



MEMORANDUM

Date: Monday, November 14, 2022

To: PMT and SCVAP Trails Stakeholder Advisory Committee

From: Matt Hastie and Brandon Crawford, MIG | APG
Karen Swirsky, KAI

Subject: Sisters Country Trails Expansion Concept Plan – Stakeholder Committee Draft

INTRODUCTION

In early 2022, Deschutes County received a Transportation and Growth Management Grant to implement Action 4.1 of the Sisters Country Vision Action Plan.¹ The strategy reads:

Livable Sisters Strategy 4 Action 4.1 (Trails Expansion Outreach)

“Conduct community outreach to gain input for trail connections between Sisters and Sisters Country.”

Sisters Country refers to the attendance boundary of Sisters School District, which is comprised of the northwest region of Deschutes County (Figure 1). Strategy 4, Action 4.1 was directed towards the community’s desire for a more complete system of trails for non-motorized uses (walking, bicycling, and horseback riding). MIG|APG is leading this outreach process and has developed a draft Trail Expansion Concept Plan for non-motorized trails and connections. The Concept Plan, developed with community input, is intended to be integrated into the County’s Transportation System Plan (TSP). Once adopted into the TSP, the map can be used to inform future project lists and funding opportunities. This draft Concept utilized a virtual community open house and survey, Stakeholder Advisory Committee input, and interviews conducted with the Sisters Parks and Recreation District, Oregon Cycles, Sisters Trails Alliance, Oregon Equestrian Trails, and Central Oregon Trails Alliance.

This Concept memo is organized into three sections:

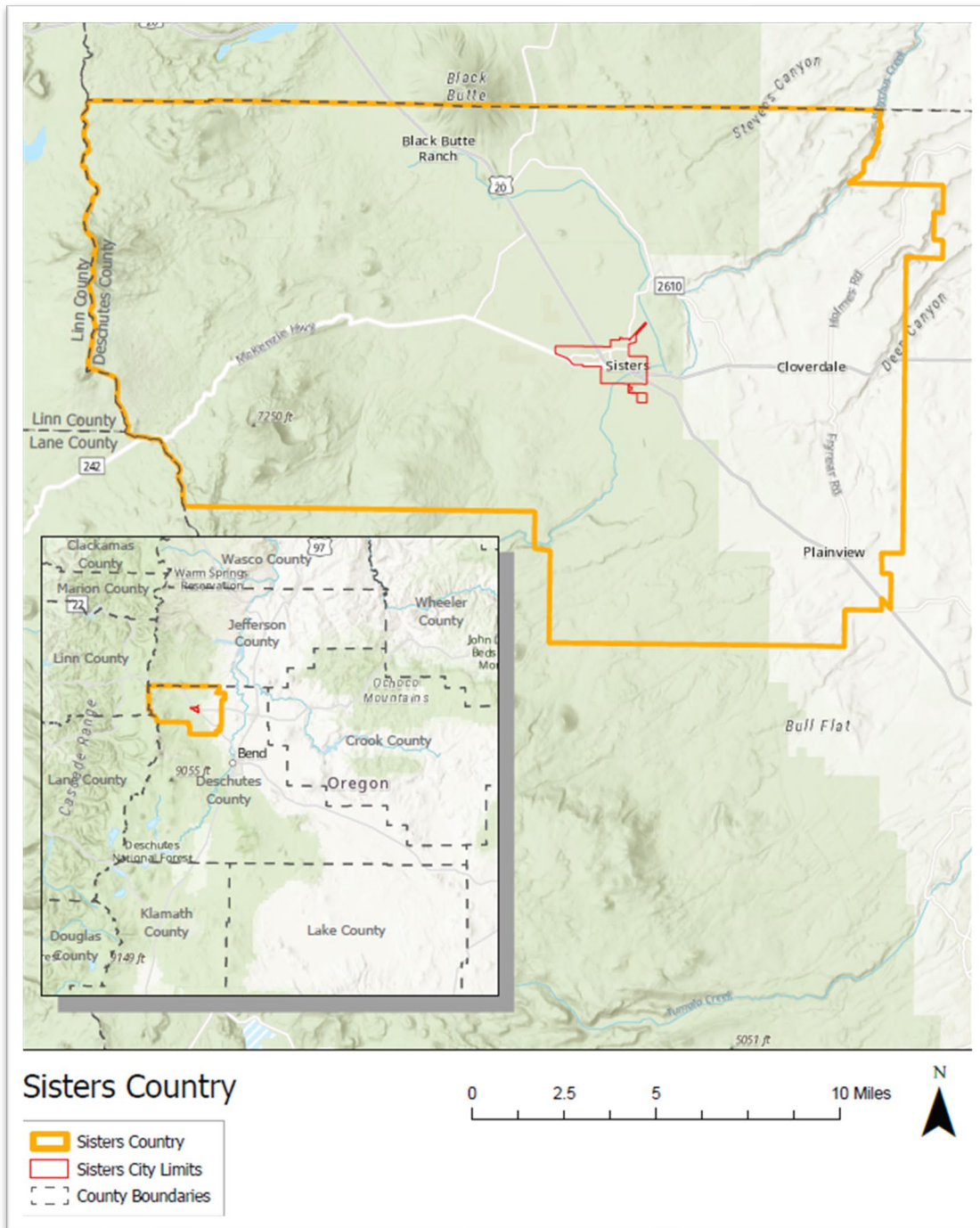
1. **Proposed Trails.** Recommendations for proposed trails that build from the trail proposals and work from the Sisters Trail Alliance, Central Oregon Trails Alliance, and Oregon

¹ Sisters Country Vision Action Plan: https://www.ci.sisters.or.us/sites/default/files/fileattachments/community_development/page/12721/scv-final-action-plan-updated_june_2019.pdf

Equestrian Trails. Community feedback and stakeholder input was gathered on these trail proposals.

2. **Planning Process.** Identification and outline of likely potential federal, state, and local planning processes that may be required for new trails.
3. **Deschutes County Transportation System Plan (TSP).** Summary of coordination with the TSP and provide preliminary trail policy recommendations as they relate to Sisters Country.

Figure 1: Sisters Country location in Deschutes County



PROPOSED TRAILS

For this Concept Plan, a 14-member Stakeholder Advisory Committee was formed to help guide trail recommendations. The Advisory Committee consists of representatives from the following local and regional groups and organizations:

- Sisters Trail Alliance (STA)
- Central Oregon Trails Alliance (COTA)
- Oregon Equestrian Trails (OET)
- Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT)
- United States Forest Service (USFS)
- Deschutes County Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committee (BPAC)
- Deschutes County
- City of Sisters
- Adaptive trails users advocate

“More trails would be great. This is the most beautiful area and it’s so great to enjoy it. Education for users of the trail is important to ensure the trails are used respectfully and with care.”

—Survey participant

Prior to this project, stakeholder members from STA, OET, and COTA developed a list of proposed non-motorized trails mainly located within Sisters Country. The proposed trails are intended for non-motorized activities, including walking/hiking, biking, and horseback riding. As part of their proposal process, preliminary drafts of proposed trails were shared with the USFS for initial review and feedback. These proposed trails are incorporated into this project to help advance trail expansion in Sisters Country

The proposed trails were also shared with the public during the June and July Sisters Trails Virtual Open House (Appendix A). The Open House included an interactive web mapping tool intended to help visitors navigate existing and proposed trails. The Open House also included a survey with a series of questions regarding trails in the area and level of support for proposed trails shown on the web map. Over half of the respondents provided feedback in support of the proposed trail connections, expansions, or realignments, and approximately one-quarter provided feedback with concerns or proposed edits to the proposed trail map. The remaining one-quarter didn’t state an opinion.

The proposed trails are mainly in the western portion of Sisters Country. The majority of all the proposed trail segments are on national forest land, and each trail intersects areas within the national forest at some point. As a note, public property under USFS management (i.e., national forest land) is not under the jurisdiction of Deschutes County as the USFS is a federal agency and not subject to County land use review or requirements. In addition, the proposed trails generally fall into two development categories or purposes. Many of the proposed trails meet multiple categories or serve more than one purpose. The development categories are as follows:

- **Repurposing of existing facilities.** These proposed trails involve repurposing, or conversions, of existing trails or decommissioned USFS roads to new trail use types. Many recreationists in the area use old USFS roads for biking, hiking, horseback riding, and other activities. Repurposing these old roads to trails is a low-barrier approach for extending the Sisters Country trail network, as many of the routes are already essentially constructed as wide trails. Repurposing would create little additional impact on surrounding habitat (compared to construction of a new trail route). A significant portion of the proposed trails include segments of repurposed USFS roads or trails.
- **New Trail or Connection.** These proposals are either for an entirely new trail or for new connections between existing trails or regional destinations. Most of the proposals created by the Advisory Committee involve a new connection between existing trails. Many of these proposed trails also connect with repurposed/converted trail types. These trail types can either be intended for recreation/wilderness access, or they may provide active transportation connections between communities or regional amenities.

Complete List of Trails

Table 1 shows the complete list of proposed new trails in Sisters Country. These proposed trails are also shown in Figure 2, Figure 3, and Figure 4, and they can also be viewed in the Sisters Country Trails Web Map.² These maps also indicate areas where proposed and existing trails cross roads or highways – these areas should include signage and marked crossings to improve safety for hikers, cyclists, and equestrians. The Table 1 indicates the intended trail users and trail purpose/development category. Note that many of the proposed trails extend beyond the Sisters Country boundaries, as shown in the figures and web map. The scope of this project is focused on Sisters Country, therefore feedback regarding proposed trails entirely outside of this boundary was not considered.

One goal of the Advisory Committee was to make sure that the Concept Plan designated some trails for different types of users – particularly separating equestrian from non-equestrian users to avoid potential user conflicts or associated safety issues. Although some of the proposed trails are intended for all users, many of the new or converted trails are either intended for equestrian use or for people walking, hiking or biking.

The majority of the proposed trails represent a collaborative planning effort among the STA, COTA, and OET, which began before the initiation of this project. As noted by these trails planning and advocacy organizations, the proposed trails are at various planning stages; many of which are **conceptual** or are

² Sisters Country Web Map. <https://www.arcgis.com/apps/mapviewer/index.html?webmap=ff3ce41f917b4ac2a5d2484f6b87e7da>

still in preliminary planning/design stages. Despite the preliminary stages of the trail locations and designs, many of the Open House and Survey participants indicated support for the proposed trails.

Table 1: Proposed Trails

Trail Name (Figure #)	Trail Type	Repurposed Route/Trail	New Trail/Connection	Trail Miles Total (Miles in Sisters Country)
Cache Mountain (2)	Bike		X	6.8 (1.7)
Black Butte Trail Conversions and Links (2)	Hike, bike, potentially horse	X	X	22.2 (10.0)
Cold Springs Loop (2 and 4)	Hike, bike, potentially horse		X	13.8 (13.8)
Black Butte Ranch to Sisters (2 and 4)	Hike/walk, bike		X	7.4 (7.4)
Cow Camp Tie Trail (3)	Hike, horse	X	X	0.8 (0.8)
Whispering Cow Loop (3)	Hike, horse	X	X	15.1 (15.1)
Whychus-MW (3)	Hike, bike		X	2.2 (2.2)
Marquis Tie-T (3)	Horse, hike		X	1.5 (1.5)
Marquis Trail-J (3)	Horse, hike	X	X	5.8 (4.5)
Marquis Trail-I (3)	Horse, hike	X	X	2.6 (0.25)
Trout Creek Butte Loop (3)	Hike, bike, horse	X	X	5 (3.2)
Trout Creek Butte Single Track (3)	Hike, bike		X	12.4 (9.0)

Trail Name (Figure #)	Trail Type	Repurposed Route/Trail	New Trail/Connection	Trail Miles Total (Miles in Sisters Country)
Trout Creek Butte Trail-O (3)	Horse, hike	X	X	3.1 (2.9)
Trout Creek Butte Loop-M (3)	Hike, bike	X	X	10.3 (4.9)
Millican Crater Trail-Q (3)	Horse, hike	X		2.0 (2.0)
Black Crater Lake Trail-S (3)	Horse, hike	X		3.4 (3.4)
Crossroads to Sisters (4)	Hike, bike		X	1.5 (1.5)
Elk Ranch Loop (4)	Hike, bike		X	2.1 (2.1)
Ditch Loop(s) (4)	Bike		X	1.25 (1.25)
Lazy Z Ranch Trail	Hike, bike		X	0.53 (0.53)

Figure 2: Proposed Trails in the northwestern region of Sisters Country

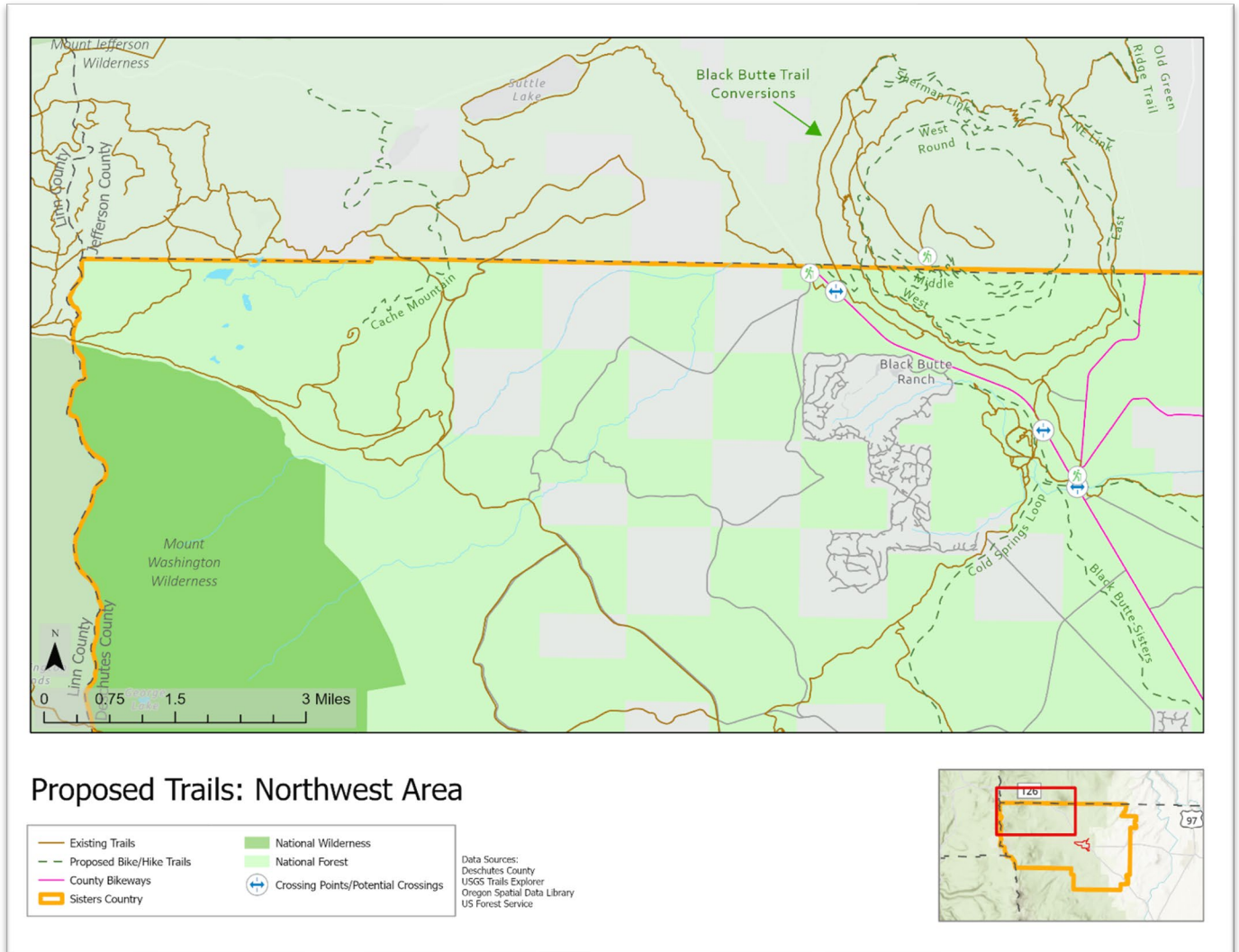


Figure 3: Proposed trails in the southwestern region of Sisters Country

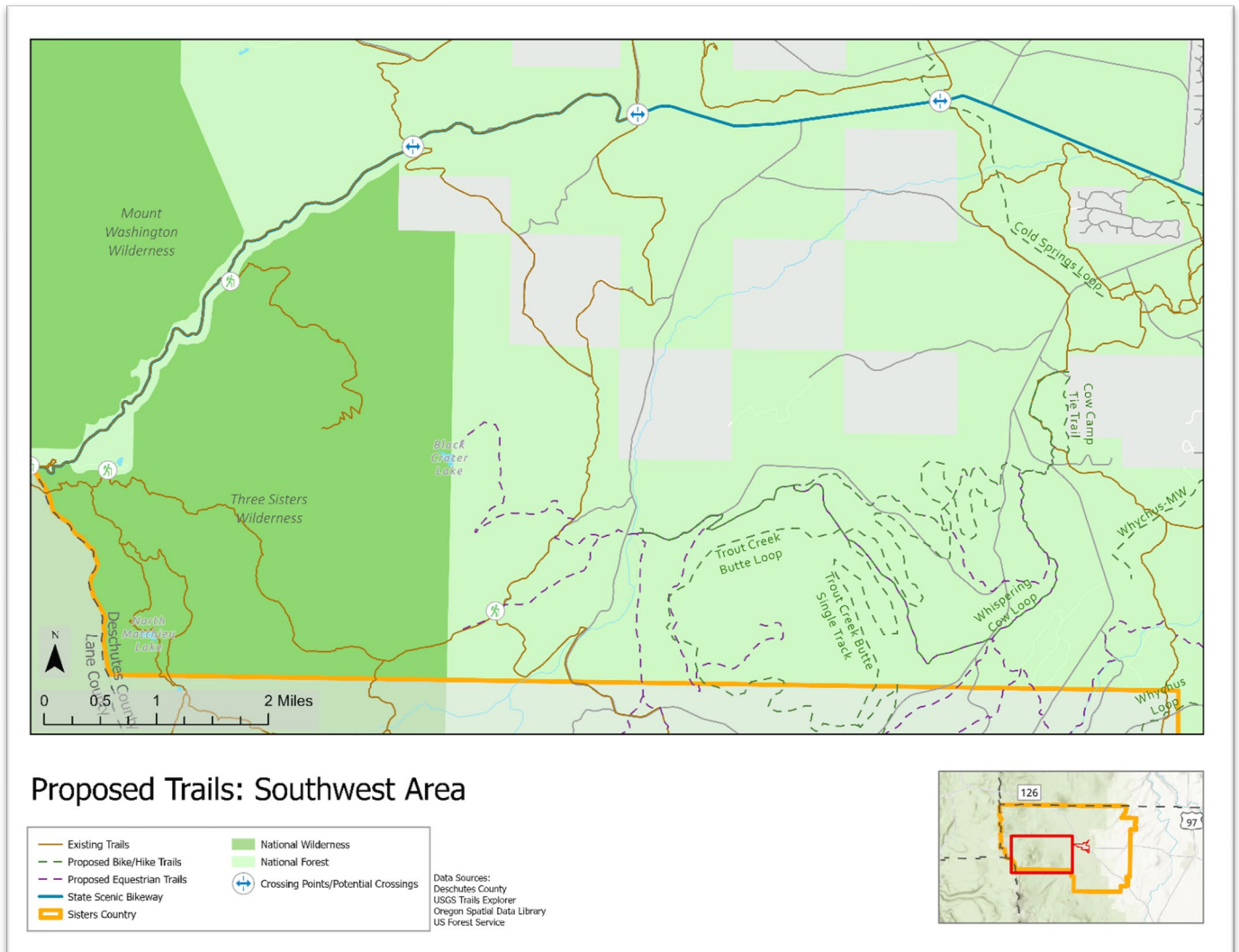
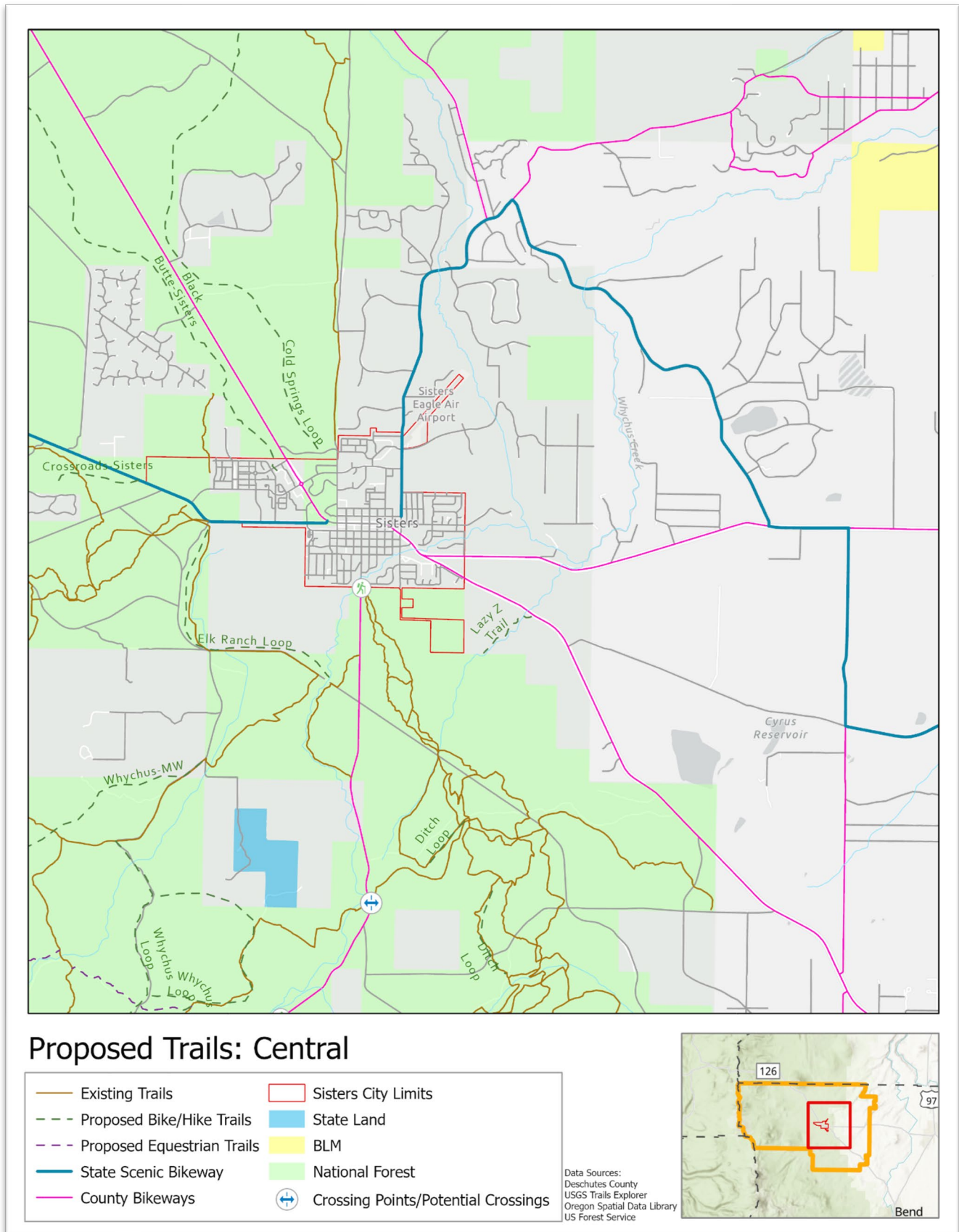


Figure 4: Proposed trails in the central region of Sisters Country



Black Butte Ranch to Sisters Trail Discussion

One particular trail generated significant interest from community members. This trail is informally referred to here as the “Black Butte Ranch to Sisters Trail.” The proposed trail begins near the intersection of West Rail Way and West Williams Avenue just inside the City of Sisters city limits, extending to the Black Butte Ranch destination resort. The trail was originally proposed as part of a larger USFS trail package in 2013, although it was never approved. The proposed trail had support from the Sisters School District, as it would provide trail access for the community’s students to the network of public trails on Black Butte, just north of the Black Butte Ranch community. The proposal subsequently evolved to include a trail connection to the Black Butte Ranch community boundary, as well as a connection to the Tollgate Subdivision, a residential area outside of City limits. Plans and designs for the trail made significant initial progress, however, the trail was not approved through the NEPA review process. A draft decision notice and Final Environmental Assessment was released, but the USFS cancelled the project at the objection phase of the draft decision. As a result, the approval decision by the USFS was halted due to the level of controversy and opposition among the community, among other reasons.

When originally proposed, the Black Butte Ranch to Sisters trail proposal generated controversy among some area community members and the area’s trail potential users. Support for the proposed trail was mixed. The proposed trail had initial support and approval from the Black Butte Ranch homeowners board. Black Butte Ranch has an internal network of private trails, which residents feared would be perceived as open to the public with the opening of a public use trail between Sisters and Black Butte Ranch. Consequently, the community opposition that emerged was largely due to concerns over the potential for trail users to trespass on private property, intrude on the privacy of residents, and increase crime in Black Butte Ranch. Opposition also came from the Tollgate community, whose residents expressed similar concerns and were opposed to the possibility of the trail passing near their homes. Some residents had the perceptions that the trail would go directly through their community although that was not the intent or plan for the trail. At the same time, the trail had broad support from trails users and area residents, many of which were excited by the prospect of having an active transportation and commuting option between Black Butte Ranch and Sisters.

The Advisory Committee has expressed support for exploring the possibility of revisiting the Black Butte Ranch to Sisters Trail. The Deschutes County Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committee (BPAC) supports the development of the Black Butte Ranch to Sisters Trail, noting it as a “high priority” trail in a 2021 memo to the County written for the County TSP. The USFS has indicated it would only revive the planning process for this trail if there were clear and broad community support, including formal statements of support from the Black Butte Ranch Board of Directors and Homeowners Association, Sisters City Council, and Deschutes County Board of County Commissioners.

Support for the trail was divided among the recent open house and survey participants, many of whom cited the same reasons for concern, opposition, and/or support that were often discussed from the

previous planning and outreach process. Based on the recommendation of the Advisory Committee, the draft Concept Plan includes the Sisters to Black Butte Ranch trail concept. In addition, recent discussions between the Black Butte Ranch homeowners board and STA have indicated potential renewed interest in the trail. Nonetheless, due to the mix of support and opposition, additional community engagement and education on the trail proposal would likely be necessary prior to identifying a final alignment and initiating local, state, or federal approvals. Future planning efforts should be clear in the intention of the proposed trail and it will be important to carefully communicate the purpose of the proposal to avoid generating misleading or inaccurate information or perceptions regarding the trail.

PLANNING PROCESS

All the proposed trails included in the draft Concept Plan pass through national forest land, and therefore would need to undergo federal review and approval from the USFS. All new project proposals on national forest land are subject to a two-part process; the Forest Service Program of Work planning and National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) review.

NEPA review. The NEPA review process requires federal agencies to assess and disclose the environmental impacts of proposed actions on federal land prior to making decisions. The USFS conducts an initial screening of a project proposal to determine if a trail proposal is ripe for NEPA review. Therefore, some trail proposals may not meet screening criteria and will consequently be rejected prior to entering the NEPA phase. The primary screening criteria includes:

- Trail sustainability
- Whether the trail is “redundant” (i.e., multiple trails connect to the same locations)
- Proposal consistency with USFS policies and regulations

If it is determined that a trail proposal meets screening criteria and adequate staff capacity exists, the proposal can enter the NEPA process. Under the NEPA process, there are different analysis and decision category levels based on the complexity of the proposed action. The category utilized for new trail proposals would be driven by the complexity of the proposed action once the project has been selected to move forward. Per the Northwest Forest Plan and the Deschutes National Forest Plan, the location of proposed trails and their management allocation help determine the complexity of a trail proposal, as well as other factors such as public controversy. For example, location and management factors that inform complexity may include siting in a designated wilderness area, sensitive or protected types of habitat, or the proximity to a natural body of water (river/stream, lake, etc.). In addition, the anticipated trail use type, inclusion of trail infrastructure (e.g., bridges), and associated trailhead needs or amenities are all considered when assessing the complexity of a trail proposal. The overall scope of the project also helps determine the required NEPA review level. For instance, a trail reroute requires a different level of analysis than a newly constructed trail system. It is important to note that analyzing a proposed new trail does not necessarily mean the trail will be constructed. Further, while it is possible for a third party to conduct NEPA analysis and review, the decision and approval cannot be delegated outside the authorizing agency.

Forest Service Program of Work. The Program of Work is the annual project workload for USFS districts, which is generated in advance of any NEPA review or project implementation timelines. The Program of Work begins with district project prioritization, which are then elevated to the Forest level to evaluate agency capacity to implement the identified district projects. The final Program of Work is approved once all levels of necessary engagement have been considered.

ODOT Deschutes County, and Sisters Review, Coordination

Some of the proposed trails (~32%) pass through or along the McKenzie Highway (OR 242) and the Santiam Highway (US 20). These Highways are owned and operated by the State, and therefore trails that pass through their rights-of-way (ROW) will need to be approved by the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT). Trails that pass through County-administered land, private property in unincorporated areas, or ODOT ROW also must go through County land use review and approval processes.

Some of the proposed trails (~18%) connect to the City of Sisters (e.g., Crossroads to Sisters), and may need to be approved by the City. The City of Sisters is currently undergoing a Parks Master Plan update, and proposed trail connections should be coordinated with the City's trail system. The Lazy Z Ranch Master Plan, a future waste treatment project on property owned by the City, although outside of City Limits, also includes conceptual trail alternatives – to the extent possible, the County may consider alternatives that link to the Lazy Z proposed trail with this plan's (or subsequent TSP) trail proposals.

Locations where trails cross/intersect roads and highways should include marked crossings, signage, or grade-separated crossings. ODOT has identified areas that are being considered for trail crossing improvements, including a crossing near the Indian Ford Campground on US 20. A grade-separated crossing/overpass or culvert/underpass that would potentially incorporate a wildlife crossing is also under consideration for the Indian Ford location.

Proposed trails that pass through or connect to ODOT or Sisters facilities will need to be coordinated with their respective review/approval authorities.

DESCHUTES COUNTY TRANSPORTATION SYSTEM PLAN (TSP)

TSP Coordination

The proposed trail alignments will be considered for adoption into the Deschutes County Transportation System Plan (TSP). The County is currently updating its TSP, and updated goals, policies, and projects should consider the proposed trails and recommendations from this Trails Concept. Any proposed trails that are adopted by the TSP will be identified in the TSP in the form of a Sisters subarea trails map. The TSP process will also include an extensive community engagement component, which will provide further opportunities for input on the proposed trails.

TSP Adoption Recommendations

In addition to the proposed trails, the County may consider adopting policies based on the outcomes of this project. This could be done by incorporating those findings directly into a section of the TSP devoted to this topic or the Concept Plan could be cited in the TSP as a supporting document and potentially included as an appendix or exhibit to the TSP. Specific policy recommendations for incorporation in the TSP include the following:

- Consider input from regional non-motorized trails advocacy organizations, such as the STA, COTA, and OET regarding new trails, trail connections, and trail improvements.
- Provide trails that are safe and accessible for bicyclists, pedestrians, and equestrian users.
- Support trail connections to the County’s regional services and amenities.
- Support a trail system that includes trails that are accessible to all users and abilities.
- Coordinate with neighboring counties and other jurisdictions on inter-county or inter-jurisdictional trails.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX A: OPEN HOUSE AND SURVEY SUMMARY AND RESULTS

The Sisters Country Trails Expansion team conducted an online open house and survey to share information about the project and gather input from the region’s trail users. The open house included an interactive storymap and information on the project background, existing trails conditions, and proposed trails from the Sisters Trails Alliance (STA), Oregon Equestrian Trails (OET), and Central Oregon Trails Alliance (COTA). The Open House and Survey were open from June 23rd to July 27th, 2022. The online open house and survey were hosted over ESRI’s StoryMaps platform and Survey123. They were publicized via the following sites and activities:

- Deschutes Country website and social media pages (e.g., Facebook)
- Constant Contact project email list
- Targeted emails to stakeholders including:
 - Sisters Nugget Newspaper
 - Eurosports Bike Shop
 - Blazing Saddles Bike Shop
 - Sisters Trails Association
 - Central Oregon Trails Alliance
 - Cycle Oregon
 - Sisters Park and Recreation
 - City of Sisters
- City of Sisters newsletters
- STA and COTA social media and newsletters

The online open house had about 614 visits, and the survey had 83 responses. Most visits and survey responses occurred within the first few days of the open house launch with a smaller bump in responses in mid-July, as shown in the time series below:

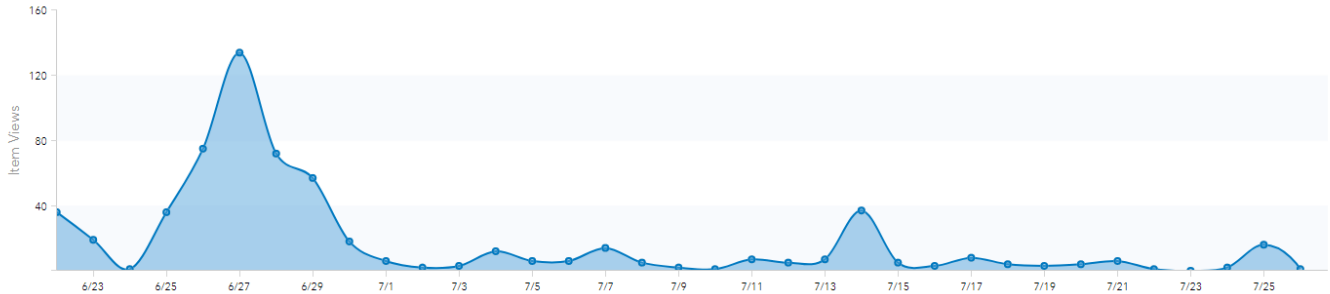
Item Views this Period

614

Avg Item Views Per Day

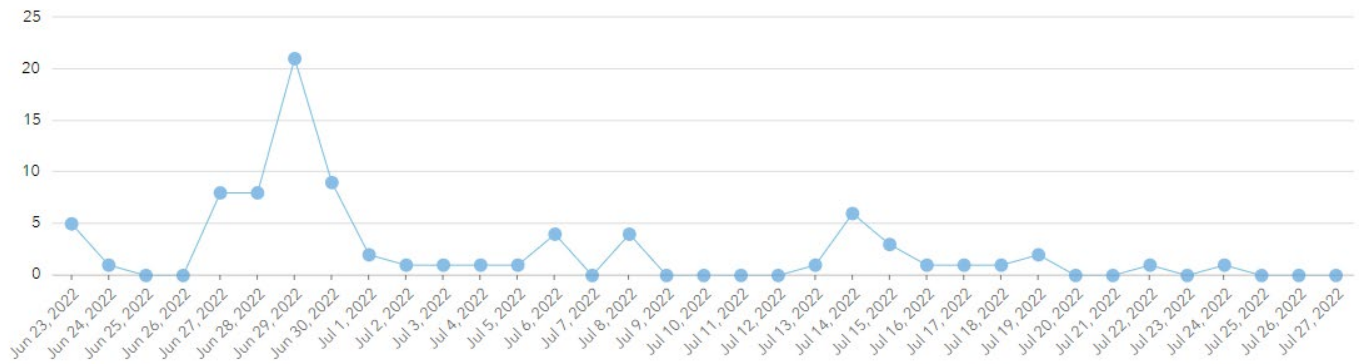
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Usage Time Series



Surveys count: 83 (total: 83)

6/23/22 - 7/27/22



This memo summarizes the participation results for the open house and survey. Some survey questions were open ended (i.e., written response). The open house and the complete survey results can also be viewed with the following links:

- Open House: <https://arcg.is/e5ymy>
- Survey results: <https://arcg.is/Oi45qK>

Summary of Responses and Key Themes

In total, a number of recurring themes arose from the survey, including the following:

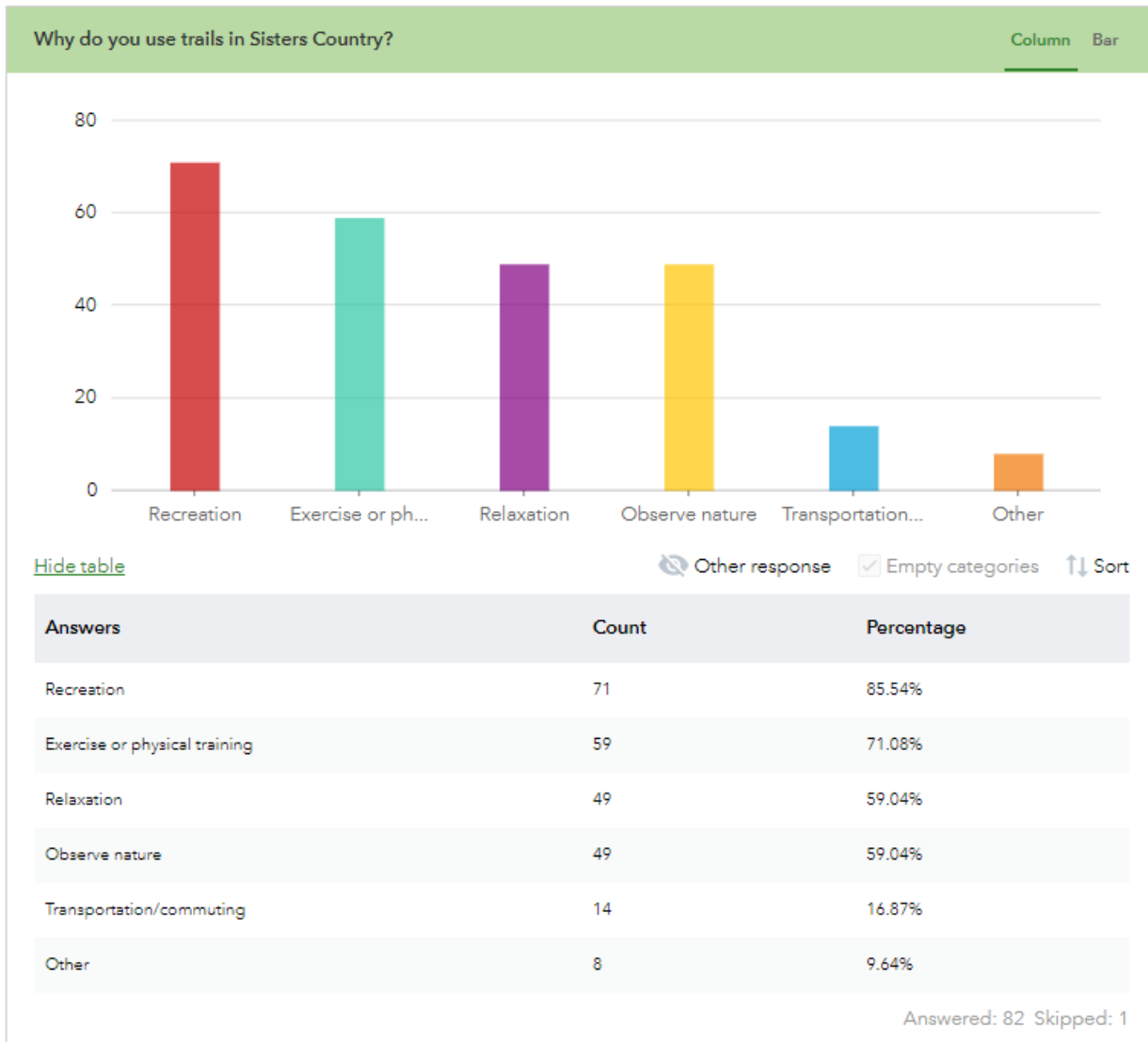
- Trail connections and access to nature/scenery are most important
- Access to regional destinations and other communities is relatively less important
- The strongest levels of support are for more hiking/walking and biking trails. The lowest levels of support are for trails for motorized sports.
- Many respondents want trails from Sisters to Black Butte and Camp Sherman; however several respondents have concerns over trail access on private property and the potential tensions that may arise from trespassing (particularly in reference to Black Butte Ranch).

- Overall, a slight majority (~52%) say they agree with the proposed trails that were shared in the open house. About 25% expressed concern or dissatisfaction with the proposed trails, and 23% did not respond.

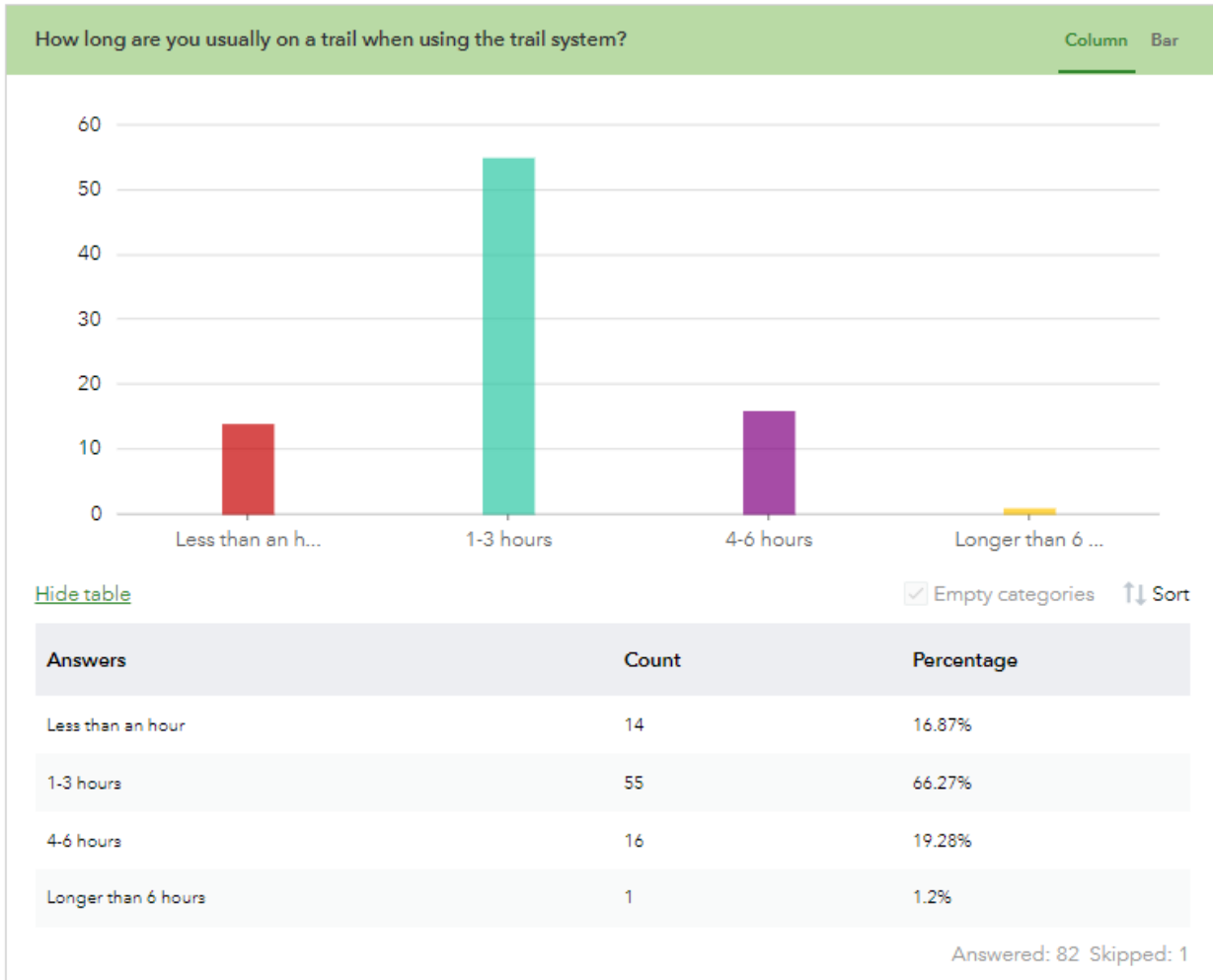
Full Responses

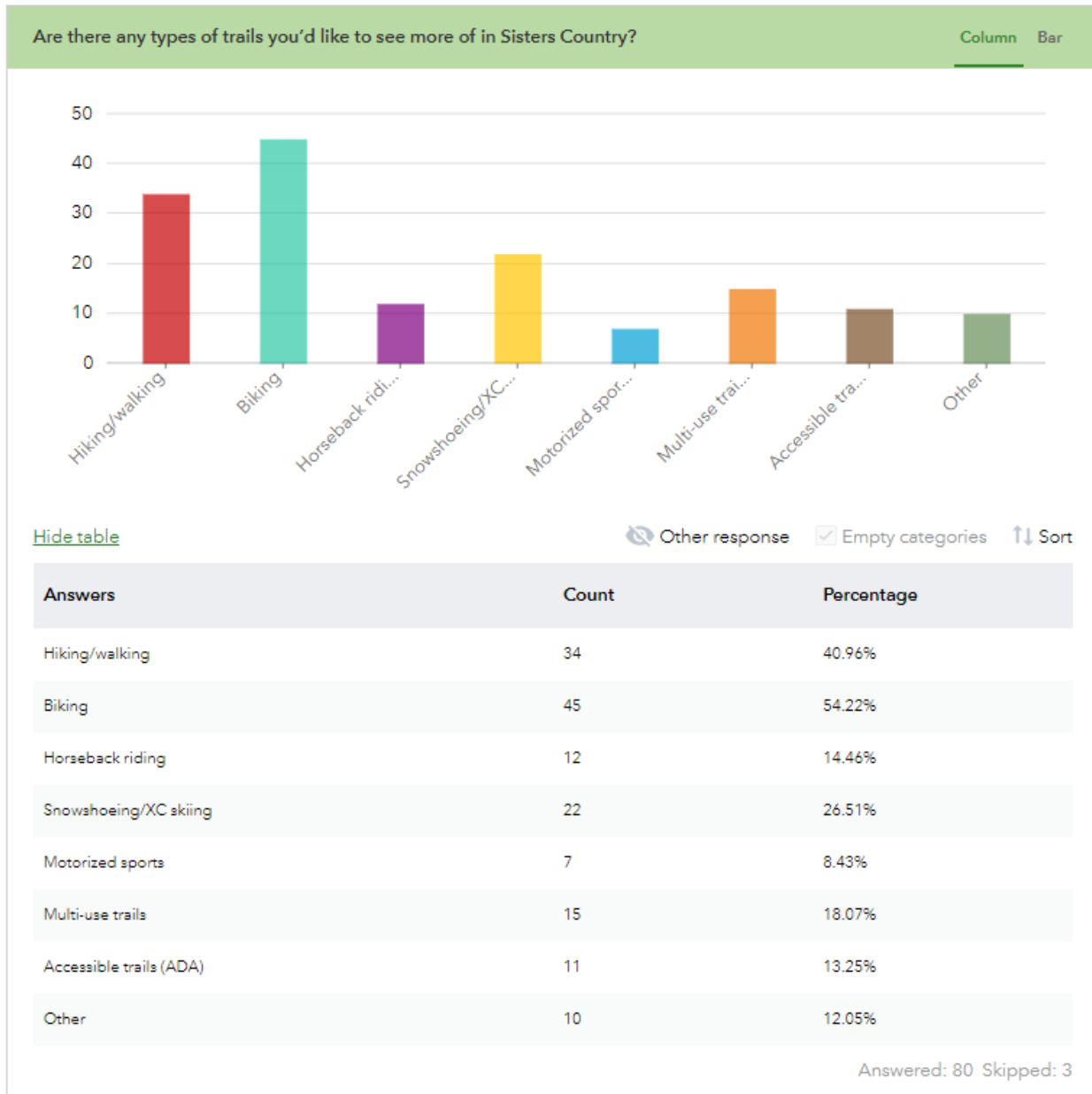
Following is a complete summary of responses to all of the survey questions.





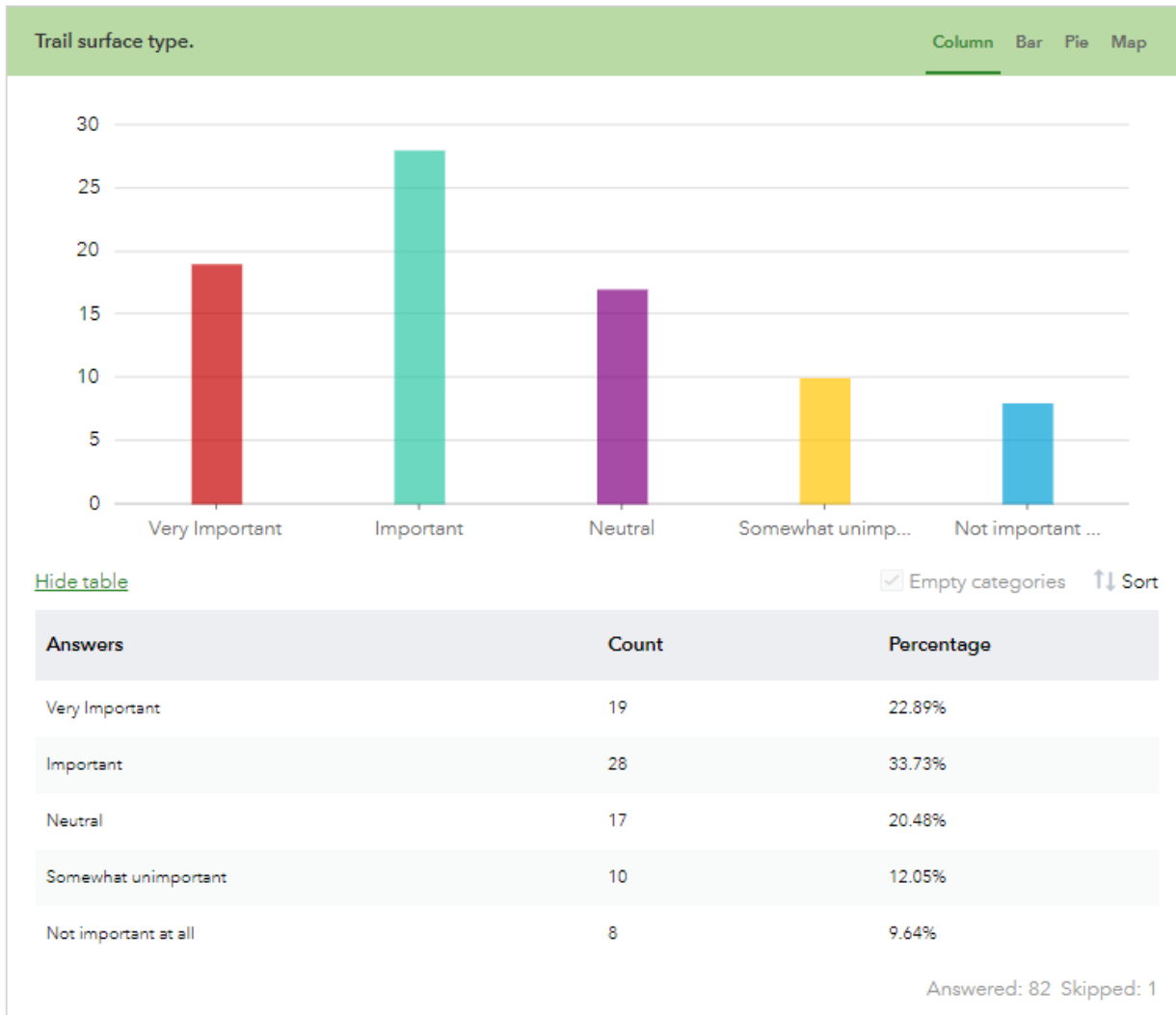


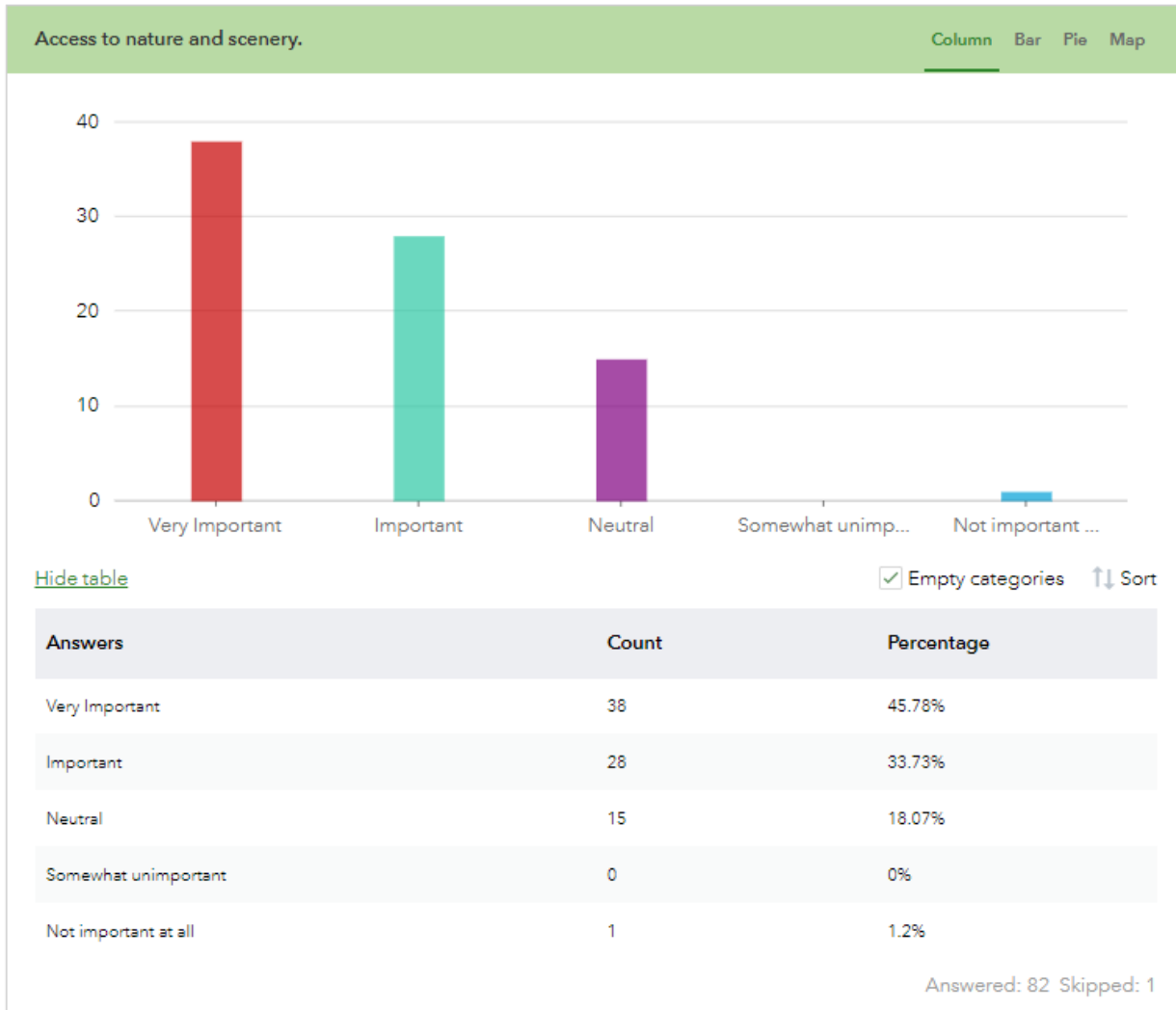


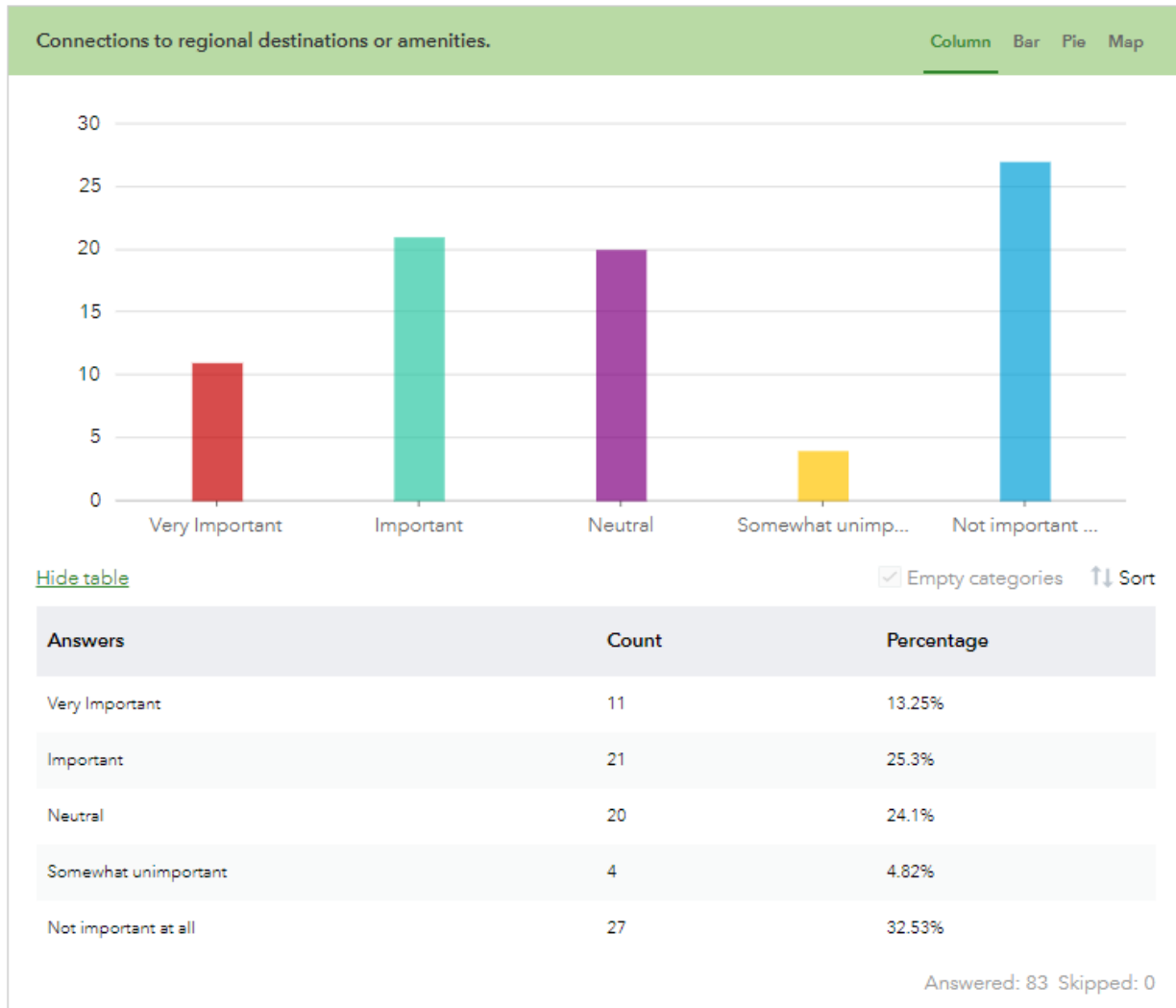








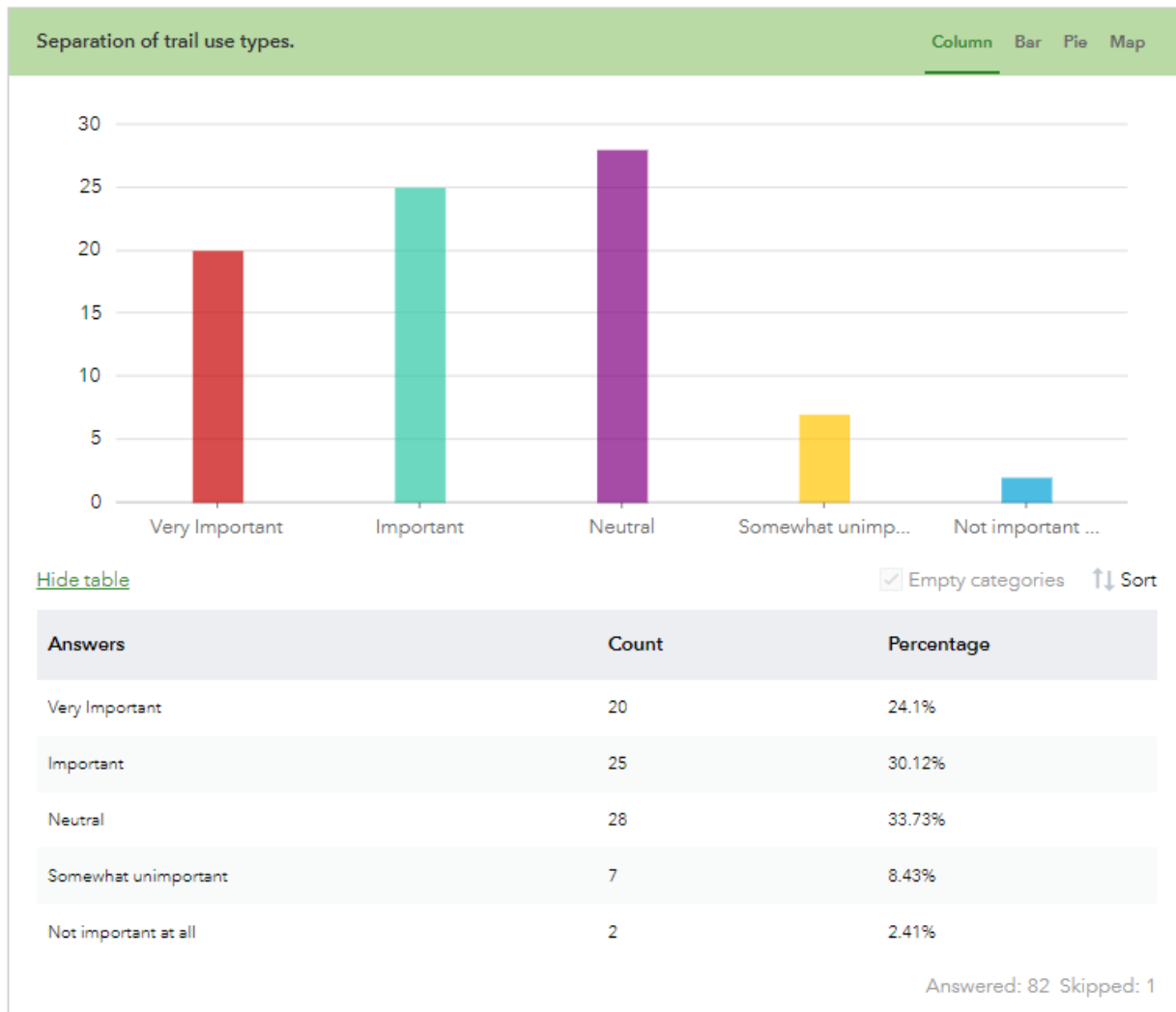


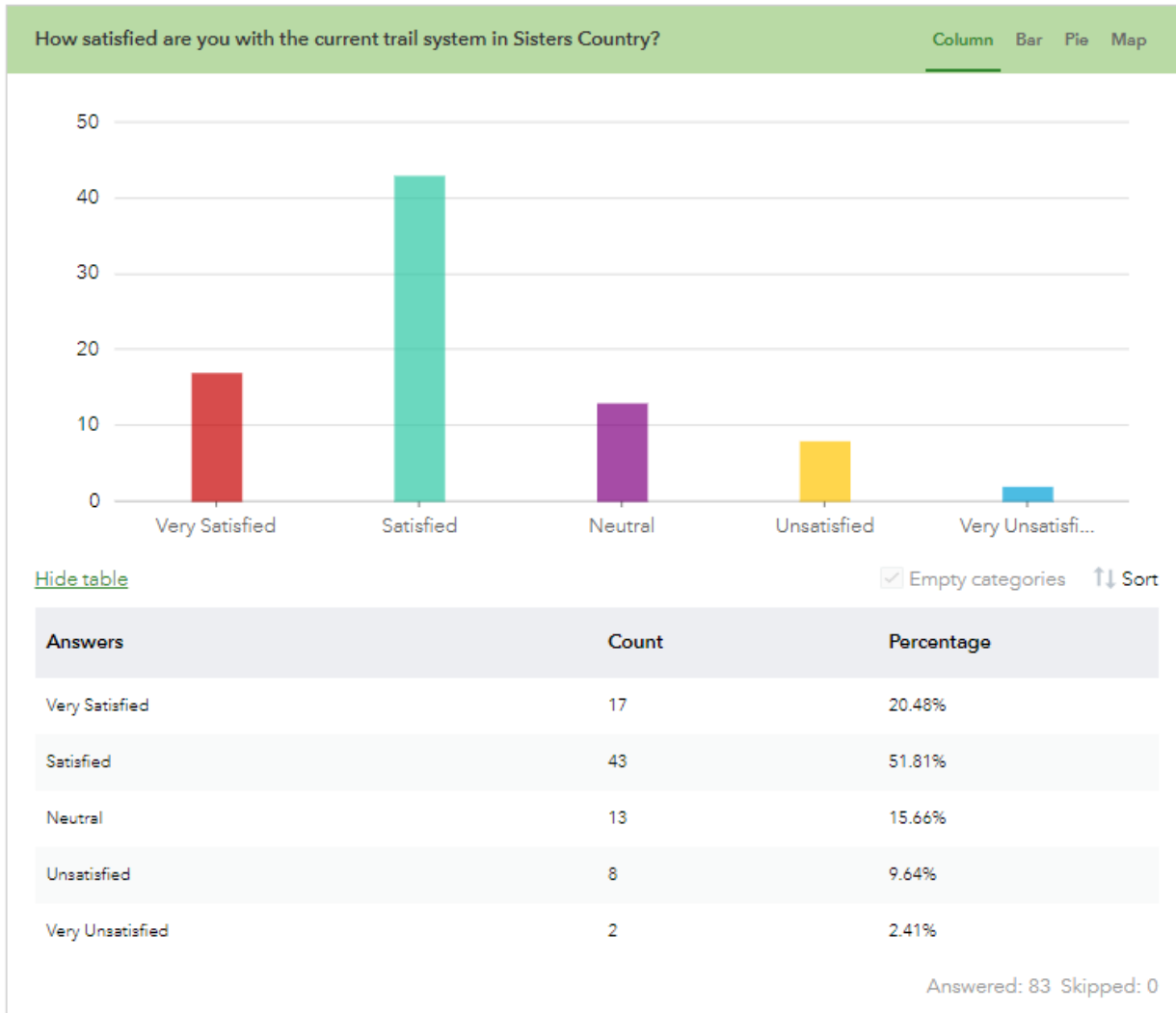




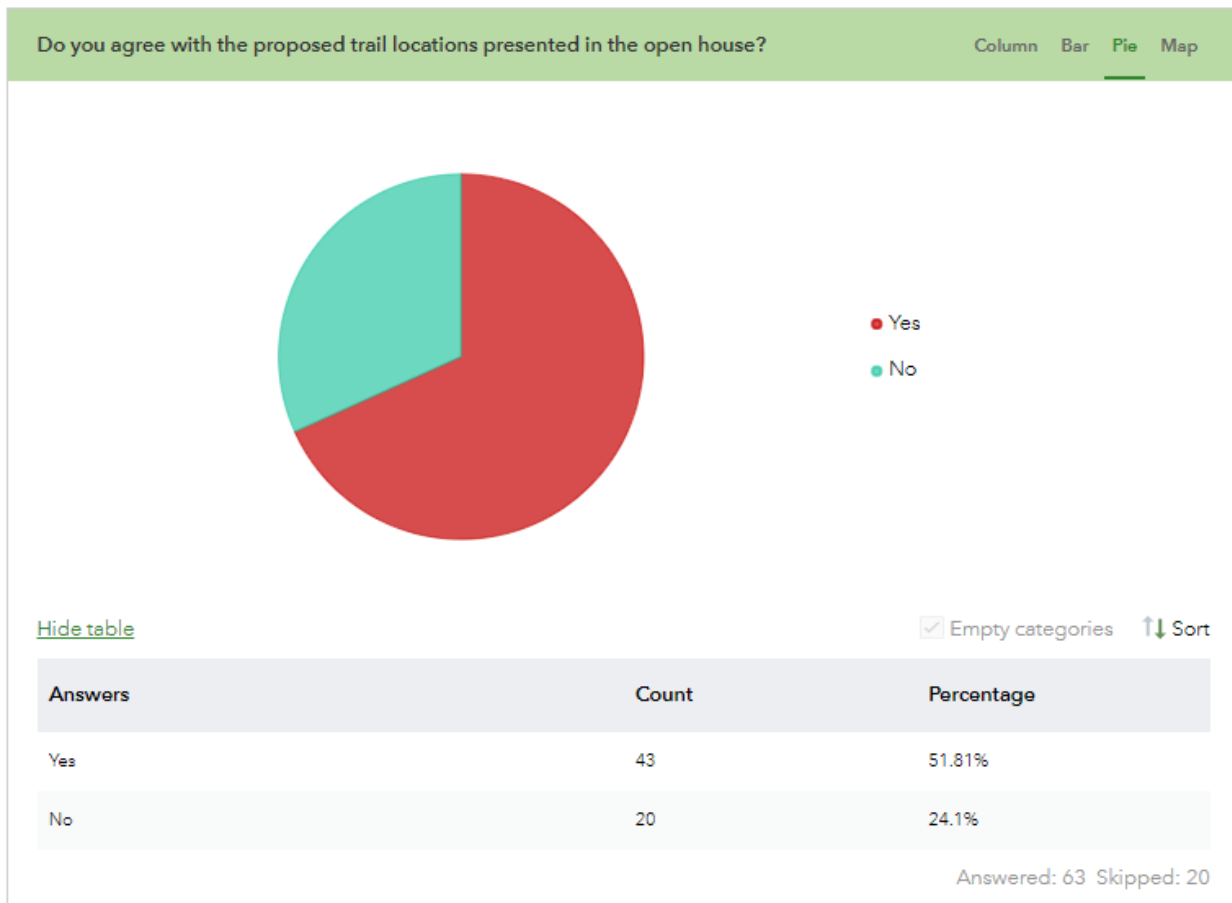






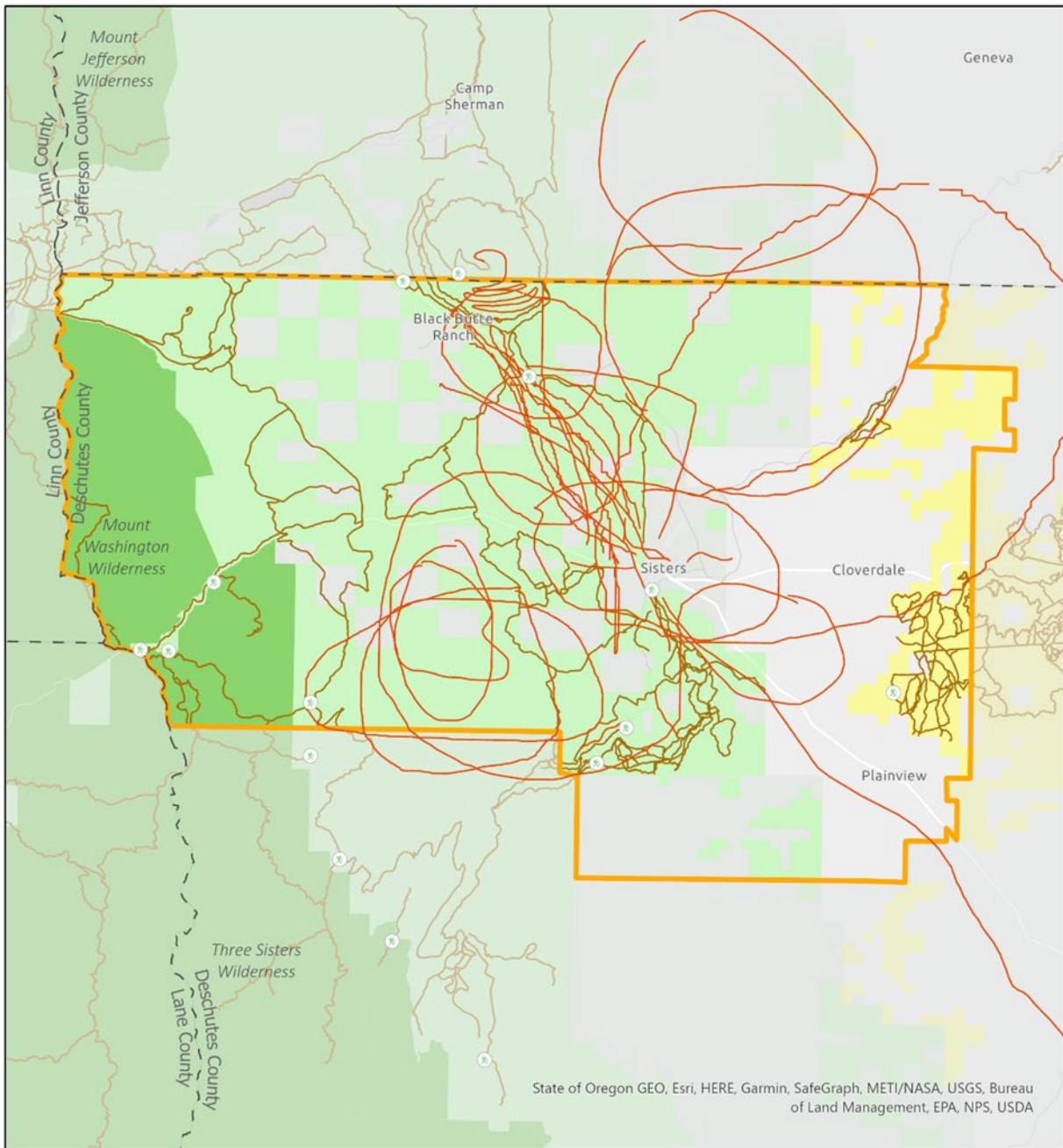


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⁴ Please see the full list of responses for more details. <https://arcg.is/0i45qK>

Please draw on the map where you'd like to see new trails or trail connections:



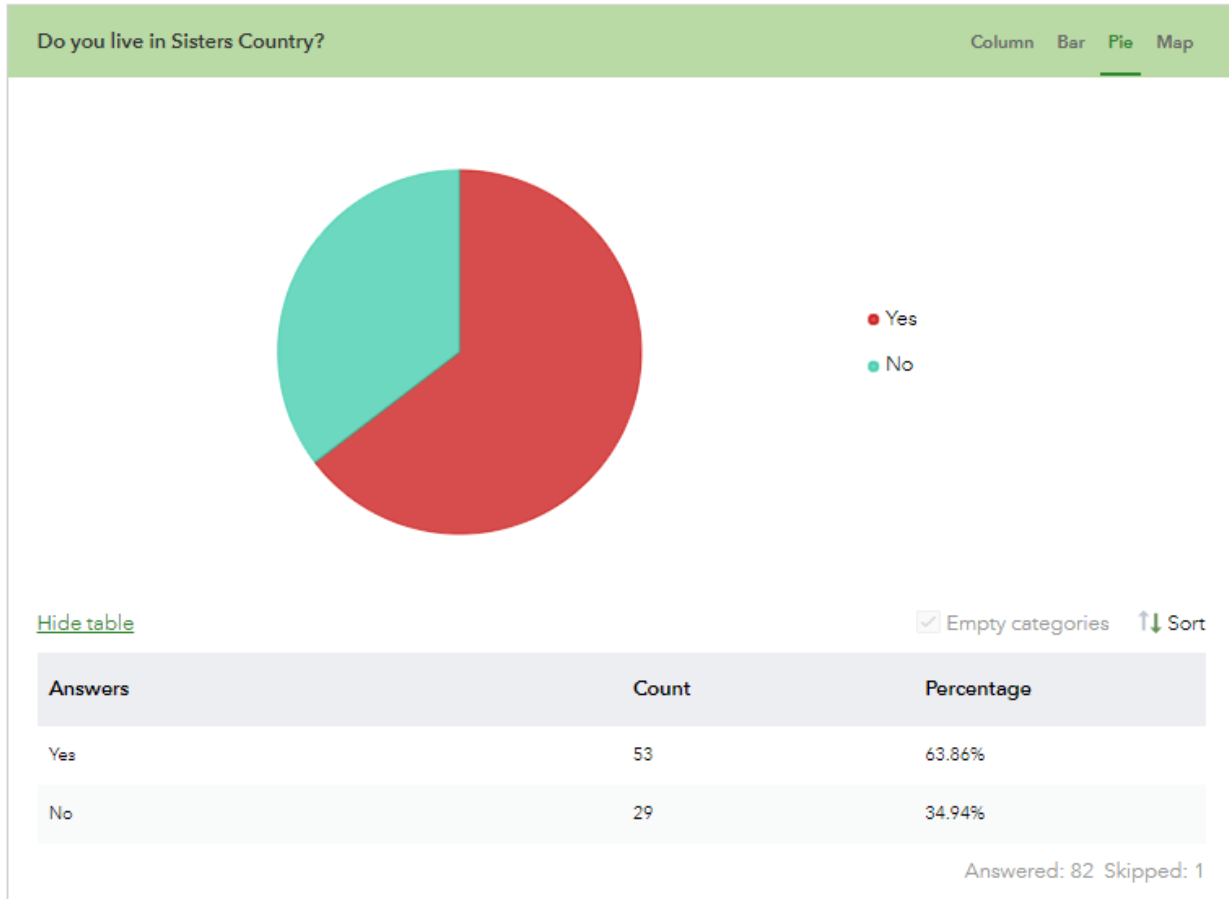
Sisters Country Trail System

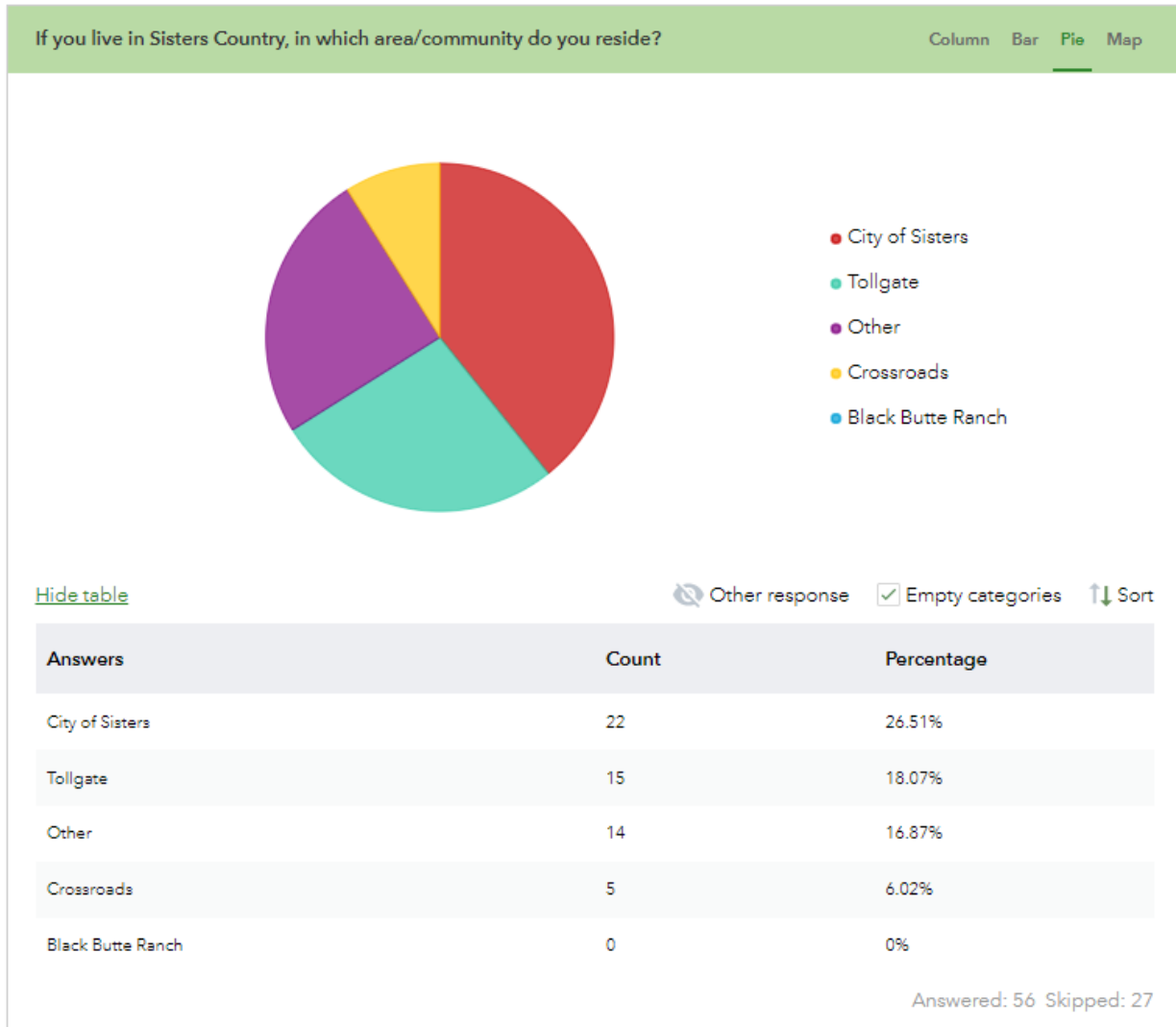


Trails	National Forest
Sisters Country	SisterCountry_mask
National Wilderness	Trailhead
BLM	Survey Response Trails

Data Sources:
 Deschutes County
 USGS Trails Explorer
 Oregon Spatial Data Library
 US Forest Service







Is there anything else you would like to share about existing or needed trails in Sisters Country?

- Many concerns over trails on private property and issues with trespassing.
- Several respondents want more paved trails, particularly for improved accessibility/ADA and for easier walking access in the area.
- Several respondents indicated that the number of current trails in the area is sufficient.
- Many respondents want to avoid controversial trail proposals. These responses are mostly in reference to the tensions created by the previous Black Butte Ranch trail proposal.