

# GREAT AMERICAN RAIL-TRAIL<sup>®</sup>

ROUTE ASSESSMENT REPORT  
MAY 2024

RAILS TO  
**Trails**  
conservancy

# GREAT AMERICAN RAIL-TRAIL ROUTE ASSESSMENT EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### THE GREAT AMERICAN RAIL-TRAIL VISION

Imagine pedaling across the entire country on a safe, seamless and scenic pathway—or walking a local trail that connects you to historic routes from coast to coast. You're enthralled in the experience of exploring America's heritage—its potential, its beauty and bounty, its people and places. Consider the intimacy of taking in all the country has to offer from the most personal vantage point: the trail.

Spanning more than 3,700 miles, the Great American Rail-Trail promises an all-new American experience. The trail travels through 12 states and the District of Columbia, connecting trail users and communities from Washington to Washington, and possibly someday from the Atlantic to the Pacific. As the first cross-country trail of its kind, the "Great American" will be hosted primarily by rail-trails—public paths created from former railroad corridors—as well as other multiuse trails, offering a route across the nation that is completely separated from vehicle traffic. Upon its completion, the Great American will serve more than 50 million people within 50 miles of its route, as well as the millions from across the country and the world who will explore America's diverse places via the trail.

The potential for a trail of this magnitude has been on Rails-to-Trails Conservancy's (RTC's) radar since the early days of RTC, some three decades ago, when co-founder David Burwell first dreamed of a trail for the nation. It would not be long before this dream would transform into vision, as RTC began to track rail-trail development in the 1980s, and the skeleton for a cross-country trail began to take shape. While the team at RTC "always knew" the potential for this trail, it also knew the significant undertaking and commitment required to get it done, thus setting two criteria for determining the trail's potential: a viable route that was more than 50% complete, and a pathway across the west.

Washington, D.C.—as the nation's capital and the home to RTC's national headquarters—had always been earmarked as the eastern terminus for a cross-country trail. In 2016, RTC staff traveled to Wyoming and Montana to explore route solutions in the west, as traversing the rugged mountains presented the same challenges to trail development as to the railroads that came before. In 2017, preliminary GIS analyses revealed multiple potential cross-country route options between Washington, D.C., and Washington State that were more than 50% complete. It was then that RTC knew the Great American Rail-Trail had the potential to become reality. Since then, the team at RTC has met with hundreds of trail partners along the preferred route for the trail as well as state agencies to align this vision with state and local trail priorities.

The Great American Rail-Trail marks RTC's most ambitious trail project to date and the single greatest trail project in the history of the country; its future is possible thanks to the hard work of the local trails community and countless volunteers, as well as the support and enthusiasm of each of the states it crosses.

### THE "GREAT AMERICAN" IMPACT

Now—and at an even grander scale when complete—the Great American Rail-Trail will magnify the economic, social and community benefits that trails have delivered to people and places for decades. For example, a study conducted by RTC in 2014 found that Pennsylvania's Three Rivers Heritage Trail—a trail along the route of the Great American—generates an estimated \$8.3 million annually as a result of outdoor tourism and local business patronage. As a large-scale, cross-country trail network, the Great American has the potential to generate millions of new dollars a year for communities along its route by increasing trail connectivity between places, catalyzing new investment in trailside businesses and commercial opportunities, and enhancing tourism as well as outdoor recreation, which, according to a report by the Outdoor Recreation Roundtable, is currently the fastest-growing industry in the country.

As new trails and connecting corridors are developed, communities along the Great American route will also gain safer walking and biking access to the places they want to go—like jobs, public transportation and shopping centers. All who enjoy the Great American will have better access to the outdoors as the trail intersects with green space within communities and connects to public lands along the route.

### THE PREFERRED ROUTE OF THE "GREAT AMERICAN"

With RTC's commitment to complete the Great American Rail-Trail, efforts have focused on working with trail partners and states to confirm a route across the country that would provide the highest-quality experience for all types of trail users—from bicyclists to hikers and everyone in between.

To this end, RTC embarked on a 12-month assessment of route options using its GIS database of more than 34,000 miles of existing, multiuse trails nationwide, and analyzing more than 300 state and local trail plans to identify planned future trails. RTC also met and worked with more than 200 local trail partners and more than 50 state agencies representing the trails along the route, shaping criteria to ensure safe, non-motorized travel on a route that is entirely walkable and bikeable. These trail criteria specify that the Great American Rail-Trail be one contiguous route that is preliminarily more than 80%, and ultimately entirely, off-road and separated from vehicle traffic; comprise existing trails to the extent possible; be reasonably direct from Washington to Washington; be amenable to the state and local jurisdictions through which it will cross; and serve as a catalyst for local economic development, including providing services for long-distance travelers.

Through the assessment, RTC and its partners have defined the preferred route of the Great American Rail-Trail as more than 3,700 miles—with approximately 2,059 miles of existing trails (trails along the route that are built and maintained by dedicated teams of local staff and volunteers) and 1,688 miles of identified trail gaps (sections of trail that still need to be developed).



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## TABLE 1 GREAT AMERICAN RAIL-TRAIL MILEAGE

	Total Miles	Existing Miles	Gap Miles	% Complete	Trail Gaps
D.C.	7.5	7.5	0	100%	0
Md.	200.8	200.8	0	100%	0
Pa.	172.5	162.7	9.8	94.3%	1
W.Va.	8.7	4.6	4.1	52.9%	1
Ohio	331.9	234.9	97.0	70.8%	10
Ind.	217.9	122.0	95.9	56.0%	9
Ill.	190.5	165.4	25.1	86.8%	4
Iowa	463.6	251.4	212.2	54.2%	19
Neb.	593.6	309.1	284.5	52.1%	10
Wyo.	510.3	17.1	493.2	3.4%	6
Mont.	440.5	111.5	329.0	25.3%	12
Idaho	90.7	80.2	10.5	88.4%	1
Wash.	517.6	391.3	126.3	75.6%	10
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>3,746.1</b>	<b>2,058.5</b>	<b>1,687.6</b>	<b>55.0%</b>	<b>83</b>

While there are more than 1,600 miles of trails to complete along the route of the Great American Rail-Trail, each trail gap has one or more future trail options identified as possible trail connections. Many of these gaps and proposed future trails are already identified in public plans that have been adopted at the state and local levels. Insight from local trail partners and states has helped to identify the preferred alignment that best corresponds with their priorities, with the intention of maximizing existing trail momentum as the Great American Rail-Trail is connected across the country.

### STATE-BY-STATE SNAPSHOT

#### WASHINGTON, D.C., AND MARYLAND

The trail route through Washington, D.C., and Maryland is the only section of the Great American Rail-Trail that is currently 100% complete. The route begins at the steps of the U.S. Capitol and picks up at the Capital Crescent Trail in Georgetown, which flows into the towpath of the Chesapeake and Ohio (C&O) Canal National Historical Park. With the C&O stretching from Washington, D.C., to Cumberland, Maryland, the route then meets up with the Great Allegheny Passage ([gaptrail.org](http://gaptrail.org)).

#### PENNSYLVANIA

The route through Pennsylvania connects several existing trails and includes a gap of fewer than 10 miles between Pittsburgh and Coraopolis. By connecting the trail through Pittsburgh, the Great American Rail-Trail also connects to the Industrial Heartland Trails Coalition (IHTC), a 1,500-mile network of trails that is part of RTC's TrailNation™ portfolio. The IHTC network will stretch across 51 counties in four states—Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Ohio and New York—from the shores of Lake Erie to the confluence of the three rivers in Pittsburgh and on to the Ohio River and Appalachian foothills.

#### WEST VIRGINIA

Traveling through the Northern Panhandle and along the Ohio River, the Great American Rail-Trail's path through West Virginia contains the least number of miles of any state across the route. As such, West Virginia has the smallest portion of trail to develop, with a 4.1-mile trail gap from the end of the Panhandle Trail in Weirton to the Market Street Bridge to cross the Ohio River into Steubenville, Ohio. Like Pennsylvania, the route through West Virginia is also along the Cleveland to Pittsburgh corridor of the proposed 1,500-mile IHTC trail network.

# GREAT AMERICAN RAIL-TRAIL ROUTE ASSESSMENT

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### OHIO

Several iconic trails make up the route across Ohio, which is already more than two-thirds complete. The Ohio & Erie Canalway Towpath Trail connects New Philadelphia to Cleveland, providing a rich history and unique experience along the way. Instead of following the Ohio & Erie Canalway Towpath Trail all the way north to Cleveland, however, the Great American Rail-Trail will branch off at Clinton and head southwest on the Ohio to Erie Trail, which travels to Cincinnati through Columbus.

### INDIANA

RTC met with Indiana state officials early in the Great American Rail-Trail process, recognizing that the route through Indiana would have a significant impact on the potential routes through its neighboring states. After analysis, two routes were presented: a shorter one across the north of the state and a longer diagonal one from Richmond, Indiana, toward the Chicago metropolitan area. State officials were excited about the potential of the Great American and asked RTC to consider including as many miles as possible in Indiana by using the longer diagonal route. To complete the preferred route through Indiana, about 95 miles of trail gaps will need to be addressed. With the state's commitment to its Next Level Connections program—a \$1 billion investment in infrastructure projects, including \$180 million for trails—there is great optimism for the necessary development to be completed.

### ILLINOIS

The route through Illinois incorporates the majority of the northern leg of the Great Illinois Trail between Lansing, Illinois, and the Quad Cities. The iconic Illinois & Michigan Canal State Trail and Hennepin Canal Parkway make up almost 75% of the existing miles that the Great American Rail-Trail will use to cross the state. Strategic investments will be required to develop just over 25 miles of trail gaps and fully connect the Great American across Illinois.

### IOWA

The Great American Rail-Trail travels through Iowa from Davenport to Council Bluffs at the western end of the state. Iowa has a rich network of trails, and on-the-ground trail partners are critical to its thriving trail culture and the development of the Great American in the state. While there are currently more than 212 miles of trail gaps to develop, support for the Great American was mentioned in the 2018 Iowa Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan, showing statewide support for the completion of the route through Iowa.

### NEBRASKA

The Great American Rail-Trail crosses into Nebraska on the iconic Bob Kerrey Pedestrian Bridge before weaving through the urban areas of Omaha and Lincoln. The existing mileage of the Cowboy Recreation and Nature Trail (the “Cowboy Trail”) takes trail users almost 40% of the way across the total planned mileage for Nebraska, with more miles set for the trail's construction in the near future. With over 284 miles of trail gaps to develop along the preferred route through Nebraska, completing the Cowboy Trail will go a long way toward making the Great American a reality.

### WYOMING

Wyoming has the potential to be an incredible section of the Great American Rail-Trail, with its unique landscapes and outdoor recreation assets. However, because of Wyoming's topography, any route through the state will require sizable grade increases at several locations, and currently, there are not significant miles of multiuse trail available to route a trail across the state. As a result, Wyoming has more trail gaps to develop—at just over 493 miles—than any other state along the Great American route. RTC reviewed mapping data, as well as various plans in Wyoming, identifying potential routes through Yellowstone National Park that could present opportunities for the Great American. In addition, the Wyoming Bicycle and Pedestrian System Task Force Report suggests that the Wyoming Legislature consider providing funding for the Great American as part of a recommended initiative to enhance the safety and function of long-distance bicycle tourism routes.

### MONTANA

The Great American Rail-Trail route through Montana will connect many of the state's communities known for outdoor recreation assets—including Livingston, Bozeman, Three Forks, Butte and Missoula—which are all along the preferred Great American route. There are currently 329 miles of trail gaps to be developed in Montana, including an off-road 50-miles-plus multiuse trail option connecting Gardiner to Livingston in Park County.

### IDAHO

The Great American Rail-Trail travels through the northern Panhandle of Idaho, primarily along developed rail-trails. Idaho has just one trail gap to complete, a connection from the city of Plummer to the Idaho–Washington state line. The state of Idaho and local officials will need to continue to work with landowners through the Lovell Valley to find an opportunity to complete the 10.5-mile connection between the Trail of the Coeur d'Alenes and the Palouse to Cascades State Park Trail.

### WASHINGTON

The Washington section of the Great American Rail-Trail begins with the Palouse to Cascades State Park Trail, which travels approximately 250 miles, from the Idaho–Washington state line to the community of Cedar Falls. The largest gap in the Palouse to Cascades State Park Trail is 35.4 miles between the city of Warden and the unincorporated community of Smyrna, ultimately traveling to the city of Othello. Creative solutions that include the rail line and highway rights-of-way between Warden and Othello should be considered to help fully close this large gap in the trail.

The Great American Rail-Trail will continue west through King County and Seattle, crossing Puget Sound via ferry to Bainbridge Island. The burgeoning Sound to Olympics Trail and Olympic Discovery Trail will complete a trip to the Pacific Ocean at the town of La Push on the Quileute Reservation.

# GREAT AMERICAN RAIL-TRAIL ROUTE ASSESSMENT

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### THE “GREAT AMERICAN” EXPERIENCE

The preferred route of the Great American Rail-Trail will highlight the diverse communities, breathtaking landscapes, and rich cultural and historical treasures that—together—make America special. A few highlights include:

- National Mall and Rock Creek Park – In Washington, D.C., the trail will begin a stone’s throw from the National Mall, which boasts iconic landmarks such as the Capitol Building, the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial. The trail then heads north along the Rock Creek Park Trails, located in the oldest and largest urban park in the national park system.
- C&O Canal Towpath at Fletcher’s Cove Boathouse – Along the Great American Rail-Trail route in Maryland, trail users can take in the sites and relics of the historical C&O Canal, which operated for more than 100 years, and once transported ships carrying various goods down the waterway to market. Today, visitors can experience the rich history of the canal through many original features, including locks, lockhouses and aqueducts.
- Holmes County Amish Country – A portion of the Great American Rail-Trail picks up on the Ohio to Erie Trail in Fredericksburg, Ohio, and follows it for about 150 miles across the state. Along this route, trail users will encounter the Holmes County Trail (a part of the Ohio to Erie Trail), which is located in the heart of Amish Country and was the first recreational trail in the country designed to accommodate Amish buggies.
- High Trestle Trail Bridge – In Iowa, the Great American Rail-Trail will utilize 16.8 miles in the middle of the High Trestle Trail, famous for its 130-foot-tall High Trestle Bridge, which boasts an art installation along—and above—the trail, wrapped in 43 twisting, diamond-shaped steel ribs, some lined with LED lights.
- Fort Robinson State Park – Great American Rail-Trail users will experience the White River Trail in Nebraska, which runs along a former Chicago and North Western Transportation Company corridor for 2.8 miles, ending at Fort Robinson State Park. Fort Robinson encompasses the fort and military camp that was home to the Red Cloud Agency in the 1870s. The agency served as an issuing point for supplies to the Oglala Lakota tribe of the Great Sioux Nation, as well as the Northern Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes, authorized in exchange for land ceded to the United States in 1868. It is also the site of Crazy Horse’s surrender and death in 1877, and visitors can find a historical plaque that marks the location.

- Coeur d’Alene Tribal History – Inducted by RTC into the Rail-Trail Hall of Fame in 2010, the Trail of the Coeur d’Alenes covers 71 miles of paved rail-trail along the Great American Rail-Trail, through Idaho’s scenic mountains and valleys. The area has a rich mining, railroad and Native American history, as the Coeur d’Alene Tribe was instrumental in the development of the trail. The trail originates in Mullan and terminates in the west in the city of Plummer in a public park with interpretive signage on the tribal history of the Schitsu’umsh people.

### THE PATH TO THE GREAT AMERICAN RAIL-TRAIL

The Great American Rail-Trail marks an unprecedented commitment by RTC and its public and private partners to create an iconic piece of American infrastructure that will connect more than 3,700 miles of rail-trail and other multiuse trails between Washington, D.C., and Washington State. This ambitious project will provide ample benefits to the communities, people and places it touches, while creating new connections to the American landscape for all who use the trail.

While the work to complete the Great American Rail-Trail is significant, RTC and its partners along the route have created a blueprint for the trail’s development; the route assessment provides important guidance to local planners, trail managers, state agencies and national partners that is based in the reality of existing plans and priorities. And while the ultimate completion of the Great American Rail-Trail is likely decades away, the 55% complete today is ready for the world to enjoy, and the momentum behind it will bring new segments onboard year after year.

### ABOUT RAILS-TO-TRAILS CONSERVANCY

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. Founded in 1986, the organization currently serves as the national voice for the trails movement, advocating for the country’s 40,000+ miles of rail-trails and multiuse trails, and 8,000+ miles of potential rail-trails ready to be built, with a goal of creating more walkable, bikeable communities in America. Connect with RTC at [railstotrails.org](http://railstotrails.org) and [@railstotrails](https://www.facebook.com/railstotrails) on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

Follow the Great American Rail-Trail at [@greatamericanrailtrail](https://www.facebook.com/greatamericanrailtrail) on Facebook and Instagram.

# GREAT AMERICAN RAIL-TRAIL ROUTE ASSESSMENT INTRODUCTION

## INTRODUCTION

### A TRAIL FOR AMERICA

Picture yourself ... pedaling across the entire country on a safe, seamless and scenic pathway—or walking a local trail that connects along historic routes. The experience of exploring America's heritage, its potential, its beauty and bounty, its people and places.

This vision and these experiences will become a reality thanks to the Great American Rail-Trail, a signature project of Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC) and our most ambitious venture yet.

### IMAGINE WHAT'S POSSIBLE

A family takes their children out on their neighborhood trail every weekend. The youngest is learning how to ride his bicycle without training wheels so he can keep up with his big sister, who is always a few steps ahead. Imagine the wonder in their minds the first time they discover that the trail in their backyard connects to trails in the next town, the next county, the next state—and all the way across America.

A small industrial community once served by a booming railroad is looking for new economic development opportunities. Imagine the potential for commerce generated by the thousands of trail users who visit the town each year and spend money on food, lodging and the many charms offered in this revitalized trail town.

Imagine a cross-country trail that connects us all, highlighting the diverse history, geography and cultural treasures that make each community special.

The possibilities are endless.

## THE STORY

### IT BEGAN AS A DREAM

For more than 30 years, RTC has recognized the potential for a multiuse trail that connects the nation.

As railroads gave way to new forms of transportation in the mid-20th century, thousands of miles of rail lines were disused across the country—giving rise to the rail-trail movement and RTC's formal establishment in 1986 to preserve these priceless corridors. The 1983 Railbanking Statute had helped lay a foundation for rail-trail development, and by 1989, an estimated 200 known rail-trails were on the ground in American communities.

As the movement took hold, RTC Co-Founder David Burwell dreamed of a trail that would connect the vast North American continent just as the railroads did—envisioning that rail-trails would one day be “America's Main Street.”

Almost from its earliest beginnings, RTC would see the dream transform into possibility. Rail-trails—tracked on a large U.S. wall map at RTC's headquarters in Washington, D.C.—began to hint at a single route forming from east to west as the 1980s gave way to the early 1990s. Using pins to mark new and completed rail-trail projects, the staff watched as more and more pins were added and the skeleton of a cross-country rail-trail slowly, but surely, began to take shape.

The seeds of the Great American Rail-Trail had been planted.

The prospect of completing such an ambitious project was exciting in its possibilities, but daunting at a time when RTC was still in its infancy. Realizing the coordination and resources needed for such a massive effort, RTC focused efforts on strengthening the organization and the national trail movement, including: advocating for new funding streams for trails and walking and biking infrastructure; supporting trail development nationwide; and increasing public support for rail-trails—drawing attention to the health, transportation, economic, environmental and social benefits they provide for their communities and the people who use them.

As RTC moved forward, aspirations of completing the iconic American route became an internal drumbeat for the organization for the next three decades.

### BUILDING A MOVEMENT—AND A VISION

RTC continued to monitor the route's progress toward 50% completion—the milestone identified as the threshold for committing to the project as a national organization.

In 1991, the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) established two new federal programs for trails: Transportation Enhancements (known today as Transportation Alternatives) and the Recreational Trails Program. By October 1998, the United States reached 1,000 rail-trails, and that number continued to grow steadily as more communities demanded these vital assets.

Washington, D.C.—as our nation's capital and the home of RTC's national headquarters—had always been earmarked as the eastern terminus for a cross-country trail. A potential terminus in the West remained elusive, however, as RTC endeavored to find solutions for traversing the rugged mountains and vast open spaces without a density of multiuse trail connections.

As the eastern half of the United States was making rapid progress on trail development, the western half was challenged by multiple factors, including less density of railroads, a lower volume of rail line abandonments and lower population densities in communities along the corridors.

In 2007, with 15,000 miles of rail-trails on the ground in the United States, RTC commissioned a study of the old “Milwaukee Road” (Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific Railroad), a legendary line connecting Chicago and Seattle that had fallen entirely into disuse by

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1980. In 1982, Washington State purchased a portion of the corridor to create the Palouse to Cascades State Park Trail, which—at more than 247 miles and growing—is now one of the longest rail-trails in the country.

Investments made by King County, Washington, and trail developers in the Seattle area would result in thriving trail networks just farther west of the Palouse to Cascades State Park Trail, making the state a viable western terminus for a cross-country rail-trail.

### **EXPLORING NEW POSSIBILITIES**

Just west of the Mississippi River, Iowa built momentum early, becoming the first state in the nation to take advantage of the national Railbanking Statute in the early- to mid-1980s. Nearby in Nebraska, rail-trails would also begin to pop up in increasing numbers.

Because much of the Milwaukee Road outside of Washington State had been lost to private landowners, RTC began to explore other potential routes in Montana and Idaho, eventually completing two comprehensive corridor assessments and related feasibility studies that helped identify new trail opportunities across both states.

By early 2016, RTC had amassed more than 160,000 members and supporters and helped secure federal funding streams that supported thousands of trail projects nationwide. With more than 22,000 miles of rail-trails on the ground—just three decades after David Burwell first dreamed of a multiuse trail across the country, and with renewed enthusiasm—RTC was poised and ready to commit to making the Great American Rail-Trail a reality.

Under the leadership of then-president Keith Laughlin, RTC embarked on a new exploratory effort to determine the feasibility of the route, as it had evolved since the late 1980s. In December 2016, three staff members traveled to Wyoming and Montana to explore options for a rail-trail route through the mountains. In 2017, preliminary geographic information system (GIS) analyses revealed multiple potential routes that were more than 50% complete for a cross-country route connecting Washington, D.C., and Washington State.

In February 2017, RTC began a formal route assessment across 12 states and the District of Columbia (detailed in the Methodology section of this report), which included meeting with hundreds of state and local officials, as well as local trail managers, and collecting mapping data and information for 130 trails. The results of this study are outlined in the State-by-State Route Analysis in this report. It's with pleasure that we invite you now to explore the preferred route of this iconic American trail in the making.

RTC revealed the preferred route of the Great American Rail-Trail in May 2019, celebrating the launch of this transformational project through a series of events with partner organizations across the country. RTC and our partners are tracking the march toward completion of the route by celebrating milestones large and small, including the completion of new trail segments, major maintenance efforts, new funding acquired and everything in between.

### **GREAT AMERICAN BENEFITS**

The creation of the Great American Rail-Trail will help amplify the benefits—on a mass scale—that trails have provided across the project footprint for decades. The cross-country route will serve as a catalyst for new investment in trailside businesses and commercial opportunities that have the potential to generate billions of dollars a year for communities through outdoor tourism and local business patronage.

As new trails and connecting corridors are developed, the Great American Rail-Trail will open up access to safe places for physical activity and outdoor recreation—promoting health and wellness and encouraging every American to make new authentic connections to their neighborhoods and environments. These connections will bridge the gaps within, and between, our diverse communities, creating safe walking and biking access to jobs, green space, transit, shopping centers and the cultural treasures that make each place unique.

The Great American Rail-Trail will encourage millions of people to form closer connections to nature and promote a sense of stewardship and conversation in their neighborhoods and beyond.

And as people explore and discover the iconic places and diverse geographic beauty along this epic multiuse trail, they'll be joined together by a sense of pride and an understanding that out of many, we become one on the Great American Rail-Trail.

United, we trail.

# GREAT AMERICAN RAIL-TRAIL ROUTE ASSESSMENT METHODOLOGY

## USING THIS REPORT

This report serves as a snapshot in time on this exciting project to connect the country by trail. Routing choices are likely to change over time as new opportunities and challenges are presented.

This report is divided into two main sections. The **Methodology** outlines the process used to arrive at a preferred route for the Great American Rail-Trail, including the various selection criteria, the state strategy, the plan review, the selection of existing trails along the route and the exploration of the trail gaps.

The **State-by-State Route Analysis** walks readers through the route of the Great American Rail-Trail from east to west—Washington, D.C., to Washington State. Each state chapter includes a discussion of the existing trails along the route and any trail gaps that need to be developed to create a contiguous trail.

Following these two main sections, you'll find an appendix that includes excerpts from an independent economic analysis of the Great American Rail-Trail from May 2022, as well as a glossary that defines important terminology used in this report.

It's important to note that RTC and our partner organizations are in the beginning stages of bringing the Great American Rail-Trail to life. This report is intended to outline the preferred route as the next step toward completing this shared vision and is not intended as a final planning document.

In conversations with trail managers and state officials across the project footprint, several common challenges were identified related to funding, maintenance, signage and trail amenities. RTC looks forward to continued future dialogue about these important issues and the formulation of shared solutions to make the Great American Rail-Trail a reality.

## METHODOLOGY

After deciding to set our vision on completing the Great American Rail-Trail, RTC created a plan for success in the initial phase of the project. The initial methodology identified five important preliminary steps, which are discussed in this section:

1. Route Selection Criteria – making consistent routing decisions.
2. State Strategy – gaining support and endorsement of the trail within each state by lead state officials, securing commitment to work collaboratively with RTC.
3. Plan Review – reviewing the adopted state, county and local plans along the potential route across the country to understand current and future trail development.
4. Existing Trails – identifying the existing trails that could create the spine of a fully protected multiuse trail across the country.
5. Trail Gaps – identifying the gaps between the existing trails and exploring viable alternatives to fill the gaps with future trails.

## GATEWAY TRAILS

*The full route of the Great American Rail-Trail will connect 150+ rail-trails, greenways and other multiuse paths. The route includes 12 iconic “gateway” trails that make possible this grand vision of a nation connected by trails. These trails have been built through the hard work and ingenuity of the trails community—nonprofit partners, state agencies and volunteers who have rolled up their sleeves to protect and preserve these priceless corridors. These trails were highlighted in the winter 2019 issue of the Rails to Trails magazine. RTC thanks the following trails for agreeing to be gateway trails for the Great American Rail-Trail:*

1. Washington, D.C.: Capital Crescent Trail (Page 17)
2. Maryland: C&O Canal National Historical Park (Page 21)
3. Pennsylvania and West Virginia: Panhandle Trail (Page 27, 30)
4. Ohio: Ohio to Erie Trail (Page 36)
5. Indiana: Cardinal Greenway (Page 48)
6. Illinois: Hennepin Canal Parkway (Page 57)
7. Iowa: Cedar Valley Nature Trail (Page 65)
8. Nebraska: Cowboy Recreation and Nature Trail (Page 84)
9. Wyoming: Casper Rail Trail (Page 91)
10. Montana: Headwaters Trail System (Page 101)
11. Idaho: Trail of the Coeur d'Alenes (Page 109)
12. Washington: Palouse to Cascades State Park Trail (Page 113)



# GREAT AMERICAN RAIL-TRAIL ROUTE ASSESSMENT METHODOLOGY

## ROUTE SELECTION CRITERIA

RTC determined the following route selection criteria to identify a feasible preferred route for the Great American Rail-Trail that ensures a high-quality experience for future users.

### **1. Provide for safe, non-motorized travel on a route that is entirely walkable and bikeable.**

The Great American Rail-Trail shall be accessible to walk or bike along its entirety. Other types of uses are welcome and encouraged where local regulations allow, but this effort focuses on identifying a route that is entirely walkable and bikeable. The trails along the route do not need to be paved. However, the surface of the trails along the route should be smooth enough to accommodate trail users of all types, including asphalt, concrete, crushed stone and natural earth surfaces that are well maintained. Early railroad trains were capable of traveling at a maximum grade of 5%. The Great American Rail-Trail should stick to this maximum grade where possible to provide for a reasonable route for trail users. The average grade along the entire preferred route of the Great American Rail-Trail is 5.1%, which includes several steep sections of Wyoming and Montana. Removing those aberrations, the average grade along the preferred route is 3.9%.

### **2. Create one contiguous route.**

RTC will identify one contiguous spine of the Great American Rail-Trail. Trails should seamlessly connect to each other as well as connect at state borders. RTC will focus its energy on identifying and facilitating the completion of one contiguous route rather than attempting to connect various trail spurs into the main spine of the trail. However, towns, cities and counties are encouraged to create trail connections into the main spine of the Great American Rail-Trail.

### **3. Provide a route that is entirely off-road in the long-term, making short-term detours for on-road routes where an off-road route has not yet been identified but is still reasonably feasible in the long term.**

The main goal of the Great American Rail-Trail is to provide an entirely off-road walking and bicycling experience to help alleviate the stress of interacting with automobile traffic. Unfortunately, there currently is no simple way to connect a trail across the country without sharing some right-of-way with roads. The route as identified in this report is 80% to 90% off-street. The remaining 10% to 20% of the route will be co-located alongside road right-of-way, and will be separated from traffic to the extent possible. As the project is built out and gains momentum, additional trail opportunities will likely become viable to transition more of the route from road right-of-way to a more traditional trail experience.

Realistically, there are some places where an entirely off-street trail is unlikely due to the constraints of topography and land development. Where the trail must use roads open to vehicular traffic, the route needs to be as safe as possible, making use of such measures as low-volume or low-speed roads, wide shoulders and separated bike lanes. These roads are to be thought of as “interim on-road connections” with the goal of identifying and completing off-street trail opportunities as they become viable.

### **4. Utilize existing trails in the route to the extent possible.**

RTC’s vision for the Great American Rail-Trail would not be possible without the hard work and dedication of planners, trail managers and volunteers who have developed and continue to maintain tens of thousands of miles of existing multiuse trails across the country. RTC wants to celebrate these existing trails by including as many of them in the route as possible. RTC initially identified 130 existing trails that made up the initial route of the Great American Rail-Trail, and the number has grown to more than 150.

### **5. Provide a route that is reasonably direct across the country.**

RTC explored several route options to connect a trail across the country. The route that presented itself to us as the preferred route, as outlined in this report, was the most direct route to connect Washington, D.C., and Washington State that also included the greatest number of existing trails and future trail opportunities.

### **6. Follow a route amenable to the state and local jurisdictions through which it will cross.**

State and local jurisdictions will be instrumental in completing the route across each state, so it is imperative that they are comfortable with and excited about the chosen route. It is also imperative that the states, counties and towns that currently are not connected by trail work together across boundaries to ensure greater connections with each other via trails.

### **7. Use the Great American Rail-Trail as a catalyst for local economic development, including providing services for long-distance travelers.**

The trails along the Great American Rail-Trail are already great community assets. It is RTC’s vision that people will use the new and existing trails along the Great American Rail-Trail for a variety of purposes, from morning walks to weekend family excursions to once-in-a-lifetime cross-country journeys. Everyone using the route will require services to some degree, including water, restrooms, parking lots, food, lodging and camping, mail services and more. Route choices were made to include areas with either existing resources or the potential for the development of these services at reasonable intervals for travelers. That said, the Great American Rail-Trail traverses several areas where basic services are currently scarce, thus making the rail-trail a tremendous opportunity for local economic development. RTC will work with partners to fill trail gaps in ways that will route trails through populated areas to capitalize on the economic development opportunities of trail tourism.

In 2022, RTC completed an economic impact analysis of the Great American Rail-Trail. More information from this analysis can be found in the appendix.

# GREAT AMERICAN RAIL-TRAIL ROUTE ASSESSMENT METHODOLOGY

## STATE STRATEGY

The Great American Rail-Trail should be viewed as 13 cross-state trails, each exploring unique landscapes, heritages and people, and each connecting at state lines to the trails of adjacent states. RTC's goal is to have each state embrace the Great American Rail-Trail and commit to working with RTC on its completion within its borders. To this end, RTC held meetings in each state with a range of public agencies, elected officials and advocacy organizations. Securing each state's support is an ongoing, increasingly successful process. The driving advocacy and resources that RTC brings to the project, as well as each state's self-interest and commitment, create the synergy necessary for the success of this great endeavor.

## PLAN REVIEW

To better understand the existing and planned trails and goals for walking and bicycling in states and communities along the route, RTC initially reviewed more than 300 adopted state and local plans that pertained to the route across the 12 states and Washington, D.C.

The most common types of plans that came up during the plan review included:

- Bicycle and Pedestrian Plans
- Trail Plans
- Comprehensive Plans
- Transportation Plans
- Park, Recreation and Open Space Plans
- Rail Plans
- Economic Development Plans
- Master Plans

Plans were not found for every community along the route, and many rural communities and counties did not always have applicable plans that were available to the public for review. However, RTC is confident that the plan review for this project was thorough and provides a solid background for understanding the active transportation and recreation goals of the communities along the route. RTC incorporated knowledge learned from the plan review to both the route and the discussion of existing trails and trail gaps in this report's State-by-State Route Analysis. RTC continues to advocate for the inclusion of the Great American Rail-Trail and policies that support its success in new and updated plans.

## EXISTING/OPEN TRAILS

To identify the existing/open trails that host the Great American Rail-Trail, RTC applied the route selection criteria outlined above to all known existing trails across the country. Based on our review of existing long-distance trails, it became clear that Washington, D.C., and Washington State made the most sense as the eastern and western ends of the Great American Rail-Trail. After deciding upon these two endpoints, RTC staff began narrowing down the route options to connect them.

The data behind RTC's TrailLink™ platform (TrailLink.com) helped form the basis for mapping existing trails for potential inclusion in the route. When we had identified what we believed to be all route options through each state that would fit the route selection criteria, RTC staff presented these ideas to state and local officials to explore their possibilities. These state and local officials were instrumental in helping identify the most viable route options.

After the route was narrowed down, RTC staff contacted trail managers representing each existing trail to partake in an introductory webinar, followed by individual interviews in the summer and fall of 2018. Through these interviews, RTC made connections with trail managers and gathered information on each trail. The information gleaned from these interviews is included in the discussion of each existing trail in the State-by-State Route Analysis.

## TRAIL GAPS

Approximately 2,059 miles of existing trails are identified in this report to form the Great American Rail-Trail. The remaining approximately 1,688 miles to connect these trails to each other and complete a cross-country trail have not yet been built. These trail gaps are equally as important to identify and explore as the existing trails.

Trail gaps were explored in great detail through the plan review and trail manager interviews. The plan review helped confirm trail gaps, while the interviews offered background on past, current and future efforts to fill these gaps.

Planned and proposed trails identified throughout our research played a large part in informing our final route decisions. Where no planned or proposed trails were identified in any given trail gap, RTC used additional information to explore other possibilities, including geographic information system (GIS) data from the Federal Railroad Administration to illustrate potential routes along abandoned and active rail corridors.

Only planned and proposed trails identified in approved planning documents are included in the mapping of the official Great American Rail-Trail route. Potential future trails that are not in approved public plans are discussed in the text of each trail gap, but not shown in the official Great American Rail-Trail route mapping. The trail gap distances included throughout this document are the result of either the actual planned trail distance or an on-street distance between two existing trails, which will be modified as actual trail projects are identified to fill the gaps.

GREAT AMERICAN RAIL-TRAIL ROUTE ASSESSMENT  
METHODOLOGY



*The Beverly Bridge opened for trail use across the Columbia River in Washington State along the Palouse to Cascades State Park Trail in April 2022.  
Photo by Kevin Belle, courtesy Rails-to-Trails Conservancy*