

Ambassador Program Summary and Recommendations

In 2007, East Coast Greenway Alliance (ECGA) decided to use the concept of “Ambassadors” (inspired by an American Hiking Society program) to increase awareness about (and potentially advocacy for) the East Coast Greenway and build support for its completion and stewardship. A grant for \$10,000 from REI, Inc., the outdoor equipment retailer, was obtained to fund a one year pilot program in ME, NH, MA, RI and CT.

Hundreds of organizations focusing on bicycling, walking, outdoor adventures, physical fitness, public health, etc. were emailed recruitment materials, including program and job descriptions. Members of the ECGA Board and State Committee Chairs were also asked to suggest volunteers to become Ambassadors.

Thirty-one volunteer Ambassadors, State Committee Chairs from ME, MA and CT and two Board members (Tony Barrett and David Read) attended training on March 8, 2008 in Boston. The content of the training was developed by ECGA staff to inform Ambassadors about:

- the current status of the ECG in their area and throughout the region
- the value of the ECG to local communities and their residents, muscle-powered tourism and its potential to contribute to local communities, and the environment.
- linkages to other trails and sites of natural, historic and cultural value

Ambassadors were introduced to their State Committee Chairs. Tips on selecting appropriate venues and how to handle opposition were also covered. At the conclusion of the training, Ambassadors were equipped with maps, brochures and a “toolkit” (on a CD) developed by staff to assist them in their efforts. Each Ambassador was also asked to report on their activities using a form, provided both online and in hard copy, designed to solicit information requested by REI.

The primary goal of the Ambassador Program was to increase knowledge about and support for the East Coast Greenway, other local trails and the benefits of trail use. We also asked the Ambassadors to provide State Committee members and ECGA’s Regional Trail Liaison with information about local officials and organizations relevant to completing the Greenway and increase support for ECGA through new memberships, volunteers and donors

The Ambassadors did an excellent job of “spreading the word” about the East Coast Greenway, the benefits of using and supporting it and other trails. Attachment #1 contains a list of the venues where they both informed about, and encouraged engagement with, the East Coast Greenway. As you will see Ambassadors responded to our request to help broaden the appeal of the ECG by thinking beyond the “usual suspects” (those associated with bicycling) when selecting venues. If the requisite support for completion of the ECG depends on public awareness of its existence and value, this Ambassador Program has made a significant contribution toward that goal in New England. The ECGA Ambassador Program has inspired the Bicycle Coalition of ME to create their own “Ambassador” Program in ME, where they will be known as “Spokesmen”.

ECGA Ambassadors were less successful in accomplishing the goals of encouraging membership (and donors) and recruiting other volunteers. Also, their interactions with State Committee Chairs varied from state to state. These issues are addressed in the recommendations below.

As a pilot program, the experiences of these Ambassadors was particularly important as a source of information for improving the program, should the funds needed to replicate the program throughout the ECG region. Evaluation questionnaires were sent to all 28 Ambassadors.* Just over 50% (15) returned the evaluation. Their responses (to be found in a separate document on the ECGA website...location to be announced in the next e-newsletter) were very positive, with 64% of respondents stating that they would like to continue to serve as Ambassadors. None stated that it was a negative experience for them.

* The original training group included 31 Ambassadors. Two Ambassadors discontinued their participation due to health and family issues. Jeff Miller participated in the training but left the area to assume the leadership of the Thunderhead Alliance in Washington, D.C. shortly thereafter.

After reviewing the Ambassador's comments, I would like to make the following suggestions for improvement:

Training:

- Multiple training sites and dates within a region would be preferable
- More discussion of membership in ECGA: what does being a member of ECGA mean other than paying a membership fee?; what are the benefits?
- More discussion of where money given to ECG goes and impact of advocacy efforts on local trail users
- Discussion of best ways to get commitment from interested people to become new members...what steps to take
- More time spent on contents of toolkit, with particular emphasis on reporting form and membership sign up sheet
- More emphasis on universal appeal of ECG, not just for bicyclists – in both content of presentations and choice of venue
- Continue to emphasize ECG as part of network of trails and benefits of using and supporting all trails – helpful in conveying message to local folks
- Establish stronger connection with State Committees and Regional Trail Liaison and more clearly describe ways Ambassadors can be helpful to both
 - Provide information about what volunteers in each state are currently doing
 - Provide information about number of paying supporters in each state
- More discussion of guidelines for selecting appropriate venues
- A sample event display provided

Continuing Support :

- Provide reminders about:
 - Contents of toolkit available for their use
 - Report form on website
 - Using estimates to report data asked for...no need to be exact!
 - Signing up new members, using rack card or sign up sheet (and location)
 - Feeding information to State Committees and Regional Trail Liaison that could help in completion of ECG
 - Staff availability to help answer questions, select venues, etc.
- Include in toolkit, sign up sheet for those who want more information (to be forwarded to ECGA staff for follow up)
- Provide more information about venues other Ambassadors are using
- Find way to bring Ambassadors together, on a regular basis, with other Ambassadors and with State Committee Chairs (in person or electronically)
 - To build greater sense of community
 - To increase commitment
 - To share experiences, challenges, tips, insights
- Provide refreshers on training info via teleconference
 - Update info on ECG progress for each Ambassador's locale
- Provide most recent newsletters for Ambassadors – good tool to inform public about ECG and ECGA

Ambassador Wish List -- Provide:

- Advocacy for ECG as part of green infrastructure
- Basic information about ECG to post in kiosks (using UV inhibiting paper and ink)
- Incentives for joining -- ? caps
- Slide show on a digital frame showing off local ECG route
- Opportunities to partner with other Ambassadors