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National Trails Community Celebrates Historic Railbanking of the Rock Island Corridor

Rails-to-Trails Conservancy Points to New Federal Funding for Trails, Walking and Biking as Opportunity to Accelerate Development of 144-Mile Rock Island Railroad Corridor

ELDON, Mo.—Today, advocates for the Rock Island Trail celebrated as Gov. Mike Parson announced that the state of Missouri would officially take ownership of the 144-mile Rock Island Railroad corridor between Windsor and Beaufort, Missouri. The governor’s announcement, which comes after decades of advocacy and negotiations, marks the final step in railbanking the corridor, which is now destined to be preserved—and enjoyed—as a trail.

“The Rock Island corridor is exceptional. Corridors of this length are few and far between. For decades, we’ve heard from so many people—from Missouri, across the country and around the world—who are looking forward to the day they can experience the Rock Island Trail. Today is a historic milestone in the advocacy to preserve the corridor, delivering economic opportunity, tourism, recreation and more for generations to come,” said Eric Oberg, Rails-to-Trails Conservancy’s (RTC’s) Midwest regional director.

RTC, the nation’s largest trails, walking and biking advocacy organization, has worked alongside partners in Missouri for decades to protect the Rock Island corridor, including submitting a bid to purchase the corridor at a point when its future was uncertain.

In recent years, advocates have focused on negotiations between the Missouri Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and the Missouri Central Railroad Company, a subsidiary of Ameren Missouri (Ameren), encouraging the state to accept Ameren’s donation of the corridor. RTC and partners in Missouri have mobilized nearly 30,000 public comments in favor of developing the Rock Island corridor into a trail and generated more than 20,000 advocacy messages in favor of the trail.

“When RTC was founded in 1986, one of the first official correspondences the organization received was from Eldon, Missouri, inquiring about our interest in helping to protect a corridor that ran through town,” said Marianne Fowler, RTC’s senior strategist for policy advocacy. “That launched RTC’s first wave of advocacy for the Rock Island. Since then, we’ve been privileged to share our legal expertise and political strategy with advocates and state agencies alike in pursuit of the Rock Island Trail. Today marks another beginning as we all turn our focus toward channeling the federal resources available to accelerate the trail’s development.”

The Rock Island announcement comes on the heels of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act that was signed into law in November, which provides an increase of nearly 70% for the largest federal funding source for trails, walking and biking, the Transportation Alternatives (TA) Program. The bill also

authorizes a new program that will provide active transportation connectivity grants to accelerate the connections between trails and other walking and biking infrastructure, and provides \$7.5 billion in supplemental funding for the competitive, federal multimodal program Rebuilding American Infrastructure with Sustainability and Equity (RAISE). Changes to the TA program alone are projected to increase federal funding for trails in the state of Missouri to \$31.6 million annually.

“This historic moment for Missouri, coupled with significant increases in funding and innovative new programs defined by the bipartisan infrastructure law, is a perfect pairing,” said Ryan Chao, RTC’s president. “RTC is committed to working with the state and communities along the corridor to help channel federal resources into the Rock Island, so that we can quickly begin to unlock all that the 144-mile corridor promises and the experience we’ve all dreamed of for so long.”

During years of negotiation with trail advocates, local residents and Ameren, the state has made clear its interest in securing local partnerships and private funds to develop the corridor. In 2018, Gov. Parson signed a bill establishing the Rock Island Trail State Park Endowment, managed by the Missouri State Treasurer’s Office, to accept donations and grants to develop the trail.

The trail’s potential economic benefit has already been demonstrated by the Katy Trail, which, according to a 2012 Missouri State Parks report, attracts 400,000 visitors annually and generates a total economic impact of over \$18 million. The completed Rock Island Trail will serve as a multiplier of these benefits and a contributor to the state’s trail and active transportation economy. A recent RTC analysis finds that trails in the state contribute \$507 million in economic activity annually, which could grow to \$1.05 billion annually as trail connectivity improves.

In 2014, Missouri State Parks, RTC and other Missouri partners succeeded in convincing Ameren, the corridor’s owner, to pursue railbanking of the 144-mile segment between Windsor and Beaufort for rail-trail conversion. To date, the rails and ties have been removed from the corridor, readying it for trail development in partnership with the communities the trail will serve. Numerous communities have offered partnerships to further develop the trail within their city limits, and then to manage and maintain it.

Rails-to-Trails Conservancy is the nation’s largest trails organization—with a grassroots community more than 1 million strong—dedicated to building a nation connected by trails, reimagining public spaces to create safe ways for everyone to walk, bike and be active outdoors. Connect with RTC at railstotrails.org and @railstotrails on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#).

To determine the net economic impact of trails and active transportation in Missouri, RTC applied the methodology used to calculate the national figures for health cost savings and local spending impact. Learn more about the methodology and national figures at railstotrails.org/atta.