

A Trip Down Memory Trail: 20 Years of RTC

By Kristen Fletcher



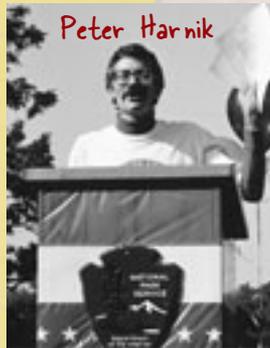
BROWN BAG BEGINNINGS

In 1984 struggling rail lines were abandoning 4,000 to 8,000 miles of rail line each year, and a national treasure was being lost.

That same year a group started to form in Washington, D.C., meeting monthly for brown bag lunches to mobilize efforts to preserve rail corridors for trail use. Members of this ad hoc group included walking, hiking and cycling enthusiasts; railroad history buffs; representatives from environmental, conservation and parks groups; and alternative transportation advocates.

Peter Harnik, a member of this early working group, says the initial idea was for each person to get his or her organization to become active in the rails-to-trails movement. But monthly lunches weren't enough to carry the momentum forward. So they began to consider creating an organization focused exclusively on rail-trails. Harnik wrote a fundraising proposal and David Burwell, a lawyer with the National Wildlife Federation, began shopping it around.

Philanthropist and conservationist Larry Rockefeller offered to provide some startup money if Burwell and Harnik could find matching funds. Burwell's boss at the National Wildlife Federation agreed to pay Burwell's salary for one year while he dedicated his efforts to creating rail-trails. That was the match they needed, and on February 7, 1986, Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC) opened its doors in downtown D.C., with Burwell as president, Harnik as program director and Chuck Montagne of Covington & Burling providing pro bono legal support.



Peter Harnik

A 'NARROW' IDEA TAKES OFF

In its early days RTC faced no shortage of skeptics in the environmental and conservation communities. Many thought the mission was too narrow. Others said there was no constituency for such a group. "We were told that people would never support a trails organization," recalls Burwell. "We felt that the counterargument was that this was not just trails but our national railroad heritage. We were protecting our history. It was adaptive reuse of a resource—the recycling of a whole transportation system."

One of the first things the brand new RTC tried was a direct mail campaign to recruit new members and supporters, using mailing lists from the American Hiking Society and the League of American Bicyclists. "We did phenomenally well with both organizations," says Harnik. The mailing generated many new members, a little bit of money and some much needed encouragement. "We started thinking we were really on to something," Harnik says.

As membership grew over the next five years, RTC added staff members and began to form chapters in regions of the country where the organization had a particularly strong membership base or inventory of trails. The narrow idea had taken off.

RTC History Time Line

February 7, 1986
RTC opens its doors.

September 8, 1986
Governor John Ashcroft (R-Mo.) files the first railbanking application for the 185-mile Katy Trail, and in June 1987 Missouri legislature votes to convert the corridor.

1987
RTC has 400 members.

October 4, 1988
President Ronald Reagan signs the National Trails System Improvement Act of 1988, securing the government's interest in federally granted rights-of-way.

1988
RTC membership jumps to 7,000.

1989
The 200th rail-trail opens with the Hart-Montague Bicycle Trail State Park (22.5 miles) in Michigan.

February 21, 1990
The U.S. Supreme Court unanimously upholds the constitutionality of railbanking.

1991
RTC has 40,000 members at five-year mark.

David Burwell

RTC Co-Founder and President (1986–2001)

Growing up on Cape Cod, David Burwell used to ride his bike along the railroad tracks to get to Little League practice. He says his mother, “like every parent, told me to stay off tracks.” But she was also the town recreation co-chair, and when the rail line went under she saw the corridor as a great off-road place for children, and the whole community, to walk and cycle. The effort to convert that rail line, which became



The Shining Sea Bikeway in Cape Cod, Mass.

the Shining Sea Bikeway, took 12 years. “It started when I was in Little League and finished when I was out of law school,” Burwell says.

Years later, when Burwell started learning

more about the nation’s system of rail lines and the public land and money that went into building them, he became convinced that the public should have the first right to unused corridors. He says the fight his mother faced in getting the Shining Sea Bikeway put in place and the challenges he watched other trail-building efforts confront “really got my legal juices going.”

Although he has moved on from RTC, he still sees the rail-trail movement reshaping the map of America much as the rail system and the highway system did earlier. “My dream is that one day you could go across this entire country—old or young, handicapped or able—on flat, wide, off-road paths. I want rail-trails to be America’s main street.”



Lafayette Morgana Trail, Calif.

December 18, 1991

The Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) is signed into law. The Transportation Enhancements (TE) program is introduced in the bill.

1993

RTC has 547 open rail-trails totaling 6,757 miles of rail-trail.

June 4, 1994

The 600th rail-trail is opened with the Monon

Trail in Indiana.

1995

RTC reaches 66,800 members.

June 1996

RTC reaches 800 rail-trails and 5,000 rail-trail miles.

HITTING THE ROAD FOR FUNDING

In 1990 and early 1991, Burwell became interested in looking at the transportation bill, the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA), as a means to garner considerable funding for trail construction. Hal Hiemstra, who joined the RTC staff in 1991, credits Burwell with a bold vision to move RTC a bit outside the conservation community and to emphasize that trails, especially urban trail systems, could be used, and were being used, as alternative transportation corridors.

Hiemstra says RTC and the broad coalition with which it was working—including Scenic America, the National Recreation and Parks Association and the American Institute of Architects—was fortunate to have support from the chairs of the Senate Transportation Committee. Both Lincoln Chaffee (R-R.I.) and Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-N.Y.) had a broad perspective on the environment and transportation and were willing to work with RTC and others to set aside funding in the bill for trail construction.

In December 1991, Burwell saw his vision become reality. President George H.W. Bush signed ISTEA into law with set-aside funding in place for bicycle and pedestrian



David Burwell and President George H.W. Bush.

trails and historical preservation. Hiemstra says the trails community was excited about the funding but concerned about having it linked to transportation and highways. “Many were anxious about being something other than ‘the trails people,’” he says. “But it showed how trails are part of a community’s fabric and helped move RTC to a much broader and more successful place.”

March 7, 1996

RTC wins The President’s Council on Sustainable Development for “promoting a community enhancing program that is both economically sound and environmentally friendly” under President Bill Clinton.

1997

RTC’s Web site—www.railtrails.org—is launched. The 900th rail-trail opens with the Raccoon River Trail in Iowa.

Hal Hiemstra

RTC Vice President of Operations and Policy (1991–1998)

Hal Hiemstra joined RTC during the final negotiation phases of the ISTEA legislation. He says those who were involved in the coalition pushing for dedicated trail development funds were hoping that 2 to 3 percent of surface transportation funding would be set aside for that purpose. On the morning after the legislation came out of committee, Hiemstra recalls “sitting there going through the bill and being stunned.” He says they still don’t know whether it was an overlooked typo or the work of a committee staffer who was firmly in their corner, but the line item for their set-aside was a whopping 10 percent—a figure few in the movement had been bold enough even to suggest.

Initially the group was ecstatic, but then it got worried. “It was a moment of truth for RTC,” Hiemstra says. “At that funding level the traditional transportation community had to notice the dollars involved. We knew they would make an effort not to adhere to the language.”

So Hiemstra and others created an implementation strategy and started planning a series of conferences to help educate the trails community about how to access the highway funds that have become the most significant source of support for trail building.



1998
ISTEA is reauthorized as the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21). The bill increases funding the Transportation Enhancements (TE) program.

October 5, 1998
Hillary Rodham Clinton launches the National Millennium Trails Program, and a partnership with Rails-to-Trails Conservancy.

Keith Laughlin

RTC President (2001–Present)

“I first learned of Rails-to-Trails Conservancy in the mid-1990s when I was working in the White House,” recalls Keith Laughlin, who was then with the Council on Environmental Quality. In 1996 RTC had been nominated for a Presidential Award for Sustainable Development. “I was part of the group that selected RTC” for the award, Laughlin says.

When approached about taking the helm at RTC in 2000, Laughlin says he jumped at the chance. “I had been a cyclist since I was a child and a great admirer of the Capital Crescent Trail since it opened.” He says he saw an organization with tremendous potential as the public’s interest in smart growth and sustainable communities began to grow.

And that award he helped give RTC? “I’m proud to say it now sits in my office.”



Keith Laughlin on the 2005 Trailblazer Excursion.

Hiemstra (far right) and Long Beach, Calif., officials at the Long Beach Bike Station.



October 1998
RTC reaches 1,000 rail-trails.

2000
RTC has 83,851 members.

June 2003
RTC reaches 12,000 miles of rail-trail with the 3.5-mile Middlesex Greenway in New Jersey.

September 4, 2003
The U.S. House of Representatives votes (327 to 90) to restore funding to the Transportation Enhancements (TE) program.

Marianne Fowler

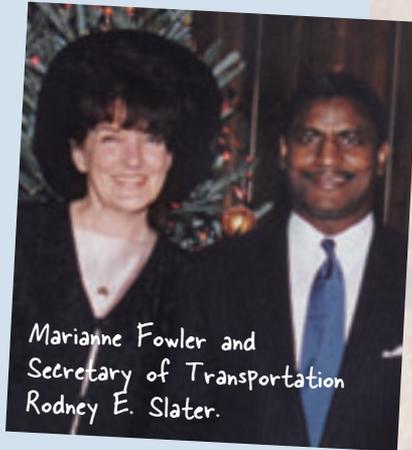
Southern Regional Coordinator, Director of Government Affairs, Senior Vice President of Policy (1988–Present)

As the 1990s were drawing to a close, President Bill Clinton asked the First Lady to lead a millennium celebration, asking each cabinet office to find a way to honor America's history and its bright future in the 21st century. Marianne Fowler says when Hillary Clinton turned to Secretary of Transportation Rodney E. Slater, he reported that his agency had decided the trails program was its most exciting initiative.

RTC drew up a proposal that involved selecting and highlighting a series of "Millennium Trails" at the community, state and national level. Out of several proposals from the trail community, Slater selected RTC to lead the effort. RTC pulled together a panel to evaluate, assess and recommend the Millennium Trails.

At the pinnacle of the selection process were the National Millennium Trails, trails significant to the history of the nation as a whole. Fowler says the plan was to have Slater announce these 16 trails at RTC's 1999 national conference in Pittsburgh. "We got word [of the winners] 48 hours before the conference was to begin." Fowler spent the next two days in her Pittsburgh hotel room calling the people associated with each winning trail. "We ended up getting people there from 14 of the 16 trails," she says.

When he announced the 16 Millennium Trails, Slater said that together they "unfolded the history of the country through rail-trails." Fowler agrees, adding that she is forever in awe of how special each rail-trail is. "Every trail is a jewel!"



Marianne Fowler and Secretary of Transportation Rodney E. Slater.

THE PATH AHEAD

Keith Laughlin, RTC's current president, says that RTC's narrow focus has been the very key to its success. "It's kept us on track," he says. "And although the focus of the work is relatively narrow, the benefits [trails] produce are broad. We can build large coalitions of support around the health and fitness, transportation or community-building benefits."

Laughlin says when he joined the RTC staff in 2001 the organization was beginning to benefit from the number of trails already in place. "We were meeting with less resistance than we used to," he says. "People have seen the trails and appreciated them," and it was harder for opponents to stir fear. But RTC still had to fight to protect funding for Transportation Enhancements when it was threatened with elimination in 2003. Laughlin counts the landslide House vote that saved Transportation Enhancements as the organization's biggest single success since he came on board. "That vote represented a tipping point," he says. "Most people thought we wouldn't succeed."

With the funding again secure, Laughlin and RTC have turned their focus to the future. "We have a goal for 2020 that 90 percent of Americans will live within three miles of a trail system," Laughlin says. Going forward, RTC will measure the success of the rails-to-trails movement less by the number of trail miles and more by the number of people who use and enjoy them.

Kristen Fletcher is a Washington writer and a homepage editor and news producer at washingtonpost.com.

September 2004

RTC opens its first of four regional offices in Pennsylvania, combining its Pennsylvania and Massachusetts offices, and adding Connecticut, Delaware, Maine, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Rhode Island and Vermont to the region.

July 29, 2005

After 12 extensions spanning two years, the new federal surface transportation legislation was passed to reauthorize TEA-21. The new bill is titled SAFETEA-LU (Safe, Accountable, Flexible and Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users).

October 2005

RTC opens its second regional office in Ohio, adding Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota and Wisconsin to its region.

RTC records 1,359 rail-trails and 13,150 rail-trail miles. Membership is at more than 100,000.

