



Sunflower Foundation

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Sunflower State Trail Appreciation Day set for Jan. 30 at Kansas State Capitol

Mike Passo, American Trails executive director, keynote speaker



Mike Passo

TOPEKA, Kan. – The value of trails – both to society and our souls – and the need to make them accessible to all will be on display Jan. 30 at Sunflower State Trail Appreciation Day at the Kansas State Capitol in Topeka.

The event, which is hosted by Sunflower Foundation and will run from 8:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m., brings together trail enthusiasts from across Kansas who share a love for trails and an understanding of how vital they are to communities.

Few people have a better appreciation for the role trails play in people's lives and communities than Trail Appreciation Day keynote speaker Mike Passo, who is executive director of the nonprofit organization American Trails, where he spearheads efforts to develop trails around the country and raise awareness of their value.

Growing up an avid outdoorsman in Wisconsin, Passo used to take his hunting, fishing, hiking and biking excursions for granted. Then, at age 22, a life-changing event gave him a different perspective.

While mountain biking, he went over a berm too fast, flipped over his handlebars and landed on his back, leaving him with two shattered vertebrae and permanent paralysis from the waist down. He remembers lying in his hospital bed devastated that he might never be able to enjoy his outdoor activities again.

In the years since, despite his physical disability, he has regained his identity by developing trail use habits that fit his needs, such as mountain biking on an adaptive bike that he pedals with his hands. Through his career work, he has come to realize that many people don't have access to the outdoor recreation he has been able to enjoy, and he is driven to change that.

"The injury and my realization of how critically important recreation is to a person's life, to the core of their being, was the first step down the road to understanding and having a passion for working in recreation," Passo said.

Throughout the event, trail organizations will share information about their projects and speak to the health, transportation and economic benefits they bring to their communities. Participants will have a chance to join small group discussions with Passo, and the foundation has invited all state legislators to the event. A trail mix

bar and exhibit of 25 display tables will provide opportunities for participants to have one-on-one time with lawmakers.

The day's events, to be held on the first and second floors of the Capitol, will include:

- 8:30 a.m. – Coffee, networking, opening of display tables (2nd floor)
- 9:45 to 10:45 a.m. – Speakers, including Kansas Lt. Gov. David Toland and American Trails Executive Director Mike Passo (1st floor Rotunda)
- 10:45 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. – Trail mix bar opened, networking with legislators (2nd floor)
- 11:30 a.m. – Lunch for registered participants (1st floor)
- 1:30 p.m. – Discussion with Mike Passo (1st floor)
- 2:30 p.m. – Display tables close

Since 2005, Sunflower Foundation has been partnering with organizations and communities across Kansas to increase access to all types of public trails – in city parks, schoolyards, nature preserves and neighborhoods. With the belief that trails can provide equitable access to the outdoors for people of all ages, abilities, backgrounds and income, the foundation has supported more than 210 trail projects in 85 counties.

The value of trails extends beyond its many health benefits. Trails also can:

- Create economic opportunities and enhance quality of life
- Generate tourism and showcase the beauty of our state
- Improve property values and increase public safety
- Create alternative transportation routes and make communities more walkable
- Offer equitable opportunities to connect with the outdoors

Trails are the foundation of recreation and the human spirit, said Passo, who believes investments in trails, particularly in rural areas, can positively impact overall community health and quality of life.

“I feel strongly that access to trails is something that can improve the lives of many, many people,” he said.

Passo is excited about trail projects and initiatives in Kansas, which he said are starting to receive national attention, and he wants the state's trail champions to know that their work is making a difference.

“It's really exciting when statewide pushes and initiatives like what you're doing in Kansas happen because it shows the entire country that trails aren't just for the yuppies up in Vermont, they're for everybody,” he said.

Registration for Trail Appreciation Day is free and open to anyone and will remain open until the day of the event. The deadline to register to receive lunch has passed, but all are welcome to visit the trail mix bar.

Go to <https://tinyurl.com/yryada78> to register for the event. For more information, contact Elizabeth Burger, Sunflower Foundation Vice President, Healthy Communities, at (785) 232-3000, ext. 112, or eburger@sunflowerfoundation.org.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Mike Passo will be available for interviews the day of the event. Any media interested in interviewing him can contact Sunflower Foundation Director of Communications Brett Riggs, whose contact information is listed at the top of this release.

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ABOUT SUNFLOWER FOUNDATION

Sunflower Foundation was established in 2000 as a statewide health philanthropy with a mission to serve as a catalyst for improving the health of all Kansans. The foundation believes that a thriving, sustainable nonprofit sector contributes to healthy communities, and we are committed to investing in mission-aligned nonprofits through grants, education, advocacy, collaborative learning, and capacity building. To learn more, visit the [Sunflower Foundation website](#).