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NOVEMBER 2026
THEASPHALTPRO.COM

HOW TO PAVE A WALKING TRAIL

Asphalt contractors can get in on environmentally positive, multi-purpose path paving



The SUPER 800-5 P-tier paver from Vögele features a wide hopper for commercial contractors. During CONEXPO-CON/AGG, Vögele product experts explained their mini sized pavers are ideal for narrow jobs, such as walking trail paving. The SUPER 800-5 P-tier tracked paver is the first mini class representative of the Dash 5 generation. Vögele equipped the small paver with the ErgoBasic 5 operating concept. Users have an unrestricted view to the front thanks to the new, double-folding material hopper. The tracked paver features a 74-horsepower engine, paving widths from 4 feet, 7 inches up to 11 feet, 6 inches, and depths up to 8 inches with a laydown rate of up to 330 tons per hour. *Photo courtesy of Vögele*

BY SANDY LENDER

Paving a multi-purpose asphalt path for the local government or community often requires finesse not only due to the narrower width of the pull, but also due to the location. When paving between trees or recreational structures or paving within feet of a picturesque community lake, backing a haul truck to a paver will be problematic, if not forbidden. Don't let a few challenges dissuade you from this rewarding work. Instead, let's look at the possibility of using a smaller labor pool while moving material differently on a project that promises to receive continued funding in today's climate.

RECREATIONAL SPACES GET FUNDED

The increase in lettings for walking, jogging, bicycle and multi-purpose paths in public spaces isn't your imagination. The Trust for Public Land reported in 2026 that the 100 largest cities in the United States invested a record $12.9 billion in park and recreation systems. The Department of the Interior reported that the Great American Outdoors Act Legacy Restoration Fund invested roughly $57.5 million in National Trails System projects during FY2021-2025 and funded dozens of trail projects across National Scenic and Historic Trails. The National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) found that local park and recreation agencies generated approximately $201 billion in economic activity from operations and capital spending in 2021, demonstrating continued large-scale investment in parks and recreational infrastructure.

Doug Carlson, the VP of asphalt products for Liberty Tire, Jackson, Georgia, has seen regional development of more park and recreational infrastructure, as well as upgrades to existing facilities, as being driven by the last decade of population growth. "I think there was a significant increase in outdoor activities during the Covid era and following, so there also is just a general trend towards more outdoor living, camping and recreation."

With the current Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), RailsToTrails.org reported federal support for trail construction based on transportation alternatives has increased from about $850 million per year to about $1.44 billion per year. Rails-to-Trails shared that trail infrastructure development has expanded "significantly" nationwide, with

more than 42,500 miles of multi-use trails now in operation and hundreds of active trail-development projects underway.

Before we assume the IIJA's expiration date means an end to these specialty projects, let's look at the language of the BUILD America 250 Act, where we see trail, bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure funding intact via the Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP) to the tune of $8.3 billion. TAP is the principal source of federal funding for:

- Greenways
- Shared-use paths
- Bike trails
- Pedestrian/walking trails
- Rail-to-trail conversions
- "Safe Routes to School" projects
- Trail connectivity projects

Where things might get sticky is in connected or shared projects across county lines. The Rails-to-Trails Conservancy has expressed concern that the BUILD America 250's elimination of the Active Transportation Infrastructure Investment Program within the IIJA leaves countywide trail systems, regional greenway networks, multi-jurisdiction trail corridors and projects that were intended to close major network gaps, without adequate funding.

The passage of the BUILD America 250 Act that the construction industry is lobbying for isn't poised to shut down path paving projects; instead, it should offer continued growth with stable federal support. Whether this affords your paving company one or a dozen asphalt path projects in the coming years, there are nuances to getting the job done right.

GO FOR A SUSTAINABLE MIX

The name of the trail game is green. Everyone from municipal planning organizations (MPOs) to the United States Department of Agriculture Forest Service (USFS) has sustainability in mind when designing a new, or maintaining an in-service, multi-use trail.

"I think there is a more sustainable mindset in architecture and engineering today with focuses on lifecycle costs, environmental stewardship, and sustainability," Carlson said. "There is an educational aspect to it where young engineers and architects today have learned about the use of recycled or sustainable materials in infrastructure and some are motivated to seek it out and plug it into their projects."

For example, the USFS worked with the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) to prepare guidelines for sustainable trail development. Within the "USDA FS Trail Maintenance and Construction Notebook" is a section (with links) to ensure trail-building and maintenance takes the natural environment into consideration. This is only one of multiple examples of the agency/owner placing emphasis on the environmental aspect of building a path through the world with as little disruption to nature as possible. When you take on the project, you become a partner in limiting that disruption.

As the team at Sripath Technologies LLC, Mahwah, New Jersey, shared, "Sustainability begins long before the materials arrive at the job site."

In a variety of park services materials, the mix design suggestions were the standard hot-mix asphalt (HMA) that a paving contractor will be familiar with. The common suggestion was a PG64-22 binder, placed at a mix temperature of 275°F and thickness of 2 to 3 inches. Polymer-modified PG64-22 was suggested for high-traffic paths, with a slightly higher temperature but same thickness. AmericanTrails.org gave more details, suggesting residential pathways using a Type F asphalt mix with a 3/8-inch aggregate should have a 2- to 3-inch compacted depth, but pathways that will accommodate wheelchair traffic need to be at least 3 inches thick and use the PG64-22 binder.



Asphalt's seamless finish meets ADA standards for wheelchair access and walker stability. You will want to create a 1/8-inch slope per foot for drainage during compaction. ***Photo courtesy of Ammann North America***

Even with asphalt's cradle-to-grave environmental benefits over other paving materials, it can be improved upon when adding a percentage of reclaimed asphalt pavement (RAP) to the design, and this is an option with multi-purpose paths, too. In fact, the team from Sripath shared a unique project, to which the Transportation Research Board's AJE35 Standing Committee on Research Innovation Implementation Management (RIIM) awarded a second-place certificate at the 2025 annual meeting, wherein asphalt rejuvenator was manually mixed into a RAP pile at the job site to pave with the 100% RAP mix.

The project was conducted by the Department of Civil, Coastal, and Environmental Engineering at the University of South Alabama and the team at the Walton County Public Works, Florida. The team, led by Professor Shenghua Wu, tested the viability of using a cold mix asphalt based on 100% RAP dosed with Sripath's recycling agent ReLIXER on a low-volume, residential, unpaved road in Santa Rosa, Florida. While this wasn't a narrow walking path, it offered proof of concept, not only for a sustainable mix but also for logistics.

"Some of the challenges with trail roads is material access," said Sripath President Krishna Srinivasan. "Getting materials into tight spaces or with few access points or being able to build around dikes and dams and bridges and local obstructions, which normally people don't face in highway paving. For those types of situations, if you've got a pile of RAP, it's easy enough to bring to a job site. It's easy enough to haul in a drum or two of ReLIXER and mix on site."

For the Florida project, that's what the team did. The crew mixed the bio-based rejuvenator into the pile with shovels at the job site, gave it a few hours to absorb, then fed the treated, 100% RAP to the paver. It



The SUPER 800-5 P-tier paver from Vögele features a wide hopper for commercial contractors. The wide, foldable wings accommodate loading from haul trucks as well as skid steers when open. Notice in this picture, we have an example of confined edges and remarkably clean pre-tacked base. *Photo courtesy of Vögele*

resulted in a pavement with an international roughness index (IRI) of 29.53. You can check out the poster titled "Fostering Local Government-University-Industry Collaboration for Low-Carbon Asphalt Solutions in Florida," at Sripath's website.

"[Professor Wu] was vital in pushing this project with the Walton County, and he actually put students on the job site while it was going on," Srinivasan said. "They used steel wheeled rollers for the compaction. Pneumatics would work as well. Because this is going to be a bike path, and not something that trucks are going to be driving on, I think you can [experiment] to find out what level of compaction is good enough for bike paths or walking trails."

PAVE THE NARROW PATH

What Srinivasan takes us to is how to pave the multi-purpose path.

According to AmericanTrails.org, the area alongside the trail's proposed path will have been cleared of vegetation, stumps and tree roots prior to construction, to a minimum of 5 feet beyond the edge of the pavement. This accomplishes two goals: it helps prevent roots and brush from encroaching on the path in the future and it gives the paving contractor room to bring in equipment. If the owner/agency has failed to clear access, the contractor must use less efficient means of paving, and this adds cost to the project.

A dirtwork contractor will prepare the sub-grade, extending it at least 2 feet beyond the width of the trail.

To place the mat, American Trails recommends either a self-propelled paver (this is preferred) or a spreader box attached to a dump truck. Standard residential walkways are 3 to 4 feet wide. Because the majority of shared walking paths are 5 to 6 feet wide and multi-purpose paths are typically 8 feet wide, the pavers employed for any of these projects are not heavy highway class machines.

The team at Bowes Construction, Inc., Brookings, South Dakota, used their Cat 655 for a large walking path project in Brookings.





Different path pavers will accept material in different ways. Some pavers, like Ammann's ABG 1570, have gravitational hopper feed, while others will be served well from a live-bottom trailer, skid steer loader, hot box chute, or other methods. *Both photos courtesy of Ammann North America*

"When we paved the Dakota Nature Park, we used end dumps and our small Cat 655," Kesmond Willert said. "Most walking trails spec out to be 8 feet wide. Our 655 has this capability and is part of the reason we keep it in our fleet."

Willert explained that when the Bowes team paved the path for the Dakota Nature Park, the company only had access to end dumps for material delivery. "We were able to get end dumps in the walking trail area; however, it wasn't the most efficient as you have to constantly worry about lowering and raising the box." He shared that there were often times when the crew had to use a skid steer to feed the paver in lush areas with heavy tree cover. "If you have to bring mix to the paver and need

something small, you have to keep the mix hot so I would recommend a hotbox transfer or, if possible, live bottoms shine when there is heavy tree cover because you don't have to worry about your end dump box catching overhangs."

Another way to feed hoppers is with an excavator bucket. Iulian Neacsu, the paving specialist and paving after sales manager for Ammann North America, shared that not all commercial path pavers—those capable of paving widths less than 6 feet—accept "hot box" feed. "Some have gravitational hopper feed, not chain," Neacsu shared. "Even so, some pavers require bucket feed [like] our ABG 1570 require transversal feed (sideway)." It's recommended to use a skid steer from the side, a mini loader or excavator, as seen on page 44.

Brandon Granger of Mauldin Paving Products offered some ideas based on the surroundings as well. "How you get the asphalt to the paver really depends on how the job site is laid out and what equipment that allows. You obviously need to get the asphalt from the plant to the paver as quickly as possible." If the job site permits it, he recommends direct dumps from trucks or shuttling from the truck to the paver by way of a loader bucket, skid steer, backhoe, etc.



"The Mauldin 1360 is a great option here, since its machine width is just over 4 feet," Granger said. "If you have trees or obstacles less than 8 feet apart, you'll need a machine like the 1360. All of our other 8-foot screed machines are also capable of paving at narrower widths—we offer bolt-on options called cutoff shoes that reduce the finished paved width. You can run two different shoes to get as narrow as a 2-foot paved width."

Whichever material delivery method works best for your equipment and environment, place the asphalt in a 2-inch or 3-inch lift, at a pace that allows you to maintain forward motion without stopping to charge the hopper. The goal is to fill the hopper while the paver moves at a smooth, continuous speed to prevent hills and valleys caused by speed fluctuations and to prevent transverse joints caused by stops and screed settling on the thin lift. Best paving practices count. The finished trail may be used by pedestrians with walkers or by citizens in wheelchairs; smoothness is safety for the end user.

Compact the surface using best practices. American Trails recommended using a 2-ton steel wheel roller in the breakdown position. The goal is to get 92 to 95% density and that starts with the paver itself.

For example, Ammann's Neacsu stated the ABG 1570 typically sees 80% density directly behind the screed before the breakdown roller arrives. For the company's ABG 2870, the contractor can see 90% density behind the machine's tamper screed. After this, he said, minimal rolling in static mode is all that's needed.

"We design all of our screeds around the same principle—screed weight—and build them the heaviest in their class," Granger said. "That produces, on average, 90%+ initial compaction before a roller ever touches the mat. My lead rationale is that if the contractor is trying to achieve 92% to 96% of the Theoretical Maximum Specific Gravity, (Gmm), that means an initial compaction off screed of 90%+ is going to mean less effort in reaching density compliance."

For the team at Bowes, getting compaction starts with assessing the thickness of the lift. "For us, we will primarily utilize steel face rollers because they are the most versatile for what we do," Willert said. "In my mind, pneumatic tire rollers are recommended because they just utilize static and manipulative compaction. Often walking paths are about 3-inch mats, therefore it can be really easy to overcompact asphalt when using steel face if steel face operators aren't cognizant of the vibratory compaction. Often when we are paving a 3-inch mat, we are utilizing just static compaction with our steel faces and vibe minimally. Therefore, pneumatic tire rollers are recommended on bike paths because they compact the material but also manipulate it together to help reach density."

REDUCE THE WORKFORCE

Something to consider when paving and compacting the multi-purpose path is how many team members need to be on site. The smaller paver and condensed rolling pattern make for a tighter operation. For Bowes, Willert said that means "for a crew size, you can get away with something a little smaller."

He listed:

1. Skid steer operator
2. Paver operator
3. Screed operator (only need one if you have autos; two if you don't)
4. Laborer

This list doesn't count drivers to bring mix, but it maxes out the paving team at five. Something to consider with the smaller paver is having a single operator there, which Granger discussed.

"The 1360 is designed for just one operator who drives the paver and runs both the left- and right-hand feed controls," Granger said. "Because it's only 4 feet wide, it's easier for that operator to keep an eye on both sides of the screed and maintain a proper head of material. An 8-foot machine would benefit from two operators, one watching each side. That said, the 1360 has features that help lessen the mental load on a solo operator—each machine is pre-wired and programmed to run screed automation, whether that means joint matching (against a curb) or grade control to follow a suitable subgrade. The addition of the automation kit would have one side of the screed pave on grade so the operator has one less thing to worry about."

Ammann's Neacsu figured the crew this way: "Providing that grade and base were previously prepared, have one on paver, second on feeding equipment, third on roller, a fourth if needed on oversight." His recommendation was the contractor could get by with a minimal crew of three to four people on such a job after considering the cost and equipment in use.

However many crew members you have for the project, the goal is to produce a smooth, safe surface with minimal disruption to the natural environment. The funding programs in place to meet the needs of a growing population that enjoys walking, jogging, cycling and moving through our parks will continue to find sustainable methods of designing and placing multi-purpose paths. Asphalt paving contractors need only use a little finesse to take advantage of the opportunity to participate in the process. AP