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“This trail disturbs the peace”: the spatial politics of rails to trails

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The politics of rails to trails

Multi-use, recreational trails are spaces of potential conflict between groups of walkers, landowners, policymakers, and urban residents. Many urbanites have seen the development of rail trails as an antidote to economic decline and automobile congestion, as well as a source of new opportunities for outdoor recreation. Residents of suburban and rural communities, however, have sometimes feared the crime, vandalism, and government intrusion that the trails would bring to their isolated neighborhoods.

The development of rail trails, therefore, highlights the increasingly fractious relationship among various metropolitan constituencies, even as many policymakers and advocates heralded trails as essential components of the nation's new outdoor recreational infrastructure.

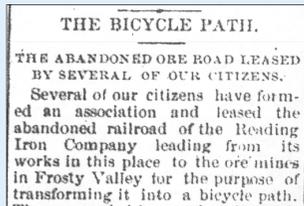


Figure 1. As early as 1897, a group of Danville, PA businessmen leased a railroad corridor for use as a bicycle path. By the 1960s, federal and state legislation accommodated the transition of rail corridors to trails.



Figure 2. In 1983, Congress amended the National Trails System Act to allow for “rail-banking” of abandoned lines for temporary recreational use.

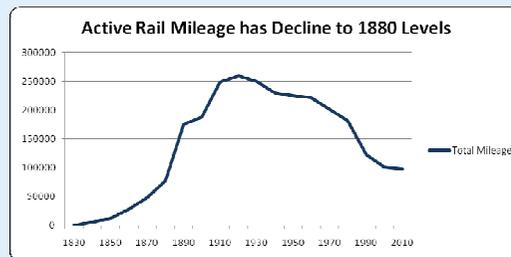
Inter-demographic spaces

Rail mileage crested in the early twentieth century and has since steadily declined, leaving over 100,000 miles of abandoned railroad corridors across the nation, many of which connect urban areas to the hinterland. The construction of rail trails, therefore, often restores links between urban areas and suburban or rural areas, each with dissimilar demographic, economic, and political characteristics.

The rise of rail trails in the 1960s, a period when white, middle-class Americans left the cities for the suburbs to escape what they perceived as an urban crisis, heightened the potential for conflict along spaces that seemed to facilitate the intrusion of the city in the countryside.



Figure 3. By 1911, numerous trunk and spur lines connected Pennsylvania's small towns and provided access to rural coal mines and lumber camps. After abandonment in the late twentieth century, these spaces provided potential corridors for pedestrians and cyclists.



Opposition to rails to trails

The benefits for public health, economic development, recreation, and open space seem to favor the construction of rail trails, but there is also a strong opposition that rallies around several key themes:

Trail users do not respect private property.

“The person...who has never owned or been responsible for real property can be, if nothing worse, a nuisance if he is allowed to run loose on private property and with no training in the responsibilities, which go along with freedom.” (Bernice A. Ford, *New York Times*, May 31, 1975)

Rail trails compromise the solitude of rural areas.

“When I grew up, we played in our own backyards...This trail disturbs the peace. My father bought this property in 1946 to be alone.” (Hanna Smith, *Morning Call*, April 30, 1989)

Rail trails violate private property rights.

“My deed specifically states that upon discontinuation of service the land reverts to...my grandfather. That was put in in 1902. The county had no right to purchase a right-of-way to ground it did not own.” (William Weirman, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, June 22, 1990)

Rail trails attract crime to otherwise safe neighborhoods.

“What kind of people are we going to get? Would it be safe for our children to stay home alone?” (Annie Stoltzfus, *Lancaster New Era*, October 24, 1991)



Figure 4. The four-mile Nor-Bath Trail links three municipalities with varying levels of Median Household Income (MHI), poverty, and home ownership. Although race and class are rarely mentioned by rail trail critics, property rights are a recurring theme.



Figure 5. Proponents see the Baltimore-Annapolis Trail, which passes nearby many homes, as a community asset. Critics see it as a potential liability that will encourage crime, reduce property values, and raise taxes.

Conclusion

As active transportation and easy access to open space gain increased prominence within the debates over health, economic development, and sustainability, the popularity of rail trails will continue to grow. The successful implementation of rails to trails projects will require policymakers and their grassroots allies to anticipate and accommodate the critical reactions to abandonment, railbanking, and public ownership, which range from legitimate legal and property rights concerns to irrational, xenophobic fears. The most effective trail planners solicit community input at all stages of the project, enlist support from sympathetic adjacent landowners, resist attacking critics, and cite legitimate studies of property values, crime, and economic impact on similar trails.

Railroad corridors are unique, inter-demographic spaces that hold great potential for meeting our recreational and transportation needs. If the concerns of rail trail critics are not addressed, however, rail trail projects will flounder on grassroots and municipal opposition.

For further information

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