



rails-to-trails
conservancy

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Enthusiasm for Rock Island Trail Loud and Clear at Missouri State Parks Public Meetings Held This Week

Missouri Rock Island Trail, Inc., Missouri Bicycle and Pedestrian Federation and Rails-to-Trails Conservancy call on the state to take necessary steps to preserve the 144-mile Rock Island Railroad Corridor

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo.—Hundreds from across Missouri attended public meetings hosted this week by Missouri State Parks to help determine the fate of the 144-mile Rock Island Railroad corridor between Windsor and Beaufort, Missouri. Public feedback at the meetings was overwhelmingly positive, mirroring the sentiment of the nearly 9,000 comments—nearly unanimous in their support for the project—that were previously submitted to the state in the summer of 2017.

“We appreciate the work that State Parks has done to gather the necessary information to make a decision about the Rock Island corridor—including this week listening to hundreds of people talk about the importance of preserving this incredible asset,” said Brent Hugh, Missouri Bicycle and Pedestrian Federation executive director. “Now, it’s time to use that information to inform a creative, flexible approach to funding and developing the corridor. As the February 2019 Surface Transportation Board deadline for the transfer agreement approaches, Missouri State Parks must listen to its citizens and follow through with accepting the corridor.”

This week’s meetings underscore the need to be creative and flexible to secure new economic opportunities for the small towns along its route, an epic outdoor recreation asset for all of Missouri to celebrate and enjoy, and a world-class destination trail.

“Missouri is incredibly lucky; corridors of this type are few and far between. It is critical that the state takes the first step and railbanks the corridor. We can build it over time, in partnership and in a way that mitigates financial risk to the state,” said Keith Laughlin, Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC) president.

“The communities along the route want this trail. Missourians across the state want this trail. Bicyclists and tourists from across the country want this trail. What’s in question is the state’s willingness to make the decision that’s in the best interest of its residents, protecting its legacy as a rail-trail leader,” Laughlin added.

In reconsidering its position on accepting Ameren Corporation’s offer to donate the corridor for use as a trail, Missouri State Parks cites concerns about costs, maintenance and the state’s capacity—all issues that have and can be addressed in partnership with Missouri’s robust nonprofit trails community, local governments and private investment.

“Cost estimates presented by Missouri State Parks assume the Katy Trail model, with a highly engineered surface and trailheads every 10 miles that they build and maintain. There is no mention of meaningful partnerships or a multiyear development plan,” said Greg Harris, Missouri Rock Island Trail, Inc. executive director. “While there is much we can learn from the Katy Trail, the Rock Island is a vastly different corridor. For example, the corridor runs through the center of small towns every few miles along its route, creating natural partners in the trail’s development and maintenance and minimizing the need for trailheads.”

“What’s more, this trail can be developed in phases, focusing first on limited surfacing that will allow access for horseback riding and mountain bikes. Phasing trail development in this way will make costs to the state manageable while delivering immediate economic opportunities for rural communities along the route,” Harris added.

At the meetings in Owensville, Versailles and Meta, the state introduced the idea of accepting sections of the corridor rather than taking the steps necessary to preserve the 144-mile corridor intact. This approach is concerning to trail advocates, because there would be no second chance to preserve the corridor. The approach would limit the corridor’s use as a trail, reduce its viability as a corridor for any future transportation use and prevent the development of a 500-mile loop between Kansas City and St. Louis.

“Breaking up this corridor is an unacceptable response. The trail’s value diminishes significantly without connectivity,” said Hugh.

In 2014, Missouri State Parks, RTC and other Missouri partners succeeded in convincing Ameren Corporation, the corridor’s owner, to pursue railbanking of the 144-mile segment between Windsor and Beaufort for rail-trail conversion. The rails and ties have been removed, and the corridor is ready to be donated for trail development. Numerous communities have offered partnerships to further develop the trail within their city limits, and then maintain and police it.

“Working together, Missouri’s Rock Island will become one of America’s longest rail-trails, but that is only possible after Missouri State Parks takes the first step of accepting Ameren’s gift of the corridor,” said Harris.

Missouri State Parks is currently accepting public comments about the future of the Rock Island Railroad corridor. Comments can be submitted at https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/RILC_InfoMtggs_Fall2018.

Rails-to-Trails Conservancy is the nation’s largest trails organization—with a grassroots community more than 1 million strong—dedicated to connecting people and communities by creating a nationwide network of public trails, many from former rail lines. Connect with RTC at railstotrails.org and @railstotrails on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

Missouri Rock Island Trail, Inc. is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit coalition of citizens and communities with a mission to preserve the Rock Island corridor and build a hiking and biking trail. Learn more at rockislandtrail.org.

The Missouri Bicycle and Pedestrian Federation is a statewide coalition of bicyclists, walkers, runners, trail organizations and related businesses that represents over 50,000 Missourians and advocates on behalf of the state’s 2 million ardent bicyclists and 6 million walkers. Learn more at MoBikeFed.org.