Riding Purple to Protect the Green: Park City's Trailhead Transit Pilot

Park City, Utah, United States of America
Visit Park City
Local Destinations (including villages, cities, municipalities, islands)
Visitor Experience & Destination Management

Summary of Good Practice Story
Bonanza Flat, a 1,534-acre high-elevation preserve above Park City, Utah, saved from development through significant community investment, became a victim of its own conservation success: cars queued and spilled onto narrow roadsides, trampling vegetation and blocking emergency vehicle access. Park City Transit extended its Purple Line bus route to the Bonanza Flat trailheads, retrofitting buses for the narrow, steep switchback road, adding custom racks carrying up to eight bikes and welcoming dogs, while introducing paid trailhead parking specifically to fund the free transit service and moderate demand rather than simply restrict it. During the July-to-November pilot, 20,044 passengers rode the Purple Line (weekend on-time performance hit 90%), parking revenue generated $317,815, hazardous roadside queuing fell by more than half, and roughly 2,500 more local residents visited Bonanza Flat in 2025 than the year before. The lesson: the real barrier to transit serving a trailhead is philosophical, not logistical — treating a trailhead as essential community infrastructure that transit has a responsibility to serve, and linking parking revenue directly to transit funding, makes the model self-sustaining.

Setting the Scene: Destination & context
Park City, Utah sits tucked into the Wasatch Mountains, where towering ridgelines, aspen groves, and alpine meadows draw visitors from around the world. Known globally for world-

class ski resorts and historic small-town charm, Park City is equally beloved by those who come in summer and fall to hike, mountain bike, and breathe in the mountain air.

Bonanza Flat is one of the crown jewels of that experience: a high-elevation preserve of open meadows, alpine lakes, and sweeping trails perched above Park City. After a hard-fought conservation effort secured the 1,534 acres of land for public use, Bonanza Flats became one of the most visited natural areas in the Wasatch Mountains. But with that popularity came a familiar tension: a wild, sensitive landscape increasingly challenged by recreational use and infrastructure.

The Turning Point: Why change was needed
On a summer weekend, the road to Bonanza Flat had cars queued at trailhead parking areas, spilling onto narrow roadsides. Visitors were trampling vegetation along the margins and dust and exhaust drifted across meadows that hikers had come specifically to escape. Emergency vehicles had to slow or stop.

The Bonanza Flat Conservation Area had been saved from development through significant community investment. The irony was not lost on local leaders: the success of that conservation effort was now generating a new kind of pressure on the land.

The Vision: What you set out to do
The answer was the trails extension of the Park City Transit Purple Line to the Bonanza Flat trailheads. The vision was straightforward in concept but ambitious in execution: give visitors and locals a comfortable, reliable, free, bike- and dog-friendly way to reach one of the region's most beloved outdoor destinations without a car.

Paid parking was also introduced alongside transit as a deliberate management tool to moderate demand. Local leaders recognized that charging for parking without offering a meaningful alternative would simply shift the burden rather than reduce it, and that a transit option people wouldn't actually use was no alternative at all. The service had to be good to ensure that access to public land didn't depend on the ability to pay.

This represented a philosophical shift for Park City Transit, from a system designed to serve urban destinations to one that recognized trailheads as essential community infrastructure. The goal was to reduce vehicle traffic and its impacts, relieve pressure on parking, improve emergency access, and enhance the visitor experience rather than simply manage it.

The Journey: How change happened
Getting the Purple Line to Bonanza Flat was not simply a matter of extending a schedule. The road to the trailheads is narrow, winding, and covers over 2,000ft of elevation gain. Park City

Transit retrofitted buses to make drivers comfortable on those tight switchbacks and grades, addressing physical realities that standard vehicles and training weren't designed for.

Park City Transit developed custom bike racks that let buses carry up to eight bikes, serving the route's most likely riders. Bonanza Flat draws mountain bikers and families with gear, and the ability to bring a bike on the bus transformed the transit option from a compromise into an enticing alternative. Dogs are welcome on board too, recognizing that for many visitors a trail day and a dog are inseparable. On an average week during the pilot, 59 bikes and at least one dog made that journey on the Purple Line.
Staff designed the financial model to be self-sustaining. Paid parking revenue at the Bonanza Flat trailheads funds the transit service directly, with any surplus flowing toward trailhead improvements and a winter shuttle for cross country skiers and snowshoers. Visitors who drive contribute directly to the system that reduces driving.

The Breakthrough: What you achieved
The results were unambiguous. Transit became the way to the trailhead. Over the course of the July to November pilot, 20,044 passengers boarded the Purple bus to Bonanza Flat. The buses ran on time. Weekend service achieved 90% on-time performance on mountain roads that would challenge any operator. Bonanza Flat parking generated $317,815 across 23,011 transactions, providing a dedicated, locally sourced funding stream for the service.

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Visitors arrived without parking anxiety. They came with bikes and dogs. Hazardous queuing instances on the road to the trailheads fell by more than 50% compared to the previous year, improving safety for all users and restoring reliable emergency access. And the benefit reached beyond visitors: approximately 2,500 more Park City residents visited Bonanza Flat in 2025 than in 2024, a sign that better access reached the people who live closest to the land.

"We had nearly 700 riders on our busiest day, and the bike racks were often full all season," Park City Transportation Director Tim Sanderson said. "Once residents and visitors discovered the service, they kept coming back."

Reflections: What you learned and what others can learn
The most important lesson of the Bonanza Flat extension may be the simplest: the barrier to transit serving a trailhead is mostly philosophical, not logistical. The infrastructure challenges were real and required investment, but they were solvable. What required more courage was

the decision to see a trailhead as a destination that a public transit system had a responsibility to serve.

“The community invested millions to protect Bonanza Flat, and this transportation program is one way we honor that investment,” Park City Mayor Ryan Dickey said. “Parking revenue funded free, frequent transit; road congestion dropped; and 2,500 more Parkites visited the trails than the year before. The model paid for itself and we’re building on it.”

For transit agencies in mountain communities considering similar extensions: link parking revenue directly to transit funding, invest properly in vehicle preparation and driver comfort, and don't treat the bike rack as a detail. In an outdoor recreation community, bringing a bike on the bus transforms the calculus for a significant share of potential riders.

The Ripple Effect: Lasting impact
Surplus parking revenue is already being directed toward a winter shuttle pilot to Bonanza Flat, extending the model into a second season and a very different set of conditions. That planning process is itself a sign of the shift the summer produced: Bonanza Flats is now on Park City Transit's map as a destination to be served year-round, not an experiment to be evaluated.

The broader ripple is a change in frame. Park City Transit now has a demonstrated model for connecting visitors and residents to recreational destinations by bus. Other communities wrestling with the same tension between access and impact can look at the Purple Line to Bonanza Flat and see a proof of concept. In a place where the mountains are both the attraction and the conservation responsibility, moving people through a landscape without overwhelming it is part of what it means to take that landscape seriously.

Awards or Certifications

Web Articles
https://www.kpcw.org/park-city/2025-09-26/mountain-bikers-using-new-bonanza-flat-shuttle-like-a-ski-lift
https://www.parkrecord.com/2025/07/10/heading-to-bonanza-flat-or-blood-lake-trailheads-try-taking-the-bus/

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