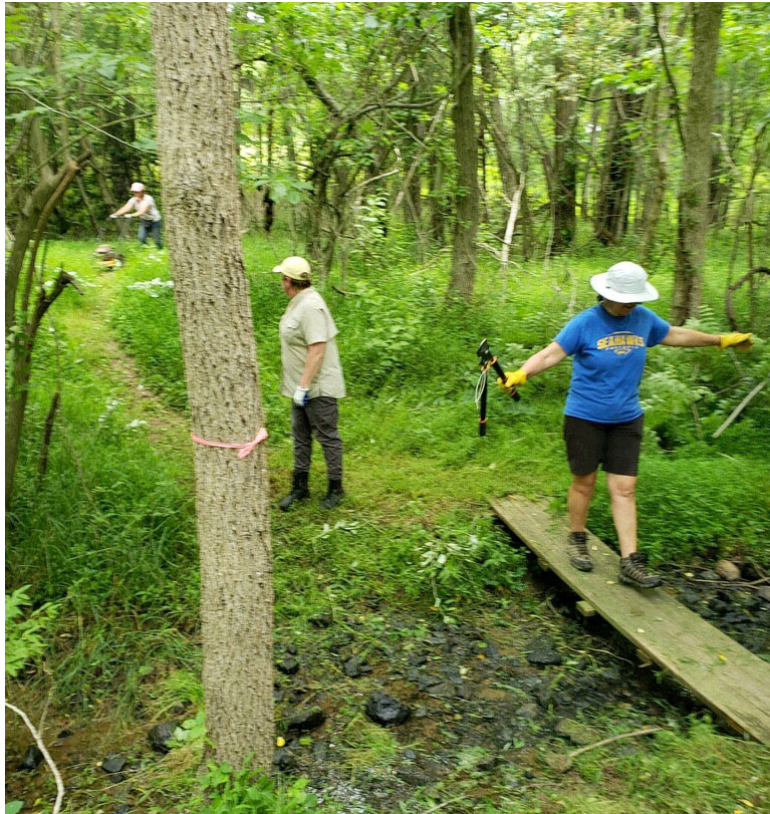


# Loudoun County's Big Vision For Trail Network

## Equine Alliance Efforts To Include Horses Have Paid Off

By Kelly Foltman, DVM



A crew of volunteers worked to open a seven-mile trail at Oatlands just south of Leesburg, Va. The trail opens to the public in October and will be suitable for horseback riding, mountain biking and hiking.

Loudoun County has a long and rich equestrian heritage, home to numerous and wide-ranging types of equestrian competitions, foxhunts, and pleasure riding. As the fastest growing county in Virginia, and one of the fastest growing in the nation, Loudoun County has surprisingly few public parks and very few public trails for horses. With increased development, places to ride on private property have diminished.

After more than a decade of consideration by various organizations looking at how to create a trail system in Loudoun, the Loudoun Board of Supervisors passed an initiative in January 2019 directing the Parks, Recreation and Outdoor Space (PROS) board to develop a detailed proposal for a network of countywide trails and linear

parks, and authorized funding to hire a consulting firm to create a master plan for the network. This is a signature project that could become a great model for other counties as well.

The Loudoun County Equine Alliance, in conjunction with Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy, Piedmont Environmental Council, International Mountain Biking, US Trail Ride, Coalition of Loudoun Towns and Potomac Heritage Trail Association, worked with members of the PROS board as an ad hoc committee called Loudoun Linear Parks and Trails (LPAT) to assist in creating broad goals and a request for proposal for a countywide, multi-modal trail network that will ultimately weave through the county. The key to developing

the political commitment for the trail network has been the alliance formed by multiple user groups.

In most locations this trail system will have a natural surface which is so essential for mountain bike cyclists and equestrians. Some sections will have parallel trails for bikes and or horses, and it is recognized that there will be some places that favor one user group over another. The system will tie into the bike/pedestrian transit infrastructure where possible. It will also use existing "spines" – trails and natural corridors such as stream valleys, the Potomac Heritage trail and the W&OD trail – and connect to parks that have, and could have, trails. Clearly, the western part and sections of the transition policy area of the county will have more equestrian friendly trails and parking. A key feature of making public trails work for horses is parking for trailers. It's such a simple thing, but often overlooked.

It is envisioned to have small off-shoots from the main trail system that will be designed for specific types of users; for example, there might be a "node" for mountain bikers that would include the types of obstacles they use, and another for a small cross-country course for equestrians. There will be consideration given to wildlife habitat as well as restoration of ecosystems from invasive plant species and erosion. Individual towns may put their own "flavor" into the trails that connect to them. We also envision a "blue way" system with public launches for canoes and other small nonmotorized watercraft. We are hoping that businesses along the trail corridors, such as wineries, breweries and bed and breakfasts, will be part of the trail build out.

The Loudoun County Equine Alliance has been involved in the push for a trail network since the Alliance's inception, making certain that equestrian use is fully represented in any plan. The consulting firm hired to produce the master plan has a resume of national successes with projects like this, and experience with equestrian use.

Done right, this visionary



**By having trails built for multiple user groups, the political interest in their development in rapidly-growing Loudoun County has increased.**

project will help Loudoun continue to be a "destination" for equestrians as it has been for more than a century.

On a smaller scale, the LCEA has been working on opening a seven-mile multi-use trail system at Oatlands in Leesburg. The trails will be open starting the first weekend of October. Use is by fee, and users can pay for either an annual or a day pass. The 400 plus acre property is owned by a private foundation, but it's central-Loudoun location and the historic mansion and gardens make it attractive as a good place to spend some time on horseback. Ultimately, the trails at Oatlands may become part of the countywide system as well.

Additional publicly accessible trails for equestrian use in Loudoun County are located at Temple Hall Farm and Franklin Park. The Virginia Horse Industry Board (VHIB) is also developing a statewide trail guide.

*About The Author: Kelly Foltman, DVM is president of the Loudoun County Equine Alliance, interim chair of the Rural Economic Development Council, co-chair of the Parks, Recreation and Outdoor Space Board and a board member of the Virginia Horse Industry Board. She is the owner of Dunthorpe Farm Veterinary Services where she practices acupuncture, chiropractic and equine dentistry. She and her husband also run a small bed and breakfast at their Dunthorpe Farm in Hillsboro, VA*