



# DRAWING POWER FROM PUBLIC USES

Trails, Gardens and Parks  
Generate Positive Vibes  
for Utilities and Communities



A utility's right-of-way still accommodates power lines. A stormwater system's expanse still serves as a filter. And a landfill still collects trash.

But such infrastructure hubs are becoming much more these days.

Major projects that once were limited to their primary functions now are embracing amenities, ones that generate public interest and build broader support. Utilities allow residents to plant strawberries in the shadows of transmission line towers. Solutions for stormwater treatment flow into plans for public walkways and wildlife refuges.

And landfills? How about turning a pile of communal leftovers into a patch primed for public participation — where amateur ornithologists count birds, Boy Scouts camp out and dozens of other visitors stop by to hike, bike or just plain relax.

It's the same place where some 80,000 tons of refuse ends up each year.

"A landfill isn't a hole in the ground that has rats running all around in garbage," says Hank Koch, longtime solid waste director in La Crosse County, Wisconsin, where the area's 350-acre landfill is

transitioning waste areas into parkland. "It's an engineering facility. We want people to view us. We want people to see what we're doing."

These days, properties that previously had been off-limits are now welcoming folks for visits — and even encouraging them to stay awhile. The expanded uses are mounting as owners of large infrastructure assets search for ways to build public trust, improve community relations and turn potential sources of complaints into robust communal resources.

## POWERFUL PARTNERSHIPS

Rights-of-way used by power utilities are increasingly regarded as fertile ground for public partnerships, given such properties' linear layouts and relative lack of insurmountable obstructions. Utilities can work with municipalities to develop trail systems and with other groups to facilitate community gardens alongside and near substations and support facilities.

For trails, a utility can invest some of its administrative power to clear the way beneath its transmission lines. Maintenance crews can prepare soil, spread mulch and even plant shrubs in buffer areas surrounding substations, giving volunteers an opportunity to exercise their green thumbs and even harvest tomatoes, cut flowers or simply take in scents and enjoy the view.

A relatively small investment in trails also can help generate a positive buzz for future transmission projects. While transmission lines deliver reliable, efficient power, they also tend to attract resistance from nearby residents. By integrating trails and gardens into existing and future projects, utilities can reframe the conversation about what power lines mean to a community.

"A next-generation trail system gives our clients an opportunity to present transmission line corridors as a



Trails on utility rights-of-way connect communities.



A landfill can provide excellent — albeit temporary — living space for Boy Scouts and other campers.

community asset," says Mark Van Dyne, vice president and general manager of the Environmental Studies & Permitting Group at Burns & McDonnell.

Such efforts are not alone. Among the most widespread programs to link public assets with private resources is ongoing transformation of railroad rights-of-way into paths for walking, skating, riding and other activities. The Rails-to-Trails Conservancy has spent three decades advocating on behalf of such efforts, and today counts conversions of rail lines into more than 30,000 miles of rail and multiuse trails.

The conservancy figures there is potential for another 8,000 miles of such trails out there, waiting to be built. The organization embraces such segments — particularly in urban areas — as outlets for recreation, transportation and increased physical activity that safely connect people to jobs, schools, businesses, parks and more.

"One mile of trail can completely redefine the livability of a community," the conservancy says. With carefully structured partnerships and agreements in place, utilities are positioned to grow the livability of their communities with asset upgrades like trails and community gardens.

## BENEFICIAL TREATMENT

Treatment systems also are finding ways to expand their public presence. In Newport Beach, California, the Big Canyon Restoration and Water Quality Improvement Project is busy turning environmental challenges into public opportunities.

Constructing a treatment wetland along Big Canyon Creek will filter selenium and help

address potential issues with metals, toxins, fecal indicator bacteria and other pollutants during periods of heavy rain. The project includes more than 6 acres of restoration of native flood plain habitat, stream restoration and invasive plant removal, all of which will attract native wildlife while improving water quality.

Plans call for walking trails where visitors will be able to interact with an area revitalized with beneficial plants, insects and animals.

"We'll have recreational trails that will circle around the entire area for future generations," says Steve Gruber, who is working on the integrated system as a project manager for Burns & McDonnell.

Back in Wisconsin, officials in La Crosse County have been working with Burns & McDonnell on short- and long-term plans to draw benefits from ongoing landfill operations. Methane gas already is being used to help generate power for a nearby healthcare campus. Sections of the landfill either are used now for recreation or being prepared for such activities during the decades ahead.

"We're not creating anything new," says Nick Nichols, the county's sustainability coordinator. "We're just taking a lot of cool ideas and putting them into place. This is not rocket science. It's just being visionary, using what's in our own backyard and preserving it for future generations."

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