

State Trails Advisory Committee Virtual Meeting Notes

Tue, Oct 26, 2021 1:00 PM - 3:00 PM (EDT)

There were 73 people participating in this meeting. Some people who attended VDOT's Bicycle and Pedestrian Committee meeting from 10 a.m. to noon stayed on the line for the STAC meeting, since these two meetings were advertised as a joint meeting.

Attendees (as noted in chat bar)

Alan Day, Potomac Appalachian Trail Club
Allie Hill, Three Notched Trail
Alister Perkinson, James City County Parks & Recreation
Anne O'Neill, National Park Service, Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance
Anthony Bates, C&O Canal National Historical Park
Benjamin Craig, Way to Go (w2ginc.org)
Beth Iannetta, Fairfax County Park Authority
Bethany McCunn, VDH
Brantley Tyndall, Virginia Bicycling Federation
Cat Anthony, Virginia Capital Trail Foundation, Virginia Trails Alliance
Champe Burnley, Eastern Shore Rail Trail Working Group
Christopher Douwes, Federal Highway Administration, Washington DC (Fairfax VA)
Corey Miles, Northern VA Regional Commission
Dave Walsh, Rockbridge Outdoors
David Brickley, September 11th National Memorial Trail
David Cook, Lynchburg District Planning VDOT
Debbie Spiliotopoulos, Northern VA Regional Commission
[Don Hindman](#), Project Director for Shenandoah Rail Trail Exploratory Partnership
Emily Stock, VA Dept. of Rail and Public Transportation
Frank Maguire, Roanoke Valley Greenway Commission
George Mapp, Citizens for a Better Eastern Shore, Eastern Shore Rail Trail Working Group
Heidi Mitter, VDOT NOVA District Bike/Ped Coordinator
Howard Albers, Fairfax Alliance for Better Bicycling
Jared Fijalkowski, U.S. DOT Volpe Center
Jim Lynch, Dahlgren Railroad Heritage Trail
Jim Outland, Canonie Atlantic
Jimmy Walters, Tobacco Heritage Trail
John Kirk, VA Dept. of Wildlife Resources
Kyle Lawrence, Shenandoah Valley Bicycle Coalition (Harrisonburg)
Lauren Delmare, Fairfax County DOT Active Transportation Engineer
Margaret Rockwell, McGuireWoods Consulting
Matthew Helt, George Washington and Jefferson National Forests
Meade Anderson, DEQ Brownfields
Michael Burton, City of Richmond Parks Department
Paul Gilbert, NOVA Parks

Peter Ohlms, VDOT / Virginia Transportation Research Council
Phil Riggan, PlanRVA (Richmond MPO)
Ralph Buehler, Virginia Tech Research Center
Ronique Day, OIPI
Sarah Sanford, East Coast Greenway Alliance
Wendy Austin, FOLAR

DCR Staff: Clyde Cristman, Tom Smith, Nathan Burrell, Kelly McClary, Lynn Crump, Kristal McKelvey, Kellie Seaton, Jennifer Wampler

Jennifer Wampler welcomed everyone at 1 p.m. and asked them to put their name and affiliation in the chat bar. She turned the meeting over to Kelly McClary to provide an update on the Shenandoah Rail Trail feasibility study. Staff are currently putting the last edits on the study before it will go to the Secretary's office. It is due to the General Assembly on November 1st and will be available online through Legislative Services in the future.

Kelly recognized Tom Smith, who is retiring after over 40 years of state service to Pennsylvania and Virginia. Tom provided an update on his replacement, Frank Stovall of the Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation. He went over other recent changes at the agency, including Russ Baxter's recent retirement (Daryl Glover has replaced Russ as the Director of the Division of Soil & Water Conservation). He suggested people check [DCR's Jobs website](#), as there are a number of positions now hiring, including biologists, environmental planners, a GIS database manager, and a natural and cultural resource manager, in addition to other park openings.

Tom turned the meeting over to Nathan Burrell, DCR's Deputy Director of Government and Community Relations, who said DCR is in the second round of updates to the agency's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Plan. This includes a holistic effort internally and externally to connect and partner with communities. ConserveVirginia has been updated to 3.0, and DCR has been partnering with DEQ's Environmental Justice Office to develop a statewide environmental justice map, which will include a layer on equitable outdoor access. The State Park's Division is working to retell the story of the lands we manage and is recruiting at historically black colleges and universities, as well as community colleges across the state. Some grant programs now have a scoring criteria related to underserved communities, leading to changes in the types of communities that are funded.

State Rail Plan

Emily Stock, Chief of Rail Transportation at the Department of Rail and Public Transportation updates the State Rail Plan every four years, as required by the Federal Railroad Administration. The last plan was adopted in 2018. The Rail Division works with trail planners following the guidance outlined in "[Rails with Trails/Pedestrian Crossing Project Initiation, Coordination and Review.](#)" a report requested by the 2009 General Assembly session in House Bill 2088. The Virginia Passenger Rail Authority was recently formed in response to Chapter 1230 of the 2020 Acts of Assembly. The Authority will be responsible for promoting, sustaining, and expanding the availability of passenger and commuter rail service in the Commonwealth.

This update of the State Rail Plan is focusing on policy development, including climate change, equity, multimodal access, passenger rail stations, and economic development (the rail-trail policy).

The Virginia Passenger Rail Authority is acquiring some railroad right of ways through the [Transforming Rail in Virginia Initiative](#). DRPT is also working on service enhancements throughout the state.

Q: What is DRPT's policy/ philosophy about trail development along active rail corridors, i.e. rails-WITH-trails?

A: This policy is under development as part of the State Rail Plan's economic development policy.

Rails with Trails: Best Practices and Lessons Learned

Christopher Douwes, Community Planner with the Federal Highway Administration, discussed a report on Rails with Trails released in May, 2021. The first Rails with Trails report was released in 2002. Since then, they have learned many best practices for safety from both railroad and trail uses. The updated study looked at why people are using railroad tracks, and how many fatalities occurred on track crossings and rails with trails, which are different from rails to trails. Rails with trails are shared-use paths or trails open and developed for public use that are located on or directly adjacent to an active railroad or rail transit corridor.

As of 2018, there were 343 identified rails with trails in the United States, comprising 917 miles of rails with trails in 47 states. Community demand for trails as part of safer, more integrated multimodal transportation networks has been a continued catalyst for the growth of rails with trails in almost every state.

Some rail with trails are in the railroad right of way, but others are beside the right of way. There are no documented cases of rails with trails adding to railroad trespassing casualties. Two known situations related to rails with trails were people who had used the trails, crossed at highway crossings, but went around barriers.

Rails with trails have benefits for railroad companies and the public. Some benefits include active transportation, health and wellness, access, economic development and environmental protection. Some challenges include property acquisition, concerns about safety and liability, and concerns about trespassing.

Many railroads have policies against locating trails within the railroad ROW. Public Transit Agencies and state DOT policies are varied.

Jared Fijalkowski, Community Planner with the Volpe National Transportation Systems Center reviewed some recommendations from report.

During the development process:

- Locate rails with trails outside of the railroad right-of-way, if possible

- Engage railroads early and often
- Determine feasibility
- Conduct environmental analysis before land acquisition and design
- Involve stakeholders early in the process

Best practices for risk management and liability:

- Conduct initial legal research early in the process
- Gather information about trespassing in the corridor
- Follow design recommendations in this report, [AASHTO](#) Guide, and [MUTCD](#)
- Consider using indemnification agreements and/or insurance to address liability

Some horizontal setback design considerations:

- Rail-with-trail setback from railroads ranges from 7 to 200 feet, with an average setback of 32 feet
- There is no national standard or requirement for setback
- Locate rails with trails as far as possible from railroad tracks
- Consider train speed, frequency, and type; rail maintenance and operations; track curvature; environmental and physical constraints; separation type; trespassing and vandalism

Some vertical separation design considerations:

- About 87% of rails with trails have separation between the trail and the railroad tracks
- Fencing, ditches, berms, and/or vegetation
- When fencing is needed, consider when selecting fence type and height: setback distance; location of grade crossings; type, speed, and frequency of trains

Design considerations for crossings:

- About 54% of rails with trails have trail/track crossings
- Propose new at-grade crossings only where there are no other reasonable alternatives
- Use existing road-track crossings where possible
- Include safety measures such as crossbucks, flashing lights, bells, crossing arms, and signage
- Bridges/trestles and tunnels are expensive and railroads often do not allow them

Design considerations for bridges and tunnels:

- Railroad bridges and tunnels can be significant barriers to rail-with-trail design
- Railroads are generally opposed to sharing existing rail bridges and tunnels with trails
- Potential solutions for rails-with-trails on corridors with bridges and tunnels include: abutments or cantilevers on existing bridges or a new bridge or tunnel

To accommodate future tracks

- Design and locate RWTs to allow potential future rail expansion, if anticipated
- Where corridor width, topography, and other factors allow, locate on the opposite side of the proposed track or siding expansion

Designing for drainage:

- Consider rail with trail impact on the adjacent rail line's drainage system
- New drainage system might need to be installed to serve both the railroad and trail

Construction, operations and maintenance:

- Coordinate with the railroad(s) prior to and during construction
- Satisfy the adjacent railroad's requirements for safety and impacts on operations

- Plan for the need to pay the railroad to hire “flaggers,” which ensure safety but significantly add to construction costs

Best practices for operations and maintenance:

- Coordinate with the railroad(s) on trail and railroad maintenance activities
- Have a comprehensive operations and management plan
- Plan activities to address trespassing and vandalism
- Conduct trail user safety and trespassing education if necessary

To view the entire report: U.S. DOT *Rails-with-Trails: Best Practices and Lessons Learned*, May 2021, see the FHWA Bicycle and Pedestrian and Recreational Trails websites.

- https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/environment/recreational_trails/publications/rwt2021/
- https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/environment/bicycle_pedestrian/index.cfm
- https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/environment/recreational_trails/

Or

Federal Railroad Administration website at

- [Railroads.dot.gov](https://railroads.dot.gov)
- <https://railroads.dot.gov/elibrary/rails-trails-best-practices-and-lessons-learned-0>

Q: Could FRA's Safety improvements program be tapped for trail crossings? Or trail separation on Rail with Trail?

A: For FRA funds, see <https://railroads.dot.gov/grants-loans/competitive-discretionary-grant-programs/competitive-discretionary-grant-programs>. Contact FRA for specific eligibility. Trails aren't mentioned, but highway-rail grade crossing improvement projects are eligible.

A: For current Federal-aid **highway** programs, trails and trail crossings are eligible under any program that can fund trails. See

https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/environment/bicycle_pedestrian/funding/funding_opportunities.cfm.

A: For proposed Federal-aid highway funding expected in current reauthorization proposals, an amendment to the Railway-Highway Grade Crossings program will specify eligibility for projects to reduce pedestrian fatalities, which could include trail crossings.

Q: CSX states that for every at-grade crossing created, three at-grade crossings need to be closed. Would love for the presenters to react to this and give us guidance.

A: If trail crossings use existing highway crossings, that would likely not invoke the need to close crossings, so, use existing crossings to the extent feasible. USDOT supports improving network connectivity and reducing trespassing. One problem with closing crossings is that it increases distances for pedestrians and bicyclists, perhaps beyond their desire or ability to make a detour. That may result in additional trespassing.

Q: How does a public agency get liability insurance if the public agency is unable to obtain this (conflict of interest with the agency)?

A: (Ricky Barton) Create an authority for indemnification.

A: See the section on Liability at this link:

https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/environment/recreational_trails/publications/rwt2021/#toc30791420

Q: Wouldn't Sovereign Immunity apply?

A: (Christopher Douwes) Sovereign Immunity varies from state to state; it may be strong in some, weak in others. The Rails-to-Trails Conservancy conducted a legal analysis that reviewed state laws and statutes relating to rails with trails: <https://www.railstotrails.org/build-trails/trail-building-toolbox/basics/rail-with-trail/>

Comment from chat (Allie Hill): UVA law students researched the various legal liabilities of having Rails-with-Trails in Virginia. You can download a summary here or email info@threenotchedtrail.com for us to email you a pdf copy.

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1lt5vt_TnH1dRacNytulu3PRMyI2TGrd4/view?usp=sharing

Virginia Rail Trails: Successes and Challenges (panel)

Jim Outand, Canonic Atlantic General Manager, said his company owns 49 miles of abandoned rail line from Cape Charles to Hallwood on the Eastern Shore. VDOT's feasibility study for a rail trail was completed in early 2021. The corridor is now rail-banked via the National Trails Act, although a maintenance entity has to be defined before the interim use negotiation period ends in the summer of 2022. In October 2021, a contract was issued to remove tracks, ties, etc. Over 30 miles of corridor parallels VDOT's right of way.

Challenges include nostalgia, NIMBYs, security and agriculture concerns, and the failure to see the economic reality of rail on the Eastern Shore. Also, it is a challenge to secure funding, and manage liability and insurance as the corridor transitions from active railroad to vacant land, to recreational trail. Jim recommended a book, [From Rails to Trails: The Making of America's Active Transportation Network](#), by Peter Harnick.

Board chair Jimmy Walters provided an update on the Tobacco Heritage Trail, a mostly undeveloped rail trail through five counties in Southside. Twenty-four miles have been converted to rail trail, primarily with an aggregate surface. The Board is considering interim trail standards to allow more immediate use of the whole corridor. Challenges include maintaining what they have, especially with weather events. Future challenges include bridges over the Kerr reservoir. This trail may be the only one in the state that allows horse carriages.

Jim Lynch, president, Friends of the Dahlgren Railroad Heritage Trail, said this developed rail trail runs for 16 miles in King George County. The railroad was constructed during WWII, connecting Fredericksburg to the Dahlgren military base. The eastern portion is the current trail. It is privately owned, but is open to the public through a no-cost permit. A goal is for the trail to become part of Caledon State Park. There is currently an agreement with a landowner to establish a connecting path.

A success is that the trail has been cleared and maintained by volunteers for 16 years and has public and county support. Challenges include limited parking, facility needs (restrooms), and the completion of the desired connection to and integration into Caledon State Park.

This rail trail is a designated National Recreation Trail and also part of the Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail. See the weblinks below for more information.

- <https://www.nps.gov/pohe/planyourvisit/maps.htm>
- https://www.nps.gov/pohe/planyourvisit/upload/PHNST-routes-within-GWRC-Region_DEC2016_rdc_access.pdf

Q: What is the status of Beaches to Bluegrass Trail, an existing regional trail that incorporates the Tobacco Heritage Trail?

A: This trail is identified as a state trail in the Virginia Outdoors Plan, but so far there is no organizational sponsorship for the entire trail. Trail development is currently being driven by the regions, who can apply for state grant funding through transportation alternatives and the recreational trails program.

Cycling for Sustainable Cities

Ralph Buehler, Professor and Chair of Urban Affairs and Planning in the School of Public and International Affairs at Virginia Tech's Research Center in Arlington discussed his book, [Cycling for Sustainable Cities](#), co-edited with John Pucher. His book, which explores how to make city cycling safe and convenient for everyone, goes through foundational information on cycling, policies, and studies on cycling around the world, all written by experts in their fields.

Cycling is very sustainable. It is environmentally friendly (virtually no pollution at all and few nonrenewable resources used), it is economical (offering improvements in health from cycling leading to reduced medical costs for individuals and society for low private and public investment) and it is socially sustainable (financially affordable for almost everyone, physically possible for most with inherent physical, mental, and social health benefits).

The mode share of trips by cycling is much lower now than in the past in some areas of the world; however, most countries have increased significantly from 1990 – 2017. However, the trend has gone down in many Chinese cities.

It is crucial to make cycling safe. This is especially important for the young, the old, for anyone with disabilities, for the timid or risk-averse. Women are more sensitive to safety than men. In the U.S., only about a third of bike trips are made by women, although they make up at least half of cyclists in some European and Asian countries. The perceived safety of cycling in the Netherlands, Denmark, and Germany helps explain higher levels of cycling there. While the cyclist fatality rate per 100 million kilometers cycled has increased in the U.S., it has continued to decline in these other countries.

In most countries, e-bike sales have been increasing each year.

To encourage more cycling while improving safety, provide:

- Better cycling facilities
- Traffic calming of residential neighborhoods
- Mixed-use zoning and improved urban design
- Integration of bike with public transport
- Restrictions on motor vehicle use
- Improved traffic education for motorists and cyclists
- Traffic regulations and enforcement
- Special events and promotional campaigns

Protected bike lanes increase cycling and safety, and bicycle expressways separate bicycles from pedestrians and remove crossings. The likelihood of a fatality with vehicle/pedestrian collisions increases exponentially above 30 km/hr (18.6 miles). Cycling promotion and training, bike transit integration and bike parking are also needed to increase cycling.

In summary, safe cycling infrastructure is crucially important. An integrated package of programs and policies is needed to complement bikeways, including parking; land-use; traffic calming; enforcement; education; integration with transit; wayfinding, push factors for drivers; and pull factors for bikes. Cycling is for everyone: infrastructure should be built for all along with inclusive cycling cultures. Planning processes must prioritize the inclusion of vulnerable, risk-averse, and disadvantaged groups at every stage.

Comment from chat: I was in Guadalajara earlier this year and the number of people cycling there and improvements to the bike infrastructure there was really impressive. I noticed it had the highest bike share percent. I took numerous photos and videos.

Q: Any thoughts about how maximum elevation range in cities might (or might not) create a ceiling for participation in cycling?

A: With electric bikes, this is not as much of an issue.

Comment from chat (Christopher Douwes): La Paz Bolivia, at 12,500 feet, and its suburb of El Alto at about 14,000 feet, have bicycling. Bogotá Colombia also is very high. Seattle WA has lots of hills and lots of bicycling. But I agree, e-bikes would be wonderful for hills.

Comment from chat (Dave Walsh): Value of tax credit for e-bikes; one of the most common comments I hear in Rockbridge are the hills.

Update on Office of Intermodal Planning and Investment Report

Ronique Day, the Deputy Director of the Office of Intermodal Planning and Investment (OIPi), said her office was directed to create a multiuse trail group to evaluate and recommend a prioritization process for multi-use trail opportunities, a master planning process, and a funding needs assessment. The group includes various agencies and they have hired a consultant to develop the report. They have had presentations by different groups representing trail interests, and have been reaching out to stakeholders. The budget set aside \$10 million for trails, and the Commonwealth Transportation Board will be making decisions on the use of the funds, most likely after reviewing OIPi's report. STAC members are invited to attend a work group meeting on November 16 at 10 a.m. to review the draft report recommendations. Please feel free to contact Ronique with questions: Ronique.Day@oipi.virginia.gov.

Virginia Trails Alliance Updates

Cat Anthony, President of the Virginia Trails Alliance (VTA) and Executive Director of the Virginia Capital Trails Foundation said the VTA is a coalition of businesses, organizations, and individuals advocating for trails. This year, the group has helped developed white papers on trails published by the [Virginia Conservation Network](#). They help coordinate the [Virginia Outdoor Caucus](#) meetings. Contact Cat to become involved, cat@virginiacapitaltrail.org.

Northern Virginia Updates

David Brickley, Founder and President Emeritus, provided an update on the newly designated [September 11th National Memorial Trail](#), saying the President recently signed legislation authorizing the trail (passed the Senate and House unanimously).

Debbie Spiliotopoulos, Senior Environmental Planner with the Northern Virginia Regional Commission (NVRC), gave an update on the Potomac Heritage Trail Equity and Economic Impact Study. She said the core work of the study is complete with draft results. There are an average of 100,000 users per mile of trail each year with significant demand for more access and wayfinding. She offered participants the opportunity to register in advance for a meeting on October 28 to learn more. The final report will be out early December, and another presentation will be offered at that time.

Corey Miles, Coastal Resources Program Manager at NVRC provided an update on Prince William County's [Trails Aspirational Map](#). This planning effort, led by the Greater Prince Williams Trails Coalition, identifies potential trails that could be built over the next 20-30 years. The National Park Service Rivers, Trails, Conservation Assistance Program (NPS RTCA) has been providing support to the Greater Prince William Trails Coalition throughout this planning process.

Comments from chat: A reminder to all that the next NPS RTCA deadline for free technical assistance is March 1, 2022. Visit <https://www.nps.gov/orgs/rtca/index.htm>. NPS RTCA is also assisting the Tobacco Heritage Trail Board with an update to the Master Plan.

Paul Gilbert, the Executive Director of NOVA Parks said a recently opened 1.5-mile section of the W&OD Trail provides separate lanes for both pedestrians and bikers, who will be separated by a two-foot median. The project includes stormwater improvements, lighting, curb ramps and a host of native plants. This is likely the trail of the future in urban areas, where use exceeds capacity.

Comment from chat (John Bolecek): When paths are busy they need to be mode separated.

Another NOVA update posted in the chat: The Potomac Appalachian Trail Club (PATC) just completed the rebuild of the steps from the NPS/George Washington Memorial Parkway Turkey Run C-1 parking lot to the Potomac Heritage Trail. This is a significant achievement for George

Washington Memorial Parkway, PATC, & the hiking public. These steps, damaged by the 2011 earthquake, are heavily used by the hiking public, and the rebuild is a big safety improvement. BROT District Manager Robert Fina led this project.

DCR updates:

Jennifer Wampler said the Agritourism conference had about 100 attendees, but only three State Trails Advisory Committee members. A synopsis will be emailed to the committee, along with the schedule and registration links for Virginia Outdoors Plan meetings this fall.

Kristal McKelvey provided an update of outdoor recreation grants. The Recreational Trails Program authorized ten new projects this year as well as four projects for the new Trail Access Program. The Land and Water Conservation Fund grant round is currently planned to open between January and March. This round will be open for acquisition, development, and combination projects. To be added to the notification list for grant rounds, email recreationgrants@dcr.virginia.gov.

Email any suggested topics for the next STAC meeting to Jennifer.wampler@dcr.virginia.gov.

The meeting adjourned at 3 p.m.

Other resources from chat bar:

MUTCD = Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices, the "Bible" for traffic signs, signals, and marking.

AASHTO = American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials, who develop guides for highways that most states adopt as standards for roads and shared use paths. AASHTO also has a 2004 Pedestrian Guide and a 2012 Bicycle Facility Design Guide that provide guidelines for shared use paths. The 2012 Bike Guide was supposed to have been updated a few years ago but the update is still not available.

One example of a rail-with-trail bridge is at Harpers Ferry WV along with the Appalachian Trail.

The slide presentations for the meeting may be viewed at this link.

<https://www.dcr.virginia.gov/recreational-planning/document/STAC-slides-10-26-21.pdf>