

## Custis Trail Needs Assessment and Priority Improvements Study

### Summary of Engagement (Existing Conditions and Experiences) – Winter 2024

#### Project Background

Forming one of the three legs of the 16-mile Arlington Loop trail network, the Custis Trail is a major east-to-west active transportation corridor within Arlington County, providing access to businesses, neighborhoods, schools, parks, as well as neighboring jurisdictions (i.e., Falls Church, Fairfax County, the District of Columbia). The Master Transportation Plan (MTP) identifies the Custis Trail as a primary bicycling corridor, given its importance in the overall network and how it provides connectivity and access to 13 Arlington civic associations, six Arlington public schools, and six Metrorail stations. Several County Board-adopted efforts provide a foundation for studying the Trail, including but not limited to, the Public Spaces Master Plan, the Langston Boulevard Area Plan, and the Forestry and Natural Resources Plan.

#### Project Goals

The purpose of this Study is to develop a better understanding of the current state of the Trail to document existing deficiencies and to identify opportunities for improvements. The results of the Study will inform where the County should invest in more detailed scoping and design for future capital projects through the County's Capital Improvement Plan. The assessment will be shared among County departments and other interested stakeholders to support ongoing coordination on trail network improvements, addressing stormwater management issues, and supporting safe and convenient multimodal trips throughout the County and region. The Study will also provide a foundation for the County to seek regional, state, and federal funding opportunities for trail improvements along this important link in Northern Virginia's regional trail network.

#### Public Engagement on Existing Conditions and Experiences

In February 2024, the County kicked off the study's public engagement to gather and assess the community's thoughts on and experiences with the Custis Trail. The online engagement included a feedback form and an interactive online map.

The interactive map provided opportunities for Trail users to share stories and feedback about their experiences, travel habits, and safety issues, and allowed respondents to place pins along the project corridor to note concerns, ideas, likes, dislikes, and general comments.

Approximately 175 individuals provided 561 comments on the interactive online map.

918 individuals provided feedback through the online form regarding their uses of the Trail, as well as demographic information such as parts of Arlington where they reside.

Outreach channels included:

- Posting information on the project webpage, beginning the week of January 21.
- Posting engagement information on County social media platforms beginning the week of February 11.
- Advertisement in Countywide transportation update newsletters.
- Earned media from GazetteLeader and ARLnow on December 29, 2023, and February 8, 2024, respectively.
- Email stakeholder outreach to established Arlington Civic Associations, the Rosslyn BID, and local active transportation advocacy organizations.
- Posting yard signs promoting the engagement opportunity along the Trail.

As demonstrated in Figure 1 below, a quarter of respondents (25%) reside within the 22201 zip code, which includes portions of Ballston, Clarendon, Court House, Lyon Village, and Ashton Heights. Approximately 15% of all respondents reside in the 22205 zip code, which includes portions of the Bluemont, Westover Village, Waycroft – Woodlawn, and Dominion Hills neighborhoods. Combined, about 40% of respondents lived in a zip code close to the Trail while approximately 17% of respondents reported living outside of the six Arlington County zip codes closest to the Trail.

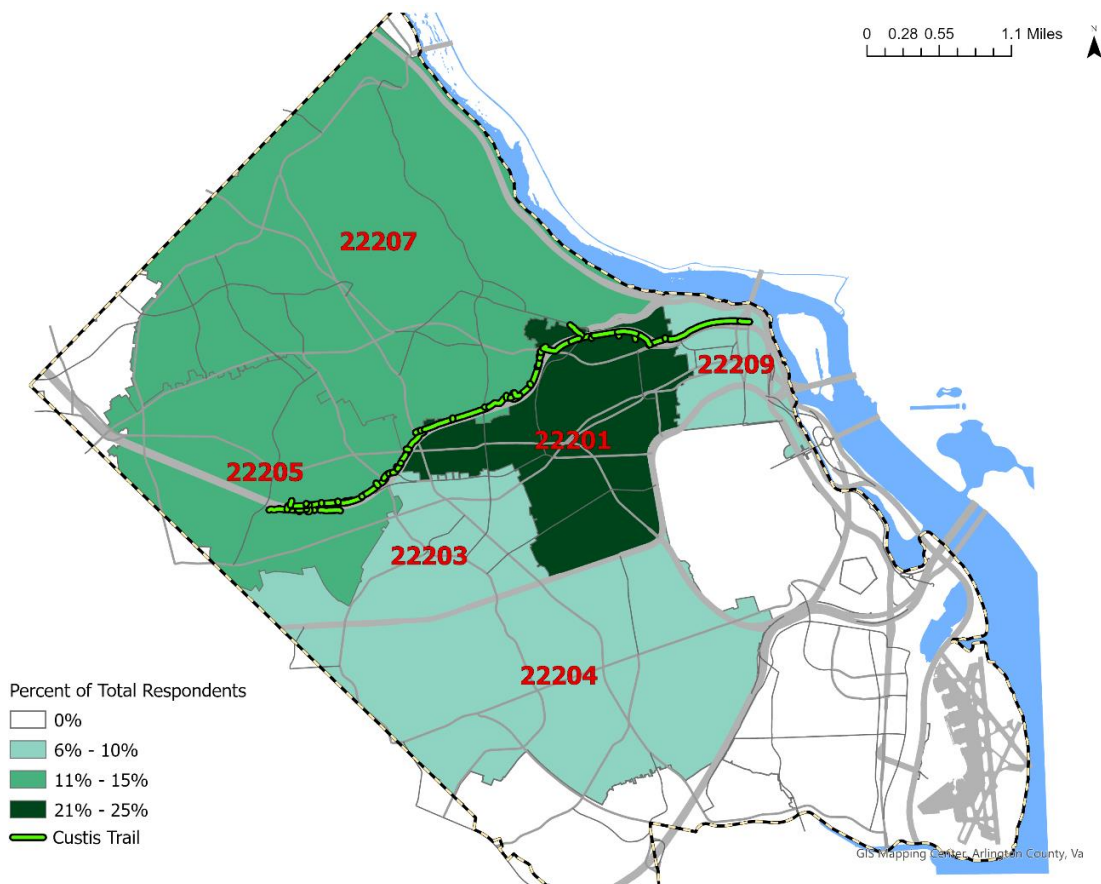


Figure 1. Feedback from respondents by zip code, shown as a % of total respondents

The project team also held an in-person bicycling tour with members of the County’s Bicycle Advisory Committee along the entirety of the Trail on February 10<sup>th</sup>, 2024. The bicycling tour focused on existing conditions, personal experiences, and reviewed opportunities for improvement along the Trail from the Washington and Old Dominion Trail intersection to Oak Street near the Francis Scott Key Bridge.

Finally, several community residents provided written correspondences through email to the project team to share their experiences of walking and bicycling along the Trail in addition to identifying potential improvements.

### What We Heard

From the feedback form, most respondents live within Arlington (86%). Over a quarter of respondents reported commuting through Arlington (26%) while about 16% of all respondents mentioned they work in the County. When asked how they currently use the Custis Trail, respondents chose a variety of transportation modes, but bicycles were the most popular response, chosen by 78% of respondents (see Figure 2 below). Over half (54%) reported walking as one way they travel along the Trail. About 46% of respondents reported that they use the Trail for jogging and running.

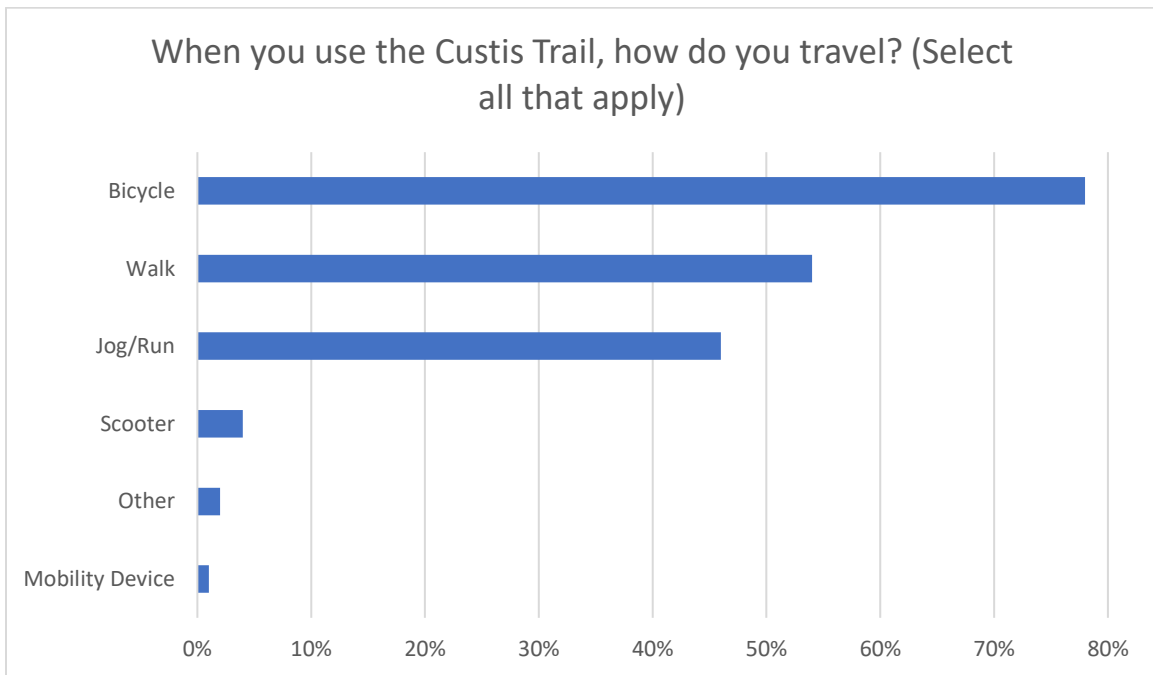


Figure 2: Feedback form responses, illustrated as a percentage of all respondents

Next the feedback form asked people about their typical travel behaviors and more about how they use the Custis Trail.

When asked about how often they travel along the Trail with other people, respondents mentioned that they “very frequently” or “frequently” used the Custis Trail with family and friends (42% combined). About 31% of respondents said that they “occasionally” used the Trail with family and friends. Comparatively, almost two-thirds of people replied that they “very frequently” or “frequently” used the Trail with young children or their pets (12% and 14%, respectively). Approximately half of all respondents said that they “never” traveled along the Trail with older adults.

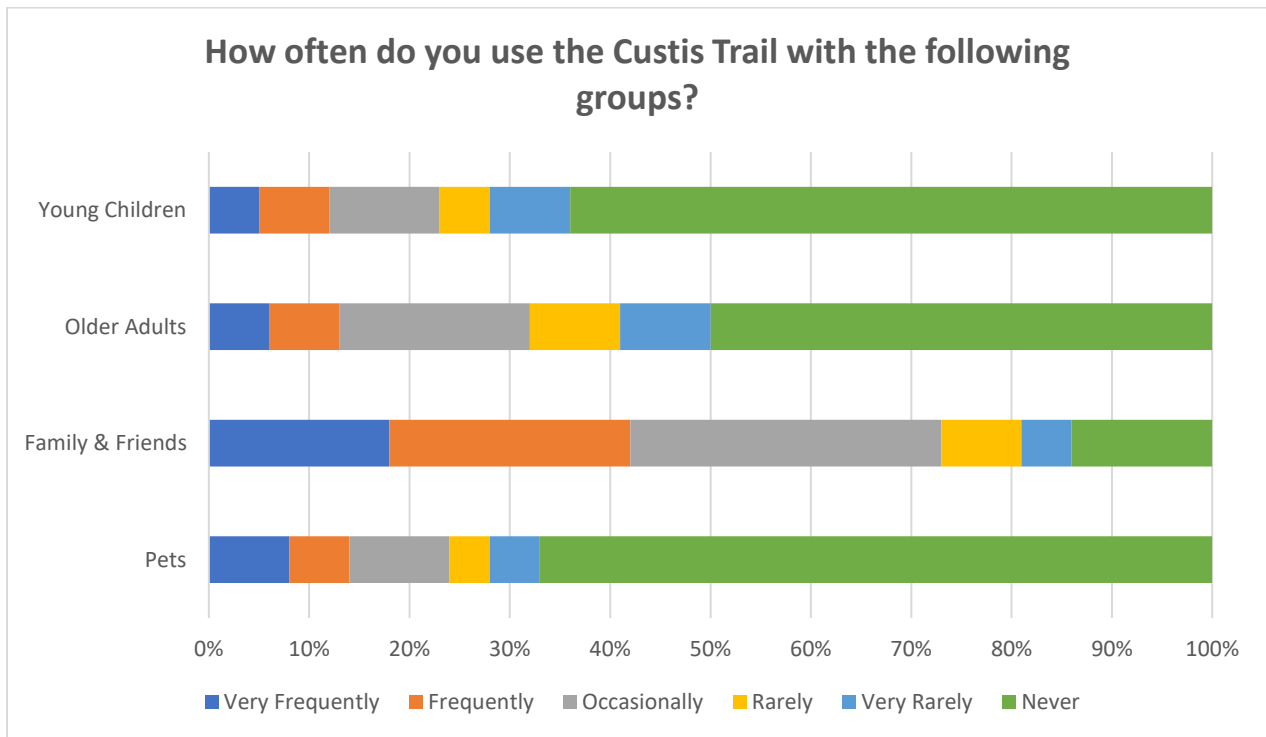
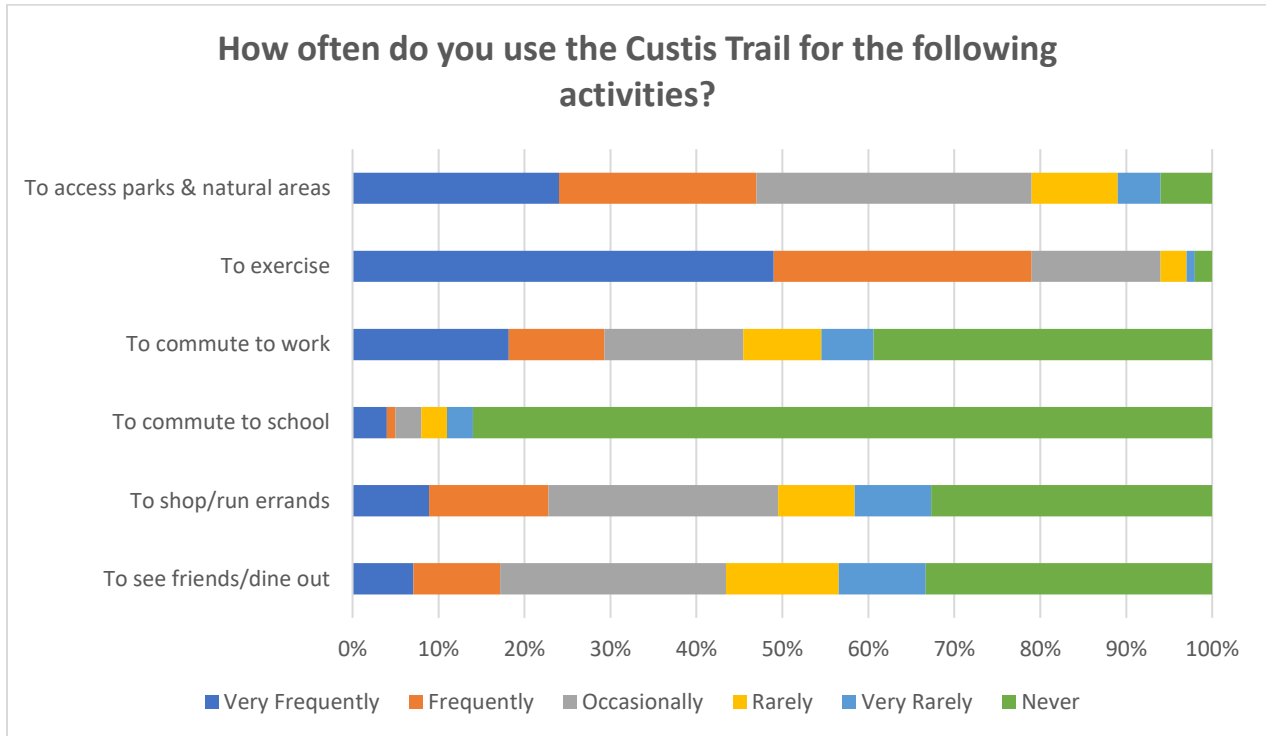


Figure 3: Feedback form responses, illustrated as a percentage of all respondents

888 participants provided feedback on the purpose of their travel along the Trail. Highlights of the responses include:

- The three most popular trail purposes that respondents engage in "very frequently" or "frequently" are exercise (79% of respondents), accessing parks and natural areas (47%), and commuting to work (29%).
- Almost half (47%) of respondents said that they “very frequently” or “frequently” traveled along the Trail to access parks and natural areas.
- 79% of respondents reported that they “very frequently” or “frequently” used the Custis Trail for exercise, compared to 4% who said they “rarely” or “very rarely” did.
- 39% of respondents said that they “never” used the Trail to commute to work compared to 29% who said that they “very frequently” or “frequently” did.
- 86% of respondents answered that they “never” used the Trail to commute to school. However, it should be noted that only two out of 345 respondents (less than 1%) who reported their age fell within the “19 and under” age range.

- About a third (33%) of respondents mentioned that they “never” use the Custis Trail to go shopping or to run errands however, 27% said that they did.
- Similarly, approximately 33% of respondents answered that they “never” use the Trail to visit friends or to dine out, while 26% said that they “occasionally” did.



*Figure 4: Feedback form responses, illustrated as a percentage of all respondents*

Overall, key takeaways from reviewing community responses:

- When reporting their age within the feedback form, reported trail usage was nearly identical across age brackets (20 to 29, 30 to 39, 40 to 49, and 50 to 59).
- People report using the Custis Trail primarily for recreational purposes such as personal exercise and to access natural environments. Despite general shifts in commuting patterns, commuting trips between home and work continues to be a reason why people report to using the Trail.
- The Trail, although heavily used by Arlingtonians, is also an important regional asset given that 26% of respondents indicated that they use the Trail to commute through Arlington between out-of-County destinations.
- Through the lens of generalized origins and destinations, over three-quarters of respondents reported traveling by bicycle when using the Trail, which suggests that users are traveling across longer distances when on the Custis Trail.



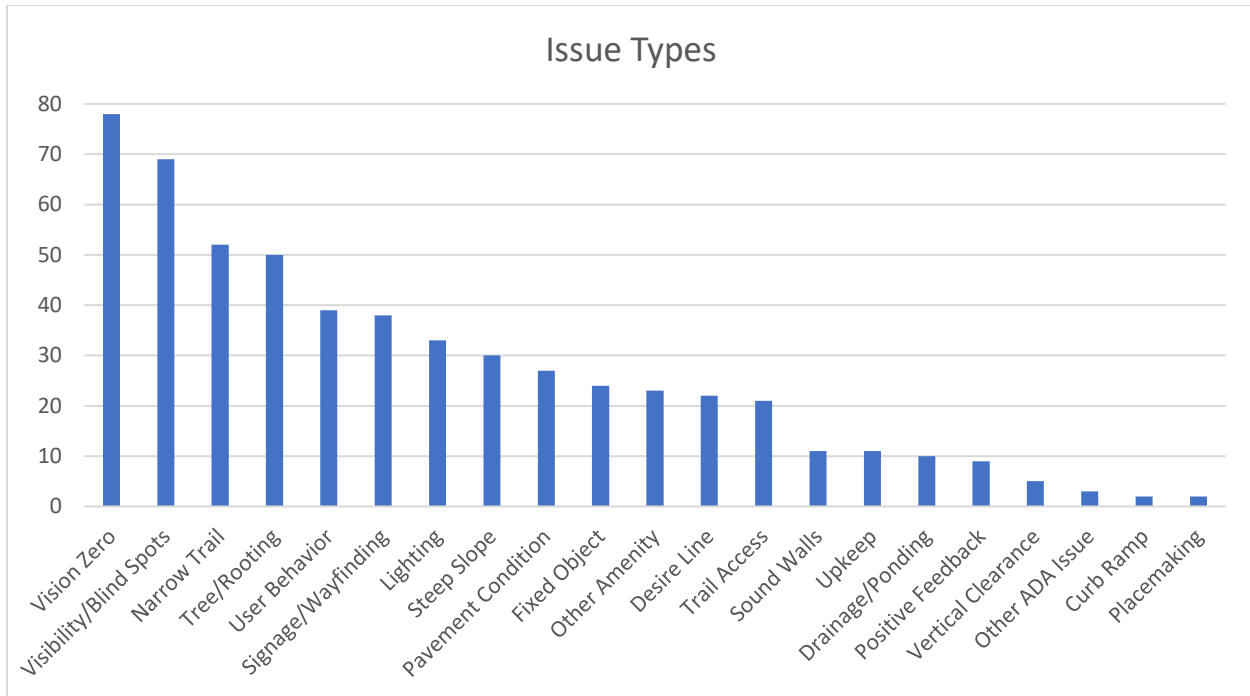


Figure 6: Commonly reported Trail issue types as identified in online feedback map

Across all 21 Issue Types, the project team was able to find common themes, which captured repeated observations shared by participants. In summary, these themes include:

- Concerns expressed about existing Custis Trail crossings at Lynn Street and Quinn Street.
- Bumpiness and pavement damage of the Trail due to tree root heaves and general wear and tear.
- People reporting their unease with bicycle users traveling at high speeds, especially in places where there are existing curves or steep slopes.
- Several specific locations where people have limited visibility due to blind spots at curves.
- Lighting concerns for individuals traveling at night.
- Desire for enhancements to trailheads such as wider access trails, additional trail connections from neighborhoods, and amenities, such as water fountains and benches.
- Interest in additional tree plantings and expanded natural surface areas.
- Desire for updated and better wayfinding throughout the Custis Trail to access specific destinations such as schools and neighborhoods, as well as to trailheads.
- Support for additional maintenance and placemaking of the Trail, particularly when it comes to trash removal, sound walls, and public art.

#### BAC Group Bicycle Ride

Project team staff organized a group bicycle ride which included members of the Arlington Bicycle Advisory Committee to document feedback of existing conditions in-person, discuss opportunities for improvement, and to observe trail behaviors of users in real time. Over the

course of the tour, the group stopped at several established trailheads and at-grade intersection crossings. Full notes collected during the group ride can be found in the appendix. In addition to many of the comments already identified in this document, Committee members shared additional observations and remarks which can be summarized as follows:

- The Trail lacks a cohesive signage and wayfinding system. Committee members reiterated how existing trail signs are outdated compared with current standards, signs may be too small and illegible especially for people traveling by bike, and several trailheads/amenities are not well-marked.
- At several Custis Trail intersections, sight distances are limited, causing visibility issues for people driving motor vehicles with people walking, biking, and rolling. Along the Trail itself, visibility was also cited as an issue because of overgrown vegetation, particularly during the summer months.
- The width of the Trail is narrow along many stretches, which is further exacerbated by the placement of lighting posts, soundwalls, stormwater concrete channels, and log barriers.
- Trailheads lack amenities such as fix-it bike repair stations and crosswalks are missing at adjoining neighborhood streets.
- Opportunities exist to leverage rain gardens, green infrastructure, and public art such as wall murals to beautify the trail and increase resiliency to reduce the amount of maintenance required.

### Next Steps

The project team is developing general and location-specific recommendations for the Custis Trail, informed by existing conditions engagement, County and State planning guidance, consultant support, and interdepartmental staff coordination. These concepts will be incorporated into the draft report in May 2024 with final publication of the Custis Trail Needs Assessment and Priority Improvements Study to be shared the following month in June 2024. Project updates will be announced on the website and promoted via the County's communications channels.

### More Information

Project Page: <https://www.arlingtonva.us/Government/Projects/Project-Types/Transportation-Projects/Custis-Trail-Needs-Assessment>

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