How Do Trails Happen?
by Sabrina Carlson

On September 25th 2017, twenty-eight students from Ms. Musta’s Outdoor Discovery class at Flagstaff High School gathered around to learn the process of taking a trail from idea to implementation.

We began our learning by considering the process of the Arizona Trail’s own Dale Shewalter. A Flagstaff school teacher, he was neither land manager nor professional cartographer. Merely an enthusiastic citizen with a vision to create an incredible resource for outdoor lovers in his home state and beyond. But trails don’t happen by magic, or even because one person has a vision.

We discussed the process of identifying goals, user groups, ideal locations, having a purpose to a trail, getting public support, land manager approval, having trail design professionals help establish sustainability and of course the all important, funding and gathering volunteers.

After our discussion students formed groups of four to write out their trail proposals. As they brainstormed their ideas they checked in about the feasibility of various suggestions and considered alternatives when their first choices were unlikely to work.

Once they had first drafts of their proposals written, we headed outside so students could lay out a small scale model of their trail using yarn. They were encouraged to incorporate sustainability considerations we had discussed previously and use found objects to indicate points of interest and trail user services in their models. Once everyone was finished laying out their models we took tour of everyone’s sites. Students had to explain the details of their trail, where they proposed building it and where they might seek funding and approval. The designs and goals were extremely variable. One group wanted ATV trail, while another wanted a horse only area, and a third designed a completely wheelchair accessible wilderness trail. By far the most popular proposal was downhill mountain biking trail.

The general public simply doesn’t have an understanding of the resources, human capital, and effort it takes to build and maintain trails. As a result it is assumed that this process is somehow easy and
expected. In reality without the efforts of both private citizens and public land managers we wouldn't have trails in wild places to enjoy. These students walked away with a tiny taste of how important public involvement is in the future of our trails and public lands access.

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