Rails with Trails

Finding the mobility, safety, and liability sweet spot

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The National Transportation Systems Center
Advancing transportation innovation for the public good

U.S. Department of Transportation
Office of the Secretary of Transportation
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Introductions

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Outline

- What is a rail with trail?
- Common benefits and concerns:
  - Mobility
  - Safety
  - Liability
- Rail with trail policies
- Nationwide research:
  - RTC research
  - U.S. DOT Research
- Questions and discussion
Rails with Trails:

Trails alongside railroads or rail transit

East Boston Greenway, Boston, MA
Source: US DOT Volpe Center
Rails with Trails: Benefits and Concerns

Rails with trails can benefit communities and avoid inhibiting railroad operations.

BUT...

You must adequately address the unique challenges and concerns that are associated with rails with trails.
Rails with Trails: Benefits and Concerns

Rails with trails can benefit communities and avoid inhibiting railroad operations.

BUT...

You must adequately address the unique challenges and concerns that are associated with rails with trails.

- **Mobility**
- **Safety**
- **Liability**
Rails with Trails: Benefits and Concerns

- Mobility
- Safety
- Liability

Can a rail with trail preserve the ability of railroads to move people and freight while creating new routes for active transportation?
How do rails with trails either promote or inhibit safety for trail users and railroad users and crews?
Do rails with trails invite unsafe and/or illegal activity that poses a legal risk to railroads, governments, and trail builders?
Mobility Benefits

Rails with trails create new opportunities to move safely and directly through an area.

✓ Promote active transportation where available right of way is scarce

Downtown Lakewalk, Duluth, MN
Source: American Trails
Mobility Benefits

A rail with trail creates a new opportunity to move safely and directly through an area.

✓ Provide access through constrained or bottleneck areas

Elliott Bay Trail, Seattle, WA
Source: Google Maps
Mobility Benefits

A rail with trail creates a new opportunity to move safely and directly through an area.

✓ Improve nonmotorized access to transit stations if built along passenger rail

Expo Line Trail, Los Angeles, CA
Source: Curbed LA
Mobility Benefits

Rails with trails also have the same mobility benefits of other trail types!
✓ Flat, smooth, and direct routes
✓ Free from vehicular traffic
✓ Promote active transportation

Neponset River Greenway, Boston, MA
Source: Bay Colony Rail Trail
Mobility Concerns

Railroads are critical transportation corridors, serving national and regional economies.

The siting of rails with trails should not inhibit future railroad expansion, if anticipated.

Minneapolis Southwest Corridor, Minneapolis, MN
Source: Southwest Journal
Mobility Concerns

Railroads are critical transportation corridors, serving national and regional economies.

Rails with trails should ensure that the railroad has adequate access for operations and maintenance.

Bypass 4 construction, Fairfield, Ohio
Source: City of Fairfield
Mobility Concerns

Railroads are critical transportation corridors, serving national and regional economies.

Special care or even rerouting is needed in areas of potential conflict, such as bridges, tunnels, and rail yards.

Steel Bridge, Portland, Oregon
Source: Bike Portland
Safety Benefits

Rails with trails can include elements that improve safety for people in the area around railroad tracks.

- Consider including access-control fencing to physically separate trail users from trains.

East Boston Greenway, Boston, MA
Source: US DOT Volpe Center
Safety Benefits

Rails with trails can include elements that improve safety for people in the area around railroad tracks.

 ✓ Ensure that there is adequate space between a train’s operating envelope and the edge of the trail right of way.

Great River Trail, Rock Island, IL
Source: American Trails
Safety Benefits

Rails with trails can include elements that improve safety for people in the area around railroad tracks.

- Avoid new at-grade crossings, and instead take the opportunity to build grade-separated crossings.
Safety Benefits

Rails with trails also have the same safety benefits of other trail types!

✓ Separates pedestrians and bicyclists from roadway traffic
✓ Introduces more “eyes on the trail”

Southwest Path, Madison, WI
Source: NACTO
Safety Concerns

Railroads and public agencies tend to be cautious. They have legitimate safety concerns about putting people close to trains.

Rails with trails can be deterrents to trespassing – make being on the trail more enticing than being on the rails.

26th Ave BNSF Bridge, Minneapolis, MN
Source: Minneapolis Star
Safety Concerns

Railroads and public agencies tend to be cautious. They have legitimate safety concerns about putting people close to trains.

Rails with trails that are too close to active tracks can:

- Pose a safety hazard
- Cause drainage problems that can damage the railroad right of way

Source: NH DOT
Liability Benefits

Cautious design and negotiation can reduce the railroad’s and trail builder’s liability and make a project possible.

☑ Purchasing the proposed trail right of way from the railroad can eliminate their liability
☑ Long-term easements that include indemnification clauses have a similar effect

Springwater Trail (before construction), Portland, OR
Source: Oregon Pacific Railroad
Liability Benefits

Cautious design and negotiation can reduce the railroad’s and trail builder’s liability and make a project possible.

✓ Rails with trails can “formalize” existing trespassing routes and reduce conflicts between trains and people.

Foothills Parkway BNSF Underpass, Boulder, CO
Source: Boulder Daily Camera
Liability Concerns

Liability is often a railroad’s foremost concern about a proposed rail with trail. A sparse case history keeps railroads and trail builders nervous. Many States have legislation that can help:

- **Recreational use statutes** can provide general protections for landowners (including railroads) whose land is used for recreation.

- **Anti-trespassing legislation** can protect railroads from trespassing lawsuits in general, including rails with trails cases.

- **Specific rail with trail legislation** can cover a number of issues from funding to liability to design.

- **Physical design of the trail**, as well as posted warnings and signage, can further protect a railroad and a trail manager.
Finding the Sweet Spot

Not all rails with trails are created equal.

- Some rails with trails require little separation between rails and the trail.
- Others may require extensive retaining walls, environmental remediation, fencing, and drainage modification.

California Railroad Museum, Sacramento, CA
Source: California Parks

Light Rail and Trail Corridor, Denver, CO
Source: StreetsBlog Denver
State Policies and Guidance

States approach rails with trails differently, depending on their needs.

- States with an active role in trailbuilding, including rails with trails when necessary.
- States with a regulatory or review role, working closely with a trail builder and a railroad.
- States see little need for rails with trails due to extensive networks of abandoned railroad corridors for rails to trails projects.
- States with little involvement in trail or railroad projects.

Example: 2008 New Hampshire DOT
Railroad and Transit Policies and Guidance

Railroads are generally cautious about rails with trails projects. But, they can embrace a project if their concerns are met.

- Coordinate extensively with the railroad throughout the process.
- Railroads become more comfortable with good precedents. And cash.

Example: 2001 SEDA-Council of Governments Joint Rail Authority

Example: 2007 Union Pacific
Past Nationwide Research

- **2002:** Rails with Trails: Lessons Learned
- **2013:** America’s Rails with Trails

U.S. Department of Transportation

Rails-to-Trails Conservancy
How We are Updating the 2002 Report

- Reviewing available guideline documents
  - State and local government
  - Railroads and transit agencies

- Interviewing practitioners
  - State Departments of Transportation
  - Railroad policy and engineering staff
  - Local governments and transit agencies
  - Trail-building organizations and advocacy groups

- Collecting new data on rails with trails

- We will release the report by the end of 2018.
How You Can Help

- What challenges have you faced in trying to build rails with trails in your area? How did you overcome them?
- How did you address the mobility, safety, and liability concerns of the host railroad?
- What benefits have your rails with trails provided to your communities?
- Questions for us?
How You Can Help

For more information or to share your experiences, please email us!

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Comments and Questions

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