

Trails Technical Document #9

Accessibility and the Universal Trail Assessment Process

Prepared by
NYS Office of Parks, Recreation and
Historic Preservation
Planning Bureau
Agency Building 1
Empire State Plaza
Albany, NY 12238

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Accessibility and the Universal Trail Assessment Process (UTAP)

A primary goal for all New York State Parks Trail Systems is to develop sustainable trails that have minimal impacts on the environment, require little maintenance, and meet the needs of the users. This document is one of a series of technical documents developed by State Parks to provide standards and guidelines for trail design and development, accessibility, and trail assessment and maintenance techniques that help ensure a sustainable trail system. Additional topics include guidelines for trail signage, trail monitoring, and trail closure and restoration. The complete list of technical documents is provided on the web at:

<http://www.nysparks.state.ny.us/recreation/trails/technical-assistance.aspx>.

These documents were designed for use within New York State Parks but can be used as resources for trail projects outside of the Parks. Within State Parks, use of these documents for implementation of trail projects will be done in conjunction with a review and approval process as laid out in *Technical Document 7 - Trail Project Approval Process for NYS Parks*. These documents may be updated periodically. Additional documents will be developed in the future as part of this series.

This document provides an overview of the need for evaluation of characteristics of trails to help determine accessibility of trails within State Parks. In addition, it discusses the use of the Universal Trail Assessment Process as a method by which to collect and provide detailed information to the public about trail characteristics.

Accessibility

State Park staff should plan to evaluate the potential of trails to be modified to meet federal standards for designation as accessible to persons with disabilities. Accessible is a term used to describe a facility or trail that can be approached, entered, and used by persons with disabilities and that complies with standards established under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Architectural Barriers Act (ABA). If a particular trail doesn't meet those standards, the information obtained is still useful for individuals to determine whether or not that trail is appropriate for them. Objective information about the trail conditions will enhance the accessibility, safety, and satisfaction of all trail users, both with and without disabilities.

Existing trail systems should be assessed to determine which trails are most suitable for use by persons of all abilities and actions that need to be taken to make trails more accessible, if appropriate. New trails or existing trails that require rehabilitation should be designed to improve accessibility for persons with disabilities. Adequate vehicular parking access to trails should be included as an integral part of accessible trail development.

The *Draft Final Accessibility Guidelines for Outdoor Developed Areas* (AGODA), published in 2009 by the federal Architectural and Transportation Barriers Compliance Board ("Access Board"), contains the most recent standards used to design and construct pedestrian trails to be accessible and to assess accessibility. There are some departures permitted from the technical provisions. Although the AGODA only applies to federal agencies or for trails that are designed or constructed using federal funds, OPRHP will follow the proposed guidelines as closely as

practicable and apply standards consistently on all State Park pedestrian trails. For further details, refer to the AGODA at <http://www.access-board.gov/outdoor/index.htm>.

All trails, but especially frontcountry pedestrian trails (greenway trails, interpretive trails, and hiking trails that are close to a road), should be evaluated to determine the following, when practicable:

- Total trail length (in linear feet)
- Length of trail segments meeting accessible standards (in linear feet)
- Location of the first point of exception to accessible standards
- Running slope (average and maximum)
- Maximum cross slope
- Minimum clear tread width
- Surface type, firmness, and stability
- Tread obstacles that limit accessibility
- Elevation (trailhead, maximum, and minimum)
- Total elevation change

GPS data collection can provide most of the information above but further assessment is required to determine if the trail can be designated as accessible. Refer to the technical provisions of the AGODA for details on how measurements should be made to assess trails for accessibility. It should be noted that the assessment needs to include the distance from the user's vehicle to the trailhead as well as the length of the trail itself.

Basic information about trail characteristics should be displayed at the trailhead of all trails regardless of whether they meet accessible standards. This allows the trail user the opportunity to determine if the trail is appropriate for their abilities.

Universal Trail Assessment Process

One method of trail evaluation uses the Universal Trail Assessment Process (UTAP), a system to collect and provide detailed information to the public about grade, cross slope, surface type, obstacles, and width of any type of trail. Beneficial Designs, Inc.

(<http://www.beneficialdesigns.com/>) developed UTAP to objectively document conditions in outdoor, natural environments in order to provide useful information for anyone who might want to use a trail, regardless of ability.

In an effort to assist State Parks' staff in assessing trails for accessibility, UTAP Training Guides and key equipment used in the assessment process have been provided to each Regional Office.

Each regional office has received:

- 1 - UTAP Training Guide
- 2 - Suunto Clinometers
- 1 – SmartTool (inclinometer)

Additional items that are required for UTAP assessments include:

- 2 Compasses or GPS unit (neither required if trail already GPSd)

- Collapsible Rolatape
- Tape Measure
- Clipboards
- Marking Flags (5-10) and marking tape or chalk
- Data forms (multiple copies) – make copies from the Training Guide

The Training Guide provides a step by step detailed process of how to assess trail trends and trail features, discusses the trail assessment team, and how to apply and use the UTAP. In addition, it provides options for disseminating trail information to users.

Important: Coordination with the State Park Resource Analysis Unit (GIS) within the Planning Department in Albany is required *prior* to performing the universal trail assessment process. The GIS unit has the TrailWare 2.0 – Trail data management software used to process the Trail Assessment Information (TAI) that can then be used to develop appropriate signage for trails and other reports. Trail projects such as this need to be coordinated with GIS staff to confirm Albany staff availability and support. In addition, the GIS unit has GPS units that may be loaned out to Regions/Parks for use in trail assessments. Please contact the GIS unit with any inquiries.

UTAP training sessions are provided periodically and have been coordinated through Parks & Trails New York (518-434-1583 or ptny@ptny.org). Efforts will be made by State Parks to coordinate regional trainings. Additional information on UTAP is provided on the National Trails Training Partnership website at <http://www.americantrails.org/resources/accessible/UTAPsum.html>.