

MEETING NOTES FROM STAKEHOLDER MEETING ON MARCH 1, 2022

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

DATE PREPARED: March 1, 2022

LOCATION: Virtual – Zoom Webinar

ATTENDEES: See Attached Attendance List

PURPOSE: New Hampshire Rail Trail Stakeholder Advisory Committee Meeting #5

Discussion:

A. Introduction – Shelley Winters (NHDOT) + Mark Debowski (GPI)

All Project Team members and Stakeholder Committee members were provided the opportunity to introduce themselves. Mark Debowski (GPI) provided a brief outline of the meeting's agenda.

B. Stakeholder Committee Change – Mark Debowski (GPI)

Mark Debowski (GPI) informed the committee that Craig Rennie, new NH Bureau of Trails Chief, will be replacing Chris Gamache on the committee.

C. Summary of Project Timeline Remaining – Mark Debowski (GPI)

Mark Debowski (GPI) provided a brief overview of the remaining project timeline. The project team is aiming to distribute a draft report sometime late April with chapters released as necessary to obtain feedback and provide time to review. A final report is intended to be released by the end of June. A pamphlet will accompany the final report.

J.B. Mack posed the question if there will be a formal public comment period. **Shelley Winters (NHDOT)** advised that there will not be a formal public comment period but rather stakeholder members should distribute the plan and collect and collate comments received by their respective constituents to the project team for review and incorporation.

D. Review DRAFT Plan Chapters – Project Team

Three chapters in DRAFT form were distributed to the stakeholder committee in advance of the meeting. Mark Debowski (GPI) indicated that these three chapters are discussed today as they are central to the (overall) Plan and therefore require feedback and additional input as we move forward with the rest of the Plan. It is important to note that the chapters, as released, have not been reviewed by the New Hampshire Department of Transportation and are in rough draft form. Spelling and grammar have not been thoroughly checked, and formatting is in process. Stakeholder committee review comment & feedback should be related to overall content, not grammar or formatting.

1. The Economic Impact of New Hampshire's State-Owned Trails – Shannon Rogers (UNH)

a. Introduction

Shannon Rogers (UNH) provided an overview of the economic study portion of the report. The following main highlights were discussed:

- There are two types of spending detailed in the report – visitor impact and resident contribution. Visitor economic impact reflects what is “net new” to the economy. In other words, visitors would not be spending in NH if it were not for the rail trail. On the other hand, if the rail trail were not there, residents may be spending their money in NH somewhere else. These are important distinctions and apply to state-owned rail trails only.
- An economic input-output modeling software called IMPLAN was used to determine the ripple effect of spending by visitors and residents to the state-owned rail trails. Spending categories were determined two years ago in consultation with colleagues doing similar work and guidelines given by IMPLAN.
- The average visitor spending per person per visit to rail trail is \$42.25 in comparison to the average resident spending per person per visit to rail trail of \$26.23.
- In total, with the data analyzed to date, for all the state-owned rail trails in the economic impact study, we see a yearly economic contribution from residents using the state-owned rail trails of \$21,735,584, tax revenue of \$2,574,517 and 215 jobs supported. Almost 8 million dollars (\$7,955,954) of economic impact from visitor spending is generated with over 1 million in taxes (\$1,310,179) and 66 jobs. In total, this is \$33,576,234 of annual value from the state-owned rail trails and 281 jobs supported.
- It is intended that the supplemental online survey completed during the pandemic will be utilized as comparative data.
- Accurate representation of spending is contingent on accurate trail counts. Unfortunately, the State of NH does not yet have a consistent methodology for collecting and housing such data. It is recommended that as the rail trail network continues to grow, the state should prioritize data collection for future planning purposes.

b. Comments and Discussion

- **Avis Rosenfield** – The NH Horse Council has submitted data that does not appear to have made it into the study.

Project Team – We have reviewed the data. The information provided was an economic study of the equestrian group as it relates to the state of New Hampshire as a whole. Information directly related to the economic impact of state-owned rail trails was not present in the report. Instead, the information appeared related to general spending habits in the broader economy. We do, however, have data from equestrian users via the supplemental online survey which suggests equestrians typically spend less than the average spender.

- **Dave Topham** – How are the jobs derived? In other words, what is the linkage between jobs and rail trails?

Project Team – This comes from output via the IMPLAN software. They connect spending in different categories to specific jobs that are supported by rail trail usage. These aren’t necessary jobs that wouldn’t be there otherwise, but they are jobs benefiting from spending because of rail trail use.

- **Craig Rennie** – In regard to spending categories, there is a category for ATV maintenance. Does this include snowmobiles too, and where is fuel accounted for?

Project Team – Fuel is accounted for within the transportation category. We will have to verify snowmobile maintenance.

- **Dick Samuels** – How do you factor in whether or not spending in any of the categories would not otherwise occur if the rail trail wasn't to be used by a person, particularly a resident (they may walk to the store on the road rather than via rail trail)? Could you also explain the tax impact category?

Project Team – This is why we separate visitors vs. residents. There is an argument that residents could be spending money on other things than rail trails. However, we did create a methodology to have in-person data collection to reiterate that we were looking for spending in relation to spending on the rail trail only. Tax data comes from rooms/meals and other taxes related to wages in jobs within the spending categories.

- **Dave Topham** – (1) Can you clarify what is meant that “83% of trail users pay no membership fees?” (2) Can you also provide additional insight to “Visitors spend 7.6 nights in the state for 6 hours on the rail” – what else are they doing? (3) Also, it looks like the number of OHRV trails is very low (only 3)- were only TE-funded trails studied?

Project Team – (1) We posed the questions if users paid membership fees to local land trusts, rails to trails conservancy, local trail clubs etc. 83% of respondents stated “no.” The remaining stated that “yes” they paid membership fees and the average was \$86 for fees. (2) In regard to the number of visitor night stays, the team will provide additional information at a later date. (3) In regard to the OHRV representation within the study, the trail locations selected for in-person surveys were developed in consultation with the stakeholder committee and input from the DNCR representative and motorized use rep and were not only TE-funded state-owned rail trails. Additionally, the Project Team did speak with a handful of OHRV users. We also have a significant number of OHRV users from the online survey for a comparison study.

- **JB Mack** – I think there could be confusion from readers related to the scope of the study. I would suggest there is a clear caveat about what this study was meant to do and what it was not meant to do. It would be really great for this to be in a format that people will find easy to use for future planning efforts. Also, in regard to average spending, the average makes sense, but the median expense category may throw people off.

Project Team –We will format appropriately for readability. In regard to median expense, we may be able to include a range of spending to further clarify. The Project Team also hopes to include a write-up to compare findings to other economic studies to depict averages stated in the report are comparable to similar types of studies.

- **Anonymous Attendee** – Tourism spending should include NH residents, as visitors, when they stay overnight in NH. They will do the same spending as out-of-staters because of trail use. NH Trails users love variety and will travel and

extend their stay for trails in different regions. Can something be added to note this even though the survey shows less for overnight stays?

Project Team – Thank you for this input/suggestion; we'll discuss as a project team.

- **Debbie Briscoe** – Page 24, Conclusion, paragraph starting with “A coordinated and easy to follow plan for conducting and analyzing trail counts.” ADD at end the sentence – Information from the Advisory Members and the User Feedback Summary indicated all user groups are significantly active in using rail trails.

Project Team – Thank you for your feedback.

- **Anonymous Attendee** – What is the plan to capture information for the Presidential Rail Trail starting in Gorham?

Project Team – The chapter circulated is still in DRAFT form. This information has yet to be added to the report, but the Presidential Rail Trail was an in-person survey location.

- **Wendy Grossman** - Have you considered the impact of rail trails on property values in the local communities? A community that has good rail trail will be a more attractive place to live. This should increase housing prices and therefore property taxes. This impact may far outweigh the spending you've included in your narrow analysis.

Project Team - Property values are not included in the scope of the economic study but are something that can be mentioned in the narrative. We hope to include a narrative that discusses other qualitative economic impacts.

- **Anonymous Attendee** - Consider putting Conclusions after Introduction for a quicker overview of results of survey findings.

Project Team - Thank you for your feedback.

- **Gary LeBlanc** - Curious if trail counters take into account people's out and back passing or if each counter passing is counted as a different person?

Project Team - We don't think the trail counters correct for out and back. We work with the RPCs to try to correct for this.

- **Anonymous Attendee** - I see in the report that visits to Southern NH Rail Trails from local residents would be shorter and day trips. Anyone from Southern NH and out of state visitors heading to the Presidential Rail Trail in northern NH would spend more time and money.

Project Team - Thank you for this comment. This is accounted for in the data from residents. We see that residents are spending overnight time at other points in NH. Every spending category is the same for visitors vs. residents. We will consider if there is a way to further dive down based on zip code, but we may not have significant enough sample size.

- **Mike Kowalczyk** - Ashuelot Trail could be included in the IMPLAN model tables

Project Team - We have analyzed Ashuelot in the spending analysis-it was our first trail count data and have worked closely with J.B. and Henry Underwood to get data and its analysis is detailed on page 9.

- **Wendy Grossman** - Why is the Cheshire Rail Trail omitted from the Spending Analysis? It is the longest rail in Cheshire County (43 miles) and goes directly through Keene.

Project Team - It isn't omitted but data has just not yet been included in this draft. It is in process.

2. Funding Rail Trails – Carolyn Radisch (GPI)

a. Introduction

Carolyn Radisch (GPI) provided an overview of the funding of rail trails. The following main highlights were discussed:

- Costs associated with rail trail development and management fall into four broad categories: (1) Acquisition, (2) Improvement, (3) Operations and Maintenance, and (4) Right-of-Way Preservation and Enforcement.
- Current rail trail funding comes from a combination of federal, state, and municipal agencies as well as non-profit trail groups. Federal funding is provided primarily through three Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) programs: the Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP); the Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Improvement (CMAQ) Program; and the Recreational Trails Program (RTP). Other federal funding sources stem from the Northern Border Regional Commission (NBRC), Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), and Federal Lands Access Program (FLAP). State funding is generally limited to the Grant-in-Aid Program (GIA) which is administered by New Hampshire Department of Natural and Cultural Resources (NHDNCR) Trails Bureau. Municipalities and non-profit organizations in New Hampshire are vital to the support of rail trails in New Hampshire as these organizations support rail trails through direct funding and/or managing volunteers to improve and maintain rail trails.
- Options for a potential state funding mechanism fall into the following categories: dedicating money from the state's operating or capital budget for rail trails; establishing a user fee; or issuing a general obligation bond which would require authorization by law.
- It is recommended that NHDOT and NHDNCR adopt the proposed model for the division of responsibilities between the two agencies. Responsibilities include Acquisition (NHDOT), Construction / Improvement of Rail Corridors (NHDOT), Management for Trail Use (NHDNCR), and Right-of-Way/Encroachment (NHDOT). Further discussions are needed between NHDOT and NHDNCR to divide state-owned rail trail responsibilities between the two agencies.

b. Comments and Discussion

- **JB Mack** – A discussion of marketing, branding, and awareness building would be helpful to get people to these trails. There may be other programs through Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) that could go to rail trails. Toll credits can be used to match federal funds (NHDOT needs to have legislative approval if it is not for roads and bridges). For small towns it is difficult to come up with 20% match and managing projects can be too much for small, rural municipalities. There needs to be a responsible party from the municipality. Please consider for inclusion.

Project Team – Marketing is something that can be a joint effort with tourism. Please reach out with any additional funding opportunities through the BIL that we may have overlooked. In regard to small town project management concerns- is this something the RPC could assist with? We need to work together to see how we can build capacity for these small towns to effectively manage large projects.

- **Debbie Briscoe** – Can the report include what grant funds trail maintainers can apply for when planning maintenance projects after Acquisition and Construction? Can we sum up in a paragraph any limitations for funding for maintenance project by trail maintainers is after Acquisition and Construction.

Project Team - Thank you for this suggestion. Our team will take this into consideration for the report. It could be helpful.

- **Mike Kowalczyk** - Why aren't toll credits listed as a means to meet a federal grant match?

Project Team - Toll credits are a soft match & thus draw down the limited federal funds more quickly and also in accordance with NH RSA 228:12-a require legislative approval (capital budget overview committee) if the toll credits are requested to be used as a match for anything other than federal highway funds solely for the funding of highway and road projects or projects concerning the travel of motor vehicles on such highways and roads.

- **Wendy Grossman** - Can any of the funds from Moose Plates be allocated to Rail Trails?

Project Team – Thank you for your comment. Our team will look into this.

- **Wendy Grossman** - It would probably be impossible to enforce a mandatory fee for hikers, cyclists, cross country skiers, etc. Especially with the many access points to the rail trails. A voluntary donation/ membership fee might work--but the users would need to be assured that their fees support rail trails in their local community--not just the faraway trails.

Project Team - Thank you for the feedback; this is a fair point.

- **Mike Kowalczyk** - It is my understanding that Ride the Wilds has been successful. Could the Ride the Wilds marketing approach be used to market all other rail trail user types (walkers, bikers, hikers, Nordic skiers, snowshoers, and equestrian).

Project Team - We can discuss Ride the Wilds with our DNCR partners and obtain their feedback/input; thank you for your comment.

- **Marianne Borowski** - The use of the label “Rail Trail User FEE” is probably not as acceptable compared to a voluntary “I support Rail Trails” yearly contribution/sticker. I would suggest it be voluntary and not be called a “Fee”.

Project Team - Thanks, Marianne; good point.

3. Prioritizing State Investments – Nicole Rogers (GPI)

a. Introduction

Nicole Rogers (GPI) provided an overview of prioritization of future state investments. The following main highlights were discussed:

- Given the limited funding available for rail trails in the State of New Hampshire, it is important to identify priority projects to receive said funding. To do so we leveraged the feedback received from the four public hearings and utilized existing plans and initiatives. Connectivity and the desire to develop a well-connected system that provides opportunities for multi-day trips and a diversity of trail experiences was most commonly documented. Many members of the public pointed out that the return on investment in rail trails increases with longer trips that attract overnight visitors, which seems to be validated by the economic study analysis.
- Other criteria included proximity to historic and natural attractions, direct contributions to the local economy, potential for transportation and everyday trips, equitable geographic distribution, proximity to populations centers, the volume of users on a trail, consideration of the trail life cycle, availability of access and parking facilities, safety, surface type and overall user feedback.
- Several “Destination Corridors” were identified that represent longer connected trails that will provide the foundation for the state’s rail trail network. These include the New England Rail Trail Spine Network, the East Coast Greenway, The Granite State Rail Trail, the rail trails near Lake Winnepesaukee, and the Cross New Hampshire Adventure Trail. All these corridors are prime examples of how an interconnected system can create more opportunities, mileages, and resources for users. It is important to note that this is still a rough draft, and we would very much appreciate feedback regarding these corridors.
- As the state moves forward towards realizing a more connected system, it is recommended that a projects or steering committee be formed. It is recommended that this committee develop an implementation plan which should include project identification and ranking. It is recommended that a two-step ranking process be adopted which puts top priority for projects that help complete a “Destination Corridor” and then equally weighted based on the following criteria: connectivity, destinations accessed and economic opportunities, transportation opportunities, equity, deficiencies and safety and cost of construction and complexity all of which were determined based on public and stakeholder feedback.

- While not included in the draft chapter, based on feedback received, we are also considering adding the corridors in the Monadnock Region as a “Destination Corridor”. Please be advised that the included Destination Corridors were originally developed with a linear methodology with connectivity at the forefront. We will continue to further develop this list and appreciate all feedback.

b. Comments and Discussion

- **JB Mack** – I am concerned about resources continually being funneled into more urban parts of the state. I would recommend the Monadnock Trail to Massachusetts be designated as a “Destination Corridor”. This is a great opportunity to build on some momentum and connect to Massachusetts trail system. We have also identified rail trails as a large part of our economic development strategy, and it would be a shame for this area to be overlooked.

Project Team - Thank you for your comment. We will continue to work with the stakeholders committee and NHDOT to further develop the list of “Destination Corridors” and consider how resources may be allocated amongst geographical regions.

- **Avis Rosenfield** – In regard to future trails and trail improvements, will trails have better surface treatments for all users?

Project Team – We are coming up with engineering and design standards regarding surface type and height/width clearances. We will likely look to project designers and the responsible party (the entity that will serve as the trail manager – likely NHDNCR Trails Bureau or a municipality) that provides the local match to determine trail surface as they will interact more directly with the trail users in particular corridors/segments.

- **Dave Topham** – In regard to trail maintenance/improvements, there have been several hold ups regarding the MOA. Where does this effort stand?

Project Team – The MOA has been further developed based on meetings between NHDOT and the NHDNCR Trails Bureau. Craig Rennie and his NHDNCR team are working on finalizing this document with the local communities.

- **Dave Topham**- For all the trails we do have in state, how many miles allow motorized use based on their acquisition?

Project Team- We will gather that data from the GIS database.

- **Wendy Grossman** - Your funding priorities completely omit the rail trail system in the Monadnock Region. Our region has about 1/4 of the state-owned rail corridors, which can all be connected and connected to Massachusetts and Vermont. This is unfair.

Project Team- Thank you for your comment. We will continue to work with the stakeholders committee and NHDOT to further develop the list of “Destination Corridors”

- **Mike Kowalczyk** - I am very surprised that the Monadnock region rail trails are not listed as a priority. The Monadnock region has 5 state owned rail trails (Cheshire North, Cheshire South, Ashuelot, Fort Hill, Monadnock). These trails together are nearly 100 miles of rail trail. These trails link to trail in Brattleboro VT, Bellows Falls VT, and Winchendon MA. The Winchendon MA link would link SW NH with the MASS Central Rail Trail (via the Ware River Rail Trail). The MASS Central runs to Boston. This could have significant tourism impact. The Monadnock Region rail trails have many natural and historical attractions. Examples: Many stone arch bridges, many deep cuts through the granite (the cut in Surry is 1 mile in length!!), go through 10 towns, each offering it's own business, recreational, and historical attractions. Finally, there is a means to connect the Monadnock Region rail trails to Nashua via the Manchester/Keene Line and the Wilton/Peterborough line (runs from Greenfield to Nashua). Regarding Mark's comment, personally I don't see the Monadnock Region rail trails as a "spoke" when these trails can connect to the MASS Central Rail Trail which runs from Northampton MA to Boston MA. The MASS Central Rail Trail connects to the East Coast Greenway which runs from Maine to Florida. The Monadnock Region rail trails are also a gateway to VT trails (West River Trail and the Saxton Valley River Trail). Finally, the MASS Central Rail Trail organizers are looking at a means to connect to the Empire State Rail Trail network. If/when this happens it allows rail trails from Buffalo, NY to get to Keene, NH!! Regarding the Monadnock Region rail trails connecting to Winchendon, there is an active group made up of Monadnock folks and Winchendon folks, MassDOT, and MASS Central Rail Trail folks working to make this connection.

Project Team - Thank you for your comment. We will continue to work with the stakeholders committee and NHDOT to further develop the list of "Destination Corridors"

- **Mike Kowalczyk** - A selection criteria could be the level of local interest and assistance in getting the trails rehabilitated and the maintenance. An area that has lots of local support could be given higher priority.

Project Team - Thank you for your comment. We will continue to work with the stakeholders committee and NHDOT to further develop the list of criteria for project ranking.

- **Mike Kowalczyk** - Regarding the MOA, several groups in my area are waiting for such a document. The users desperately want to use the trails year-round and the lack of a maintenance MOA prevents this from happening. Please, please, please, work to get this done soon.

Project Team – Thank you for your comment. This work is ongoing and has been circulated to municipalities by the NHDNCR Bureau of Trails.

- **Debbie Briscoe** - Can we have a definition. "What is a "completed" Rail Trail? Does it include paving? Does it include a parallel 5 ft wide minimum unpaved path?" Please stress best practices of having a 5ft unpaved/natural path. This is worrisome if sponsors do not consider this, there needs to be some support on the State level. Gaps can also include not having an unpaved/natural path on an improved section.

Project Team - We are coming up with engineering and design standards regarding surface type and height/width clearances. We will likely look to project designers and the responsible party for the local match to determine trail surface.

These notes 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

**Stakeholder
Meeting #5
Attendee List**

Project Team

Shelley Winters, NH Department of Transportation
Shannon Rogers, PhD, University of New Hampshire
Mark Debowski, GPI
Carolyn Radisch, GPI
Nicole Rogers, GPI

Stakeholders

Avis Rosenfield, Non-motorized users
Ben. Clark, Railroad Operator (Plymouth and Lincoln Railroad)
Craig Rennie, NH Bureau of Trails
Dave Topham, NH Rail Trails Coalition
Dean Beaman, Motorized Users (OHRV & Snowmobiles)
Dick Samuels, Business & Industry Association of NH
J.B. Mack, Southwest Regional Planning Commission
Patrick Herlihy, NH Department of Transportation
Scott Crowder, Office of Outdoor Recreation

Other Attendees

Alexis Rudko
Bob Holdsworth
Debbie Briscoe
Gary LeBlanc
Joan Ganotis
Marianne Borowski
Marshall Michelle (FHWA)
Meag Poirier
Mike Kowalczyk
Sally Gunn
Wendy Grossman