

NOTES OF MEETING OF AUGUST 18, 2021

New Hampshire State Rail Trail Plan
New Hampshire - Statewide
MAX-2018023.01

DATE PREPARED: August 18, 2021

LOCATION: Virtual – Zoom Webinar (including phone-in option)

ATTENDEES: Shelly Winters, NHDOT
Shannon Rogers, PhD, UNH
Mark Debowski, GPI
Carolyn Radisch, GPI
Nicole Rogers, GPI
Public Representation

PURPOSE: New Hampshire Rail Trail Public Meeting #4

Discussion:

1. Introduction – Shelly Winters (NHDOT)
 - a. Project Overview
 - b. Project Team
 - c. Stakeholders
2. Project Scope – Mark Debowski (GPI)
 - a. Update Rail Corridor Inventory
 - b. Economic Impact – Shannon Rogers, PhD (UNH)
 - c. Tiered System for Prioritizing State Investments in Rail Trail Projects
 - d. State Funding Mechanisms
 - e. Rail Trail Maintenance Definitions, Costs, Insurance, Agreement Template
 - f. Recommendations on Ensuring the Integrity of Publicly Owned Rail Trail Corridors
 - g. Rail Trail Design Standards
 - h. Final Report
 - i. State Rail Trail Pamphlet
 - j. Public Engagement
3. Timeline – Mark Debowski (GPI)
4. Requested Public Feedback – Mark Debowski (GPI)
 - a. Tier System for Prioritizing State Investments
 - b. State Funding Mechanisms
 - c. Other Items
5. Public Comment Period

Kris Pastoriza

Q: Will the economic analysis include externalized costs of uses of rail trails? For example, noise, pollution, dust and CO2 produced by motorized use of trails.

A: These factors definitely have an economic impact. Unfortunately, the economic analysis scope within Senate Bill 185 was limited and geared more towards visitor spending than a cost-benefit analysis and this plan is conducting the economic impacts in accordance with SB185.

Q: What are the specific ways in which global warming is integrated into your planning for the rail trails?

A: The SB185 scope is limited to current trail use and future investments. Environmental sustainability, carbon footprint, and commuter access routes can all be potential criteria for the prioritization of future investments.

Q: ATV Clubs use their “volunteer” trail maintenance labor as a contribution toward co-payments they need to make for grants they receive.

A: Thank you for your comment.

Anonymous Attendee

Q: How do you find out why people don't use the trails? How do you survey the people who don't show up on the trail and the reason why they don't?

A: This is something we don't have the answer to but this is a very valid point and we may consider this in the future.

Paul Coats - Lebanon (NH) Director of Recreation

Q: Does the economic impact study account for things like increased home values near rail trails, increase in population to the state in areas of rail trails? Increase in business development or sales with rail trails?

A: These factors have an economic benefit, but the economic analysis scope within SB185 is geared more towards visitor spending than a cost-benefit analysis. We do, however, have a qualitative way to get those stories. We do provide open ended questions on the user spending survey which allows us to collect this qualitative type of information. We plan to have vignettes within the report that help capture this. We do understand that there should be a focus on the quality of life as it relates to business/employee retention, etc. Businesses can often benefit from proximity of rail trails.

Q: Will there be opportunity to see the draft report before it is finalized and public input during that phase?

A: The draft report will be available on the project website. However, it will not be open to general public comment. The stakeholders advisory committee will be reviewing and providing comment to the draft report. The public is encouraged to funnel any concerns to the stakeholder advisory committee and the members that represent them.

Richard

Q: Do your maps and plans include easements on rail corridors from non-state entities as well as state entities?

A: They do not include easements.

Q: Since OHRV fees are being used today, they should be exempt.

A: Thank you for your comment.

Q: Rail spike removal!

A: Thank you for your comment.

Q: GIS Mapping of towns, town tax maps and individual deeds should show boundaries.

A: Thank you for your comment.

Anonymous Attendee

Q: Will the draft plan be available for public review and/or feedback prior to finalization?

A: The draft report will be available on the project website. However, it will not be open to general public comment. The stakeholders advisory committee will be reviewing and providing comment to the draft report. The public is encouraged to funnel any concerns to the stakeholder advisory committee and the members that represent them.

David Forsyth

Q: In doing user surveys, how do you account for people joining the rail trail in the middle, i.e., not at a trail head?

A: This is something we are working on, especially to get additional surveys from the equestrian users. We do typically set up at trailheads. We do have signage and staff to try and entice those on the trail to stop & take a survey, but it does have limitations.

Q: How wide is the typical rail trail corridor? How do you know if a property is encroaching without a survey?

A: The ROW varies from anywhere between 33-99 feet so it can be difficult to do so without a survey. We are looking for volunteers to help walk and identify those encroachments. We are looking to orthorectify old maps into a GIS database. Once property lines are established, we need to figure out how to identify encroachments and effectively enforce.

Dan Whittet

Q: Will the analysis of rail trails and State objectives ever factor in a future with passenger rail? How about environmental impacts of alternative transportation?

A: We are looking at state-owned rail trails only. We are not making recommendations regarding the Pan Am rail corridor that is being contemplated for the NH Capitol Corridor project. We are looking at active rail with trail standards for active state-owned railroad lines. Municipalities can approach the owners of privately-owned active rail lines about installing trails within their right of way. We are not looking to replace active rail with trails anywhere, but are looking to incorporate additional rail trails miles where it is safe and feasible to do so. We are allowed to have interim use and all municipal agreements have a termination clause and timeframe should the property be needed for rail use (in most cases this is not very likely).

Q: How can citizens better impact the direction of the legislature relative to trail use?

A: We encourage you to become engaged with Dave Topham and the NH rail trails coalition who may be better suited to align citizens with advocacy efforts. Hopefully some of the outcomes of this plan, including the economic impact analysis, will provide information, data, and recommendations that can be reviewed and considered by citizens and users of the rail trail network as they try to seek funding and support for rail trail projects

Anne Forsyth

Q: Many railroads were built on or adjacent to wetlands. Wetlands are very valuable resources for birds and other wildlife. Will you consider including the value of wetlands to the economy?

A: While the direct impacts to wetlands are not considered as part of this effort, the preservation to wetlands can be a prioritization criteria for future investment funds.

Q: Bird watching is an important activity made possible by opening up good viewing opportunities on rail trails. Bird watching is a very popular activity that contributes to the economy. I hope you will recognize this benefit to the state.

A: Yes, we are definitely aware of the economic value that bird watching brings to the state. This is a usage option on the user survey and therefore we are collecting data.

Nancy Stiles

Q: The marsh area has many natural resource opportunities – do you know what and when a plan might be in place to connect the Seabrook Trail (which connects with MA) and the Hampton branch which ultimately connects with Maine?

A: While the direct impacts to wetlands are not considered as part of this effort, the preservation to wetlands and marsh areas can be a prioritization criteria for future investment funds.

Jim Breeling

Q: Are there plans to use the inactive rail trail next to Silver Lake in Madison to go south as far as it can?

A: The State does not have a timeframe but there will likely be a Request for Proposals (RFP) for the abandoned state-owned Conway Branch Railroad Line some time in the future.

Q: Does your inventory include those non-profit and volunteer organizations (including snowmobile clubs) that use or help maintain rail trails?

A: We are trying to get this information and will reach out to stakeholders to get as accurate a list we can within our GIS inventory process.

Q: Because the economic benefit methodology will likely yield an underestimate of economic value, is there a factor that could be applied to show increased value if the trail system is adequately supported and marketed as a tourist attraction?

A: We can show economic existing spending and compare to other states that have great marketing and tourism boards. We will not have a factor to multiple at the end of the study but this will be a great starting point for the state or local groups to begin with.

Debbie Briscoe

Q: Are the State agency representatives on this SB185 Committee having conversations with the HB311 committee? Looks like they are planning to updated the recreational liability laws.

A: This came up last week and one of committee members and house rep will be reaching out to us. They are looking for the results of this plan to see what additional work needs to be done.

Q: Is your economic analysis considering of both visitors and locals?

A: Yes, we are collecting both in- and out-of-state visitors. We are collecting the net use spending of visitors and residents' economic contribution for their investment.

Tom Duston

Q: Are there any examples of rail trails adjacent to active rail?

A: Yes- the WOW trail in the Laconia area is an example.

Q: Is there money in the federal infrastructure bill for rail trails?

A: We do not know at this time.

Anonymous Attendee

Q: Perhaps recreation departments could help to spread word about survey/plan?

A: Absolutely. We will continue to funnel this information out to stakeholders and we advise you all to share the survey as well.

Ken

Q: Have you reached out to well established trails and their States to learn from their experience? GAP, Katy, etc. Seems like most of this exercise has been done many times in other areas.

A: Yes! We are reaching out to other states and getting input from other trail organizations.

Alexander Bernhard

Q: Do you plan to address the transfers DOT has been making of federal funds for trail development to other users?

A: This study is intended recommend a managing entity to allocate funds appropriately.

Q: Do you plan to address the delays that have been occurring in the processing of approved applications for federal funds for rail trail development?

A: We will be making prevailing rail trail agreements for standard processes and efficiencies that need to be addressed via state agencies.

Q: Rarely is there funding for pre-engineering. Projects are 'under-engineered' which causes delays. Perhaps a solution is a state funded program like Massachusetts that has a great leveraged effect.

A: We will certainly consider that. Valid point. Thank you.

Mark

Q: What is the State's vision to directly assist the various trails?

A: We are hoping this study helps frame answers to the topics raised by SB 185.

Roger Pelletier

Q: What are the chances for an ATV trail from Littleton to Gorham?

A: That is handled by the DNCR. There are usage restrictions based on the funds used to acquire specific railroad corridors. Please reach out to DNCR for additional information on a specific trail or project as ATVs are more under their purview.

Dick Mackay

Q: How do you quantify physical and mental health?

A: This is not in our scope, but physical and mental health can be considered as a prioritization criteria.

Kristine Keeney- East Coast Greenway Alliance

Q: Connecting across state lines should be a priority. The current condition of trails should also be a consideration. As an example, the Presidential and Ammonoosuc trail are in very poor condition – less use equate to less economic impact. Gravel aggregate is very large and difficult to traverse if not a motorized user. Need to consider long-distance trips. Bikes will fishtail in unstable/drainage issues/mudding. If surface condition offers a more difficult use you will have less users and therefore less economic impact.

The East Coast Greenway Alliance has also produced our own design standards and references for local, state and federal guidance. Can be found at www.greenway.org/design-guide.

We also encourage the project team to look into the interagency (MassDOT, Energy and Environmental Affairs, and Department of Conservation and Recreation) MassTrails program who meet bi-monthly in regard to grant and state funding.

A: Thank you for those comments.

Tom DiMaggio

Q: We have a Statewide Trails Advisory Committee meeting coming up this month on August 24. This type of survey was done a few years ago and is available and still valid for most rail trails. The other thing that needs to be thought about is the time/effort that local organizations provide to keep trails usable. They are keeping trails open which is a valuable dollar amount and should be taken into consideration.

A: We will take any information. We understand there is a lot of investment via volunteer work. We won't capture that in economic impact portion of study but we are looking at maintenance costs and are trying to come up with cost estimates so everyone has clear expectation of time and money required to maintain the trails.

Steve Workman-Transport NH

Q: Some trails act as commuter options for folks and there is a cost-benefit analysis that should be conducted. Making meaningful connection to social health and well-being should be a considered prioritization criteria factor. I recommended the project team look at other policy goals in other state plans for other potential criteria including active health and connectivity to public transit opportunities to make a more well-rounded connected plan for the state.

A: Thank you for your comments.

Dave Topham

Q: Has there been any discussion between the tourism committee to see potential economic impacts of connection and a full system?

The NH Rail Trail Coalition (NHRTC) is watching HB-311 now in the committee/commission. NHRTC has a member who has applied for the open Statewide Trails Advisory Committee (STAC) slot for the Heritage Trail. We are awaiting a reply from DNCR Commissioner Sarah Stewart.

A: This study will allow for future projections to be made and will provide a great baseline to do that type of estimation.

These minutes constitute our understanding of the discussions and conclusions reached. Please advise us within ten (10) days, in writing, of any exceptions or corrections.

Respectfully submitted,

Nicole Rogers
Project Engineer

cc: Mark Debowski, GPI
Carolyn Radisch, GPI