

Build a Blue Trail



NORTHERN FOREST CANOE TRAIL

PROVIDE ACCESS

During the planning process, you'll receive many suggestions for potential launch sites from individuals, organizations, government agencies, and businesses. Lay out the route on paper, consider these suggestions, and make initial selections based on the location of roads, accessibility of the terrain, and spacing along the route. Initial access typically will be at existing parks or open space, federal and state boating launches, private marinas, campgrounds, and lands owned by non-profit organizations. As the blue trail expands, additional access sites can be secured.

Now that you have identified potential access points, you face the challenging but rewarding job of obtaining permission to use lands for launches, campsites, and other facilities.

Private land: Easy access is vital to draw people to a blue trail and riverfront. Many times, this means working with private landowners. It's important to get landowner permission for blue trail users to use their property whether it's to access the river, camp overnight, or stop and stretch their legs.

Private landowners can open their land to recreational use by formal or informal agreements or may sell or donate land through conservation easements and acquisitions. To identify landowners, you can go to the tax assessor's office for copies of the tax parcel maps for each parcel of land in your blue trail corridor. These maps will also show the boundaries of individual parcels.

Private property owners will be interested in the stewardship and management services you will offer to ensure protection of their property. They will want to know about anticipated usage and plans for facilities and

services before agreeing to allow access to their land or exploring the possibility of an easement or acquisition.

For information on common landowner concerns see [Build a Blue Trail: Work with Landowners](#).

Public land: Even if land is publicly owned, it doesn't mean it will automatically be accessible to blue trail users. You will need to request permission from the public land manager. [Natural and recreational areas](#) are usually a good place to start. These areas may already have camping or other overnight accommodations and well-established launch sites. Public land managers will have many of the same questions as private property owners. Do your research and be well prepared when approaching these managers about becoming partners in your project.

Communicate with landowners and land managers

It's important to bring landowners and land managers into the process from the very beginning. By doing so, they will likely be more supportive of the blue trail and willing to talk to other landowners and land managers and get their support and involvement as well.

Working with landowners can be a rewarding experience but it also can be a time consuming process that will likely require patience, reaching difficult compromises, and facing outright rejection from time to time. Landowners, of course, do not have to participate, no matter how effectively you present your blue trail plans. Landowners are within their rights to walk away at anytime before a solid agreement is reached. But there are ways to communicate with landowners that will make forming effective partnerships easier.

Contact landowners and land managers by letter:

You may have better success by first writing to an owner or manager rather than making a cold call where a quick "no" is easier than a discussion. A letter can detail exactly what you want and include a brochure or other information about your blue trail, giving the recipient a chance to mull over your request and make any inquiries. Be sure to include your contact information and suggest a time you will check back with the owner or manager.

Introductory information: Compile an introductory package of information that includes a brief description, the blue trail vision, frequently asked questions, information on your state's liability laws, and any other details you think would be helpful. For information on your state's liability laws see [Resources: Liability](#).

Before approaching an owner or manager for permission to use their property, you should have the following in place:

- Trained volunteers or staff to assist in caring for the property
- Tools and equipment including workboats if the property is accessible only by water
- A management plan, be it a formal document or unwritten intentions
- A commitment to an ongoing relationship and regular communication with the manager or owner
- A single, reliable contact within your group

Make the request: Asking for access to a property is much like fundraising. It requires preparation and a gracious, thoughtful approach by an enthusiastic, knowledgeable, and trust-inspiring representative of the group. In your letter, let the landowner or manager know you will be calling them in a few days for a reply or to see if they have further questions. Therefore, when you call, there's no



JAMIE MIERAU

need for a lot of explanation and you can get down to business. It is wise to mention that other landowners in the area are being contacted simultaneously, so as to not infer the singling out of a property.

Try to arrange an in-person meeting at a time and place convenient to the owner or manager. At the meeting articulate the following:

- Benefits that will appeal to them (fostering an appreciation of nature, building a constituency for the resource, etc.)
- Your group's philosophy and policies about usage (Leave No Trace practices, etc.)
- The type of users they can anticipate on their property (paddlers, families, school groups, campers, etc.)
- Amount of anticipated usage
- Services you are willing to provide (periodic cleanups, habitat restoration, stewardship services, etc.)

If the owner or manager agrees to grant access to users, be sure to express your gratitude and follow that up with a letter acknowledging the agreement. Ask owners or managers if they would like to be listed where you publicly acknowledge other donors (newsletter, website, etc.) as providing access to their land

is a valuable donation. Also ask if they would allow the use of their name when reaching out to other landowners.

Assess the property: After an owner or manager agrees to grant access to their land, make a thorough assessment of the property, if you have not done so already. Your assessment may include:

- A description of the site, access points, amenities, and water body
- An inventory of sensitive wildlife habitat or fragile vegetation
- Identification of potential campsites, launch and day-use areas that would minimize impacts on the property
- An evaluation of the access point's ease of use from the water and safety concerns
- An investigation of any hazards, such as uncapped wells and hunter's traps
- A survey of neighboring communities for indications of potential opposition

Use the results of these studies to develop a policy on how the site will be managed.

Seal the deal: If the property is suitable, talk with the owner or manager in detail about their expectations of use and impacts and your group's ability to manage usage. Encourage the adoption of strict low-impact standards (no fires, carrying out human waste, etc.) for all sites along the blue trail, but let the owner or manager establish the rules and restrictions for the specific site.

Reach an understanding in writing. Some owners and managers prefer a simple letter reiterating agreements and responsibilities while others may request a legal document. Land trusts may prefer a stewardship and management plan based on the inherent qualities and characteristics of the property. Include a time period in all agreements with an

option to renew. It's wise to have your lawyer examine and approve your agreements before signing them.

Special thanks to the Rivers & Trails Program and Chesapeake Bay Gateways Network for their contribution to this section