Since its creation in 1812, public health has been at the backbone of Fairmount Park. Created to preserve Philadelphia’s water supply and combat yellow fever epidemics, the park quickly became a cherished spot in the city and was expanded several times throughout the 1850s. Today, Fairmount is Philadelphia’s largest and most popular park with 2,063 acres and more than 10 million visitors each year. Fairmount Park is also one of the first examples of using civic infrastructure to serve multiple functions: it protected Philadelphia’s watershed, but also provided space for recreation.

In 2014, Fairmount Park was linked to Center City Philadelphia by extending a trail along the banks of the Schuylkill River. The trail extension has driven the use of the park as a means of transportation in addition to recreation. The Schuylkill River Trail also connects the city to surrounding suburbs, and will eventually become part of a 130-mile trail linking Philadelphia to rural Schuylkill County. Recent projects to extend the Schuylkill River Trail were financed through public-private partnerships, the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation, and City of Philadelphia capital budget funds.

Since August 2015, more than 2 million pedestrian and bicycle trips have taken place on the Schuylkill River Trail in Center City. In the first 10 months of 2016, 48.5% of all weekday bicycle trips and 44.4% of all weekend pedestrian trips on the Schuylkill River Trail in Center City occurred during commuting hours. Further, on an average workday (Monday-Friday) in 2016, more than 4,800 people used the trail (3,207 pedestrians and 1,617 bicyclists). For reference, a road with Average Annual Daily Traffic equal to 3000 or more vehicles a day is considered a minor urban arterial. The Schuylkill River Trail has clearly become an important piece of transportation infrastructure in the City of Philadelphia.

Using a sample of cyclists recording data in the Cycle Philly mobile application, we estimated the number of bicycle trips routed through Fairmount Park and the Schuylkill River Trail that runs through it. The Cycle Philly app records GPS bicycle trip data submitted by users, and records the trip’s origin, destination, and route. About 7% of all trips recorded by the Cycle Philly app used the Schuylkill River Trail. Most of these trips were commute trips (to home or work), suggesting that the trail is used as transportation infrastructure in addition to a recreational space.

In addition, Fairmount Park still serves as a critical piece of Philadelphia’s water system. Over 1.1 million people in the Philadelphia region receive water from the park. The park also features a 1-acre wetland, which treats a portion of the 70 million gallons of storm water generated in the surrounding watershed each year.

Fairmount Park thus began as a means of delivering clean water, transformed into a beloved greenspace, and now will be a gateway to increased travel and economic activity within and around Philadelphia.

For more information about Georgia Tech’s research regarding park infrastructure, please contact Dr. Kari Watkins, kari.watkins@ece.gatech.edu.