

Dear Friend:

New York is blessed with a rich railroad history. Since the first railroads in the 1830's over 10,000 miles of track have been built in the Empire State. Over time, many lines proved to be financially burdensome and were abandoned by their operators; a process which continues to this day.

An abandoned railroad line need not become a community eyesore. With an organized effort, these lines can once again become community assets in the form of a rail-trail. Over 650 miles of former railroad in urban, suburban and rural communities has been developed into rail-trails within New York State.

New York is also blessed with millions of acres of parks, open space and important conservation areas. Rail-trails can connect communities with these valuable environmental and recreational resources and connect these ecological communities to each other.

The Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation ("State Parks") wants to assist you in realizing your vision of converting an unused rail corridor to a multi-use trail to serve your community. This document is intended to provide some basic information and organizational contacts.

OPRHP Planning Bureau

### Getting Started!

For most individuals and organizations starting a rails-to-trails project will seem like a daunting task. First, realize you are not alone. There are many organizations that may be willing to help with your trail project and there are probably many of your neighbors who share your vision for a trail. Parks and Trails New York and the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy are two not for profit private organizations focused on rail-trails that are equipped to provide you with technical advice and help organize your community. State Parks and the National Park Service each offer grants and technical assistance to help you realize your trail. The New York State Department of Transportation can provide information on the status of the rail line and also has a grant program that may assist you in developing your project. The last section of this document contains contact information for each of these organizations. In addition, many areas have Municipal Planning Organizations that may have developed regional trail plans. Your abandoned railroad may be part of a larger trail plan.

However no amount of outside help can substitute for strong community support for a trail. Share your idea with a few friends. Ideally you will form a core group of individuals who will act as trail leaders. Use each other to contact public officials at all levels to talk about the idea and eventually place "letters to the editor" in the local paper

about the idea. Having the support of public officials for the trail project is very important.

What benefits will a trail provide?

While some will argue that a trail is a costly luxury, you should know that rail-trails can provide benefits to every type of community that they traverse. These trails tend to support a variety of recreational uses depending on community direction and trail surface. As gasoline prices go higher and concerns for greenhouse gas emissions grow, these trails can provide an alternative to traditional motor vehicle use for commuting and leisure. Trails also provide an opportunity to provide a resource that will contribute positively to the public health of your community by providing a safe facility for exercise and recreation.

Trails are proving to contribute positively to the economy of their host community. They not only contribute to the quality of life but also attract tourists, attract homebuyers and support local businesses. Studies have shown that trail users spend between \$5 and \$30 dollars each time they access a trail. A 2006 User Survey and Economic Impact Analysis of the 60 mile long Pine Creek Trail in rural Pennsylvania suggests that trail users spend more than \$3 million on services ranging from food at local restaurants to overnight accommodations. A 2002 survey by the National Realtor Association established that a significant number of new home buyers considered the proximity of trails important or very important to their decision to buy a particular home.

When to start?

No time is too soon but you should start as soon as you see an active rail line become inactive for a year or more. It could be a sign that the railroad is considering “abandoning” the rail line. Every operating freight line must apply to the National Surface Transportation Board before it officially discontinues service on an operating track. Congress recognized that once a rail line is abandoned and sold off, it marked the loss of a national asset that could not easily be reconstructed. Congress amended the abandonment law so that a railroad right of way can be preserved while in the interim a trail for public use could be created and operated. This process is what is known as “rail banking.” The process is detailed but it does address the fact that most railroad right of ways are composed of a diversity of titles ranging from a narrow easement for railroad purposes to full fee ownership. The Federal Surface Transportation Board web site (see back cover) provides very detailed information on this process. The site is very informative and contains most if not all the written materials related to an abandonment.

It can be the case that the rail line you are considering for trail use was long ago abandoned by the railroad. In these circumstances creating a trail becomes a difficult but not impossible task. Some groups have had success re-acquiring the corridor from private interests. Some groups have even received permission from private landowners to use the rail bed as a trail. New York’s General Obligations Law “Recreational Use Statute” (Section 9-103) makes it very difficult to sustain a successful suit against a property owner who allows their land to be used for those recreational activities generally associated with a trail.

Can we afford the trail?

The cost of acquiring a trail can vary widely. Some rail corridors have been acquired for as little as \$1, while others have been purchased for substantial amounts. Before substantial funds are paid, the value of the corridor should be established through the preparation of a professional appraisal. The cost of developing a trail from rail can also vary greatly. In some instances, trails have been established simply by removing the rail (most times this is done by the railroad for reuse in other locations) and minor modification of the trail surface. To the other extreme, some trails have been paved, some have built new bridges and others installed culverts; each action a costly proposition. The good news is that there are many grant programs available including the Federal Transportation Enhancement Program, Recreational Trail Grants and State Environmental Protection Fund Park Grants which can assist communities with the acquisition and development of the trail. Obviously once a corridor is secured, you can develop the trail over time depending on the resources that are available.

Acquiring and developing a rail-trail takes a great deal of time and information. For additional assistance contact:

Parks and Trails New York  
29 Elk Street  
Albany, New York 12207  
(518)-434-1583  
[www.ptny.org](http://www.ptny.org)

Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (National Office)  
1100 17<sup>th</sup> Street, NW  
10<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Washington, DC 20036  
(202)-331-9696  
[www.railtrails.org](http://www.railtrails.org)

Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (Northeast Regional Office)  
2133 Market Street, Suite 222  
Camp Hill, PA 17011  
(717)-238-1717

Surface Transportation Board  
395 E Street, S.W.  
Washington, DC 20423-0001  
(202)-245-0230  
[www.stb.dot.org](http://www.stb.dot.org)

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