLWT Starter Guide.

### Trail Design Toolkit

The Trail Design Toolkit is the companion piece to the Decision-making Framework. While the framework guides the decision-making and trail design processes, both parts of the Starter Guide are meant to be used iteratively.

The Trail Design Toolkit contains four main parts to guide trail advocates through selecting a relevant trail type for a trail project's selected site. The four sections are:

- Trail Design Guide: prompts users through yes or no scenarios, guiding the user to a specific trail type that best meets the needs of a proposed site
- Trail Type Information Cards: provide brief descriptions of each trail type, a diagram highlighting key design aspects, and an example of an existing trail for each trail type
- Native Plant Resource Guide: a collection of native plant resources for each Great Lakes state
- Supporting Information Appendix: trail design considerations and more in-depth details that specify dimensions for each trail type

For those interested in learning more about a planning process, learn more at [Trail Project Life Cycle by Professional TrailBuilders Association](#).

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# Appendix

## Trail Planning Worksheet

### Step 1: Envision

#### 1.1 Vision and Mission Statements

Draft a *vision statement* answering the questions, “What change do we want to create? Why do we want to achieve this project?” (RMC Learning Solutions, 2023)

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Draft a *mission statement* answering the questions, “How can we achieve this vision? What can we do today to make it happen?” (Piscopo, 2023)

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#### 1.2 Values

List some *values* are relevant to the project:

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### Step 2: Define Goals

List some potential *goals* for the short term, long term, and legacy.

Short term (0-3 years)

Long term (3-10 years)

Legacy (10+ years)

## Step 3: Define Stakeholders

### 3.1 Stakeholder groups

For each of the following *stakeholder groups*, list a few potential organizations and individuals that could fit in each group.

Decision-makers

Users

Implementers

### 3.2 Identify All Potential Stakeholders

Make a list of all *potential stakeholders* for the trail project:

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### 3.3 Defining Key Stakeholders

From the list created in step 3.2, refine the group into a list of *key stakeholders*:

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## Step 4: Analyze

### 4.1 Site Analysis

For the chosen site, list *physical features* that may influence different aspects of the trail (think about where water may drain or flood, erosion of soil, etc):

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Describe the *circulation* of the site (where people are moving in the area):

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### 4.2 Identify All Potential Stakeholders

Answer the following questions about the local community for the chosen site:

How can I represent the *needs of my community*?

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Who is *helped*? Who is *harmed*? Who is *missing*?

Helped

Harmed

Missing

