

Policy briefs call attention to important statewide policy considerations, relationships, and guidance for use by planners, engineers, implementers and community members.



Rail line preservation and rails-to-trails projects

This policy brief helps people who manage rail lines or who are interested in converting rail right-of-way to trails.

The policy framework for rail line preservation and rails-to-trails projects

The rail right-of-way (ROW) is an important transportation asset for active, imminent or future rail use. When not in use for railroad purposes, the right-of-way can also be an important community asset for other users, in particular for pedestrians and bicycle riders when it is converted to a trail. Pairing policies from the Oregon Rail Plan that provide guidance for preserving rail lines, with policies from the Oregon Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan that provide a framework for agency coordination and path development, provide a foundation for rail line preservation and conversion of rail-to-trails. The policies provide a technique for maximizing infrastructure use in cost-effective ways.

Rail banking is a voluntary process where a railroad company enters into an agreement in which the corridor is not considered abandoned, but can be sold, leased or donated to a trail manager by reverting the land easement to adjacent land owners. The framework supports efficient decision-making, while also preserving flexibility of future rail use. Rail-to-trail conversion can also occur when a railroad company decides to abandon a line and permanently relinquishes the ROW for trail use.

Applicable plans and policies

Plan	Policy
Oregon State Rail Plan	<p>Strategy 3G: Preserve the rail system through a hierarchy of investment and action.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Preserve Service – Continue rail service on an endangered line through partial subsidization of the railroad operator, acquisition of the line by the public, or some combination of methods to keep service on the line. 2) Preserve Infrastructure – Preserve the right-of-way and improvements (e.g. track structure) that occupy the right-of-way through means such as acquiring the corridor or otherwise preserving the infrastructure in place for some indeterminate period. The corridor could be brought back to operation at any time, although more resources will likely be required to resume service the longer the corridor is out of operation. 3) Rail Banking – Invoke rails-to-trails legislation to preserve the right-of-way for interim trail use and the potential for the future return of railroad use. The railroad can salvage track but should leave the bridges, tunnels, embankments, etc., for trail and future rail use. 4) Rail line abandonment - Rail line abandonment will be used only as a last resort if there are no justifiable reasons to save the rail line or the right-of-way. Even in this instance, right-of-way preservation may have a continued public benefit for other modes.
	8.2C: Be opportunistic in acquiring right-of-way for future potential pedestrian and bicycle facilities, and identify strategies to utilize development projects for filling gaps, particularly in potential future high need locations.

Oregon Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan

Strategies 2.5 A-E:

2.5A: Build partnerships through collaborative efforts to identify paths or trails. Share information among local jurisdictions regarding design innovations, funding, engaging local partners (e.g. tourism organizations, private and federal entities) and other technical information that becomes available.

2.5B: Review and update guidelines and procedures for path or trail planning and design.

2.5C: Develop paths as safe alternative routes that help complete the network.

2.5D: Regional Paths: Identify off roadway walkways and bikeways in state facility plans, Regional transportation Plans, or Transportation System Plans for future development, justifying need according to prioritization categories listed in Strategy 8.2A of this Oregon Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan.

In addition to the definition of “high need locations” specified in Policy 8.2A, off-roadway walkways and bikeways that meet all of the following criteria shall be considered Regional Paths that demonstrate a statewide benefit and shall be prioritized as a “critical connections.”

- Is a continuous path made up of one or more connected segments that is primarily physically separated from the roadway;
- Connects two or more incorporated communities, with each community no more than 15 miles apart; or traverses through a single large community with a path that is 10 miles or longer;
- Will serve as a connection point for people commuting between communities; or is part of officially designated walking and bicycling route, such as Scenic Bikeways, Bike Route, or US National Bike Route; and
- Is endorsed by elected bodies along path alignment.

2.5E: When adding to a Regional Path that qualifies under Strategy 2.5D, prioritize those segments or improvements that enhance overall utilization of the route.

Why policies on rail line preservation and rails-to-trails matter

Rail line preservation and rails-to-trails offer co-benefits such as preserving ROW and alignments for future potential railway use while creating community assets and biking and walking transportation networks in the interim. The partnership created to leverage the existing transportation assets are a benefit to communities. The practice supports the creation of long, linear trails for pedestrian, bicycle, and/ or equestrian use for both transportation and recreational purposes. The recreation benefits support public health, tourism and the economic vitality of the communities the trail passes through. The transportation benefits of creating the trail are increased accessibility, social capital, and a safe space separated from motor vehicles where riders can travel with confidence and comfort. Long, linear trails can create critical connections between communities that may be otherwise inaccessible to those without a vehicle or who do not feel comfortable riding near traffic.



Rails-to-Trails Case Studies

The Banks-Vernonia Trail is the first rail-to-trails project in Oregon. The trail is 21 miles long and is located over a decades-old railway bed. Elsewhere, the OC and E Woods Line State Trail in Southern Oregon is the state’s longest linear park at 109 miles. It stretches from Klamath Falls east to Lene, and then north to Sycan Marsh.



The Salmonberry Corridor is another trail being considered for rails-to-trails conversion in Oregon. The 86-mile former railroad right-of-way runs from Banks in Washington County to Tillamook on the Oregon Coast. The corridor passes through eight cities, and the majority of the corridor is currently owned 'fee simple' by the Port of Tillamook Bay. Part of the corridor also includes an active rail line used for an excursion train. In 2007, a storm damaged a substantial portion of the corridor and rendered it infeasible for heavy rail service. As a result, an effort began to develop a regional trail along the Salmonberry Corridor. The Oregon Legislature authorized funding for trail planning, and the project is currently in the concept planning and public outreach phase.



The Capital Crescent Trail in Washington, D.C. and Maryland is an example of how a rail-to-trail can serve as both a recreation path and an important transportation corridor. The 11-mile trail connects Silver Spring, Maryland – a busy D.C. suburb – with downtown Washington, D.C. via railbanked trail paralleling the Potomac River. The “State of Bicycling” Report (Montgomery County, 2015) reported approximately 70,000 trips in the month of June. While weekend recreation use is high, trail counters found that weekdays also averaged more than 1,000 trips, peaking during morning and evening commute hours.

When to consider rail line preservation options

During rail corridor preservation discussions, railroad owners can choose to abandon a rail line or voluntarily “bank it.” Rail banking is a voluntary agreement to use an “out-of-service” rail corridor as a trail until a railroad might need the corridor again for rail service. Official negotiations with the railroad begin after the railroad submits an initial notification to abandon the line to the Surface Transportation Board (STB). Negotiations end with either rail banking or line abandonment. A local, state or federal agency, or an advocacy group can partner to build and maintain the trail.

Other helpful guidance and tools

[Rails-to-Trails Conservancy](#)

[Legislation establishing rail-banking procedures](#)

[Grant funding for rails-to-trails projects in Oregon](#)

For questions about rail line preservation and/or conversion of rails-to-trails, contact the ODOT Rail Division at 503-986-4321.