Charleston Rail Line Linear Park: Building on the Past, Prospects for the Future

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The Trust for Public Land
Center for City Park Excellence

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Cover: Artist's conception of Charleston Rail Line Linear Park. Jacob Lindsey/Fabric Urban Design.

The Trust for Public Land conserves land for people to enjoy as parks, gardens, and other natural places, ensuring livable communities for generations to come.

Our Center for City Park Excellence helps make cities more successful through the renewal and creation of parks for their social, ecological, and economic benefits to residents and visitors alike.

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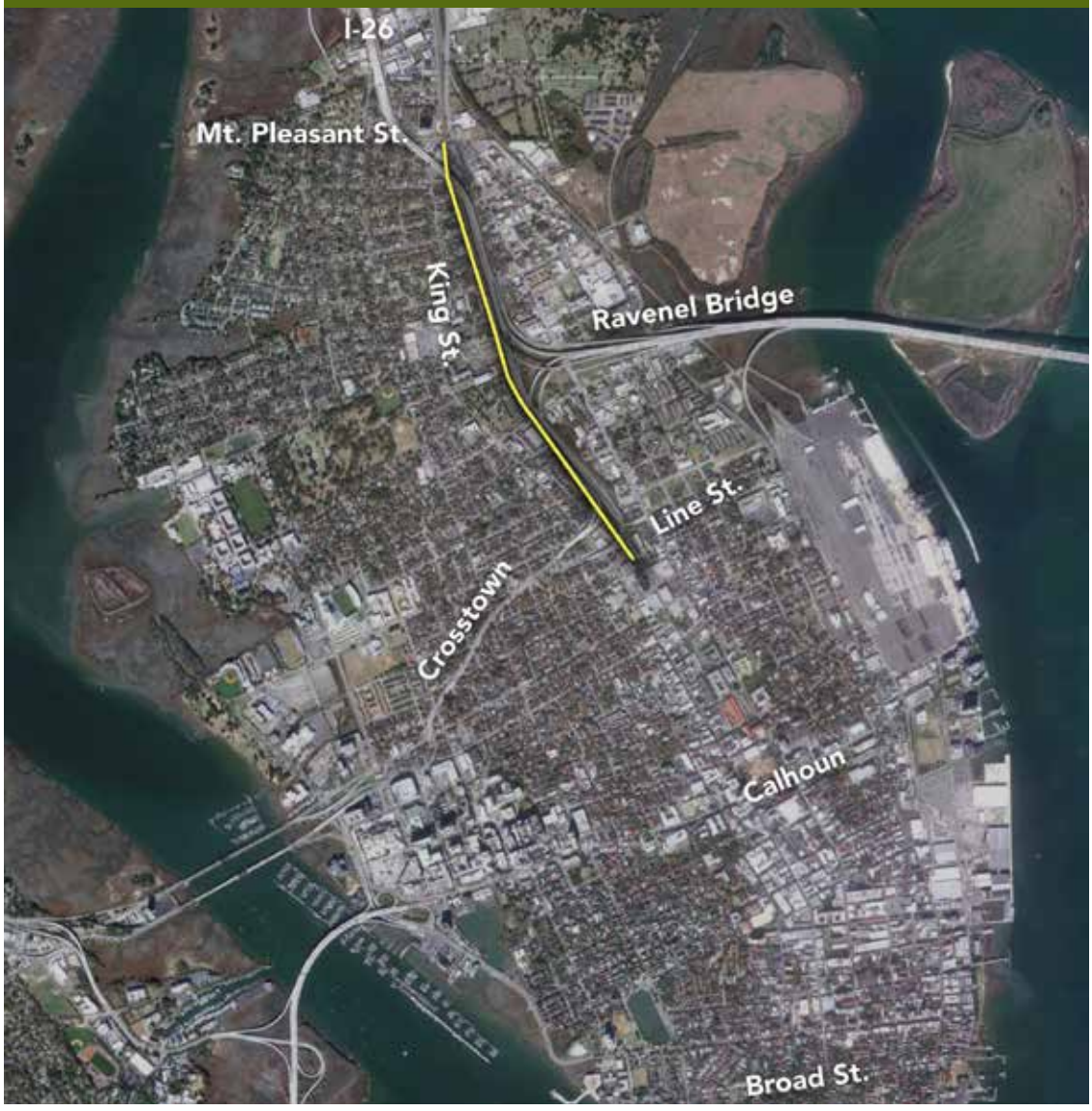
Introduction

The United States is in the midst of an urban park renaissance, and linear trails are among the most popular of the new facilities. From the High Line in New York and the Capital Crescent Trail in Washington, D.C., to the BeltLine in Atlanta, the Sugar Creek Greenway in Charlotte, and the Burke-Gilman Trail in Seattle, trails are proving their economic, environmental, transportation, and community-building values.

Charleston, South Carolina, is one of the localities that now has this opportunity. The facility, which has been dubbed the "Charleston Rail Line Linear Park," would be created out of a 1.6-mile disused Norfolk Southern railroad track between Mount Pleasant and Line streets. Because of this once-in-a-generation occasion, and in order to sort out many of the issues that would be involved in this effort, the Speedwell Foundation has contracted with The Trust for Public Land to produce a short report on the experience of other communities in creating linear parks for recreation and nonmotorized transportation.

DOWNTOWN CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA—PROPOSED LINEAR PARK



JACOB LINDSEY/FABRIC URBAN DESIGN

New Value from an Old Icon

Trails and greenways have created thousands of healthy recreation and transportation opportunities across the United States, providing people of all ages and abilities with safe and accessible places to walk, hike, jog, skate, ski, and ride. By connecting people with places, trails make communities more walkable and livable as children find safer routes to school, adults find cost-effective exercise and commuting options, neighborhoods find social gathering spots, and business districts find new ways for customers to reach them. And trails, especially rail-trails, are extremely well used (*see Table 1*).

Trail stories are as numerous and varied as trails themselves. In bike-friendly Seattle, the Burke-Gilman Trail receives upwards of two million uses annually, with a full third of weekday users identifying as commuters. In northern Virginia, equestrians enjoy the Washington & Old Dominion Trail through a parallel bridle path for most of the trail's 45 miles, connecting rural horse country all the way to Washington's suburbs. And hardy Midwesterners don't let frigid winters interfere, grooming trails like Michigan's Traverse Area Regional Trail for cross-country skiing and using connecting hiking trails to create long ski-touring loops. Elsewhere, in tourist-oriented Cape Cod, the Cape Cod Rail Trail serves hundreds of thousands of vacationing walkers and runners from early spring to late fall.

Table 1. Some Notable Urban Rail-Trails

Trail	Length (in miles)	Annual Usership
Burke-Gilman Trail, Seattle	17	2,000,000
Capital Crescent Trail, Washington, D.C.	11	1,000,000
Illinois Prairie Path, Chicago	62	800,000
Midtown Greenway, Minneapolis	5.7	1,100,000
Minuteman Trail, Boston	10.4	2,000,000
Monon Trail, Indianapolis	10.5	1,200,000

The Economic Value of Trails

These corridors are more than just nice amenities. The Trust for Public Land has found that they provide real economic benefits to communities. Whether daily commuters or out-of-town destination visitors, trail users bring business to local stores and restaurants with every trip. In Leadville, Colorado, the Mineral Belt Trail has helped the town reimagine itself, as the trail's opening in 2000 coincided with the closing of the Asarco Black Cloud Mine, the town's major economic driver. As Leadville struggles to recast itself as a recreation and tourism destination, the Mineral Belt Trail, which traces 12 miles along a former railroad corridor that transported gold and silver from area mines, has helped bolster the local economy. In the months following the rail-trail's opening, Leadville's sales tax revenues increased 19 percent as business owners reported serving customers who had come into town specifically to ride the trail.[1]

A 1999 study of southwest Ohio's Little Miami Scenic Trail found that users—who then made upwards of 350,000 visits annually to the 27-mile trail (the number is higher now)—purchased an average of $13.54 on food and other goods per visit, plus an average of $277 annually on clothing and equipment.[2] Northern Virginia's Washington & Old Dominion Trail receives 1.7 million visitors annually, generating $12 million in trail use-related spending, including $7 million spent in the local economy, according to a 2004 study. Each year the W&OD's local users spend another $5.3 million directly related to their trail use, while local purchases account for $15 of nonlocal visitors' estimated $74 per person per visit spending.[3]

Trails have been credited with strengthening small towns in Orange County, Florida, where businesses in neighborhoods adjacent to the West Orange Trail estimated that 11 percent of their business "was a direct result of trail users" who visit the trail 900,000 times yearly.[4] A 2010 study of that trail plus two other Orange County trails, the Little Econ Greenway and the Cady Way Trail, determined that their average user spent $20 per visit on food and beverages, transportation, books and maps, bike maintenance, rentals, and other items. With 1.7 million visitors annually, that adds up to some $33 million spent each year along the length of the trails.[5] Meanwhile, in the tourism-dependent economy of North Carolina's northern Outer Banks, a trail network with an annual usership of 680,000 was found to generate $150 per cyclist per day, leading to an estimated $60 million annually in tourism spending and multiplier effects—almost nine times the initial cost of developing the infrastructure.[6]

FELKERINO/FLICKR

Washington & Old Dominion Trail, near Washington D.C.

Greenways directly benefit neighborhood residents, too. Several studies have shown that trails bolster property values and enable adjacent properties to be sold more quickly. A 2003 study of Indianapolis's popular Monon Trail, which runs 16 miles on the bed of a railway called "The Lifeline of Indiana," found that this pathway is becoming a *new* lifeline for surrounding neighborhoods. Homes adjacent to the Monon Trail—which receives 1.2 million visitors annually—had an 11 percent higher average sale price than comparable homes elsewhere in the city, while the average price for all homes in Indianapolis's greenway corridors was nearly 10 percent higher than the average price for comparable homes in the area.[7]

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Midtown Greenway, Minneapolis

Real estate agents are quick to tout nearby trails, and the benefits are not limited to urban areas. A 2009 study of the Little Miami Scenic Trail outside Cincinnati found that single-family residential values increased an average of $7.05 for every foot the property was closer to the trail.[8] Likewise, a 1998 study of the 83-mile Mountain-Bay Trail in Brown County, Wisconsin, found that lots adjacent to the rail-trail sold faster and for an average of 9 percent more than comparable lots further from the trail; the average lot along the trail was priced 26 percent higher than slightly larger lots not on the trail.[9] Developers of the Shepherd's Vineyard housing development in Apex, North Carolina, also saw the selling power of greenways, with a $5,000 premium on homes adjacent to the regional greenway—and those 40 homes were still the first to sell.[10]

If the trail aficionado happens to be a corporate CEO, the effect can be greatly magnified. After considering several cities, restaurant chain Ruby Tuesday chose a site adjacent to the Greenway Trail in Maryville, Tennessee, to house its corporate headquarters. As Chairman and CEO Samuel Beall III noted, the trail was a key factor in the relocation choice: "I was very impressed with the beauty of the park, which helps provide a sense of community to this area, as well as the many benefits it provides to our more than 300 employees.[11] Meanwhile, in Raleigh, North Carolina, SAS Institute, one of the country's largest software firms, has made the adjacent Reedy Creek Greenway an asset for both employees and the surrounding community. The 5.3-mile trail, which SAS's 4,000 employees easily access via a spur line, connects the corporate campus to downtown attractions, two universities, an art museum, a nature center, and additional trails in an adjoining state park. Beyond fitness benefits, the Reedy Creek Greenway and other trails like it improve community livability by easing burdens on congested roads—a win-win for corporations and their neighbors.[12]

DARCY KIEFEL

Towpath Trail, Cleveland

Encouraging such pedestrian and bicycle routes makes good economic sense for cities, too. Replacing vehicle trips can reduce congestion, save on roadway costs, cut air pollution, conserve energy, and improve traffic safety. Combined with such individual benefits as lower vehicle and parking costs, the estimated individual and society benefits add up to $2.73 for every mile not driven, according to a 2004 Canadian study.[13] That's good news for local businesses, as customers who bike and walk to commercial districts have reported spending more money in the area per month than those who drove to the destination.[14] (Nonmotorists spend less per trip, but they make more trips overall.) Americans would realize enormous financial benefits if even a small fraction of the more than 200 billion miles driven each month were shifted to travel by bicycle or on foot.

Beyond these direct economic impacts, trails present benefits through environmental restoration and traffic reduction—factors felt far beyond trail-side residents and businesses. Although harder to quantify, environmental benefits reach deep into the communities, providing habitat restoration, stormwater management, and other green infrastructure.

The History of Rail-Trails

Long before the term "rail-trails" entered the American lexicon, walkers saw the potential of an unused, pitchfork-shaped corridor of the Chicago, Aurora & Elgin Railroad. The first rails-to-trails conversion in the United States, the Illinois Prairie Path has been extended to include 62 miles of path connecting 27 communities across three counties and will soon celebrate its 50th anniversary. Branching out through Chicago's western suburbs, the trail receives over 800,000 users annually, including bike commuters who utilize its connections to Chicago's commuter rail network. Workers and recreationists alike delight in the path's restored native prairie landscapes, rare remnants that were accidentally preserved by the railroad's presence and now anchor the beloved route.

PINELLAS COUNTY COMMUNICATIONS

Fred Marquis Pinellas Trail, near St. Petersburg, Florida

Environmental restoration efforts can also handily pair with trail corridors as green infrastructure for urban stormwater management and flood damage mitigation. Following a devastating 1984 flash flood, leaders in Tulsa, Oklahoma, worked with the Army Corps of Engineers to create a more natural flood-control system along flood-prone Mingo Creek. The restored floodplain features permanent depressions that store and slow water during storms but spend most of the year as soccer and baseball fields; these lakebeds are connected by a network of recreational paths that double as low-flow flood channels during wet periods. As a result of this new greenway corridor and other measures restricting development in the floodplain, flood insurance rates in Tulsa dropped by 25 percent, and more recent storms have spared the city.[15] By using a creative approach to flood control infrastructure and planning holistically rather than for sporadic flood events, Tulsa has given its residents city amenities that reach far beyond the riverbanks and floodplains.

Of course, no civic improvement comes for free, and trails are no exception, with costs generally ranging from under $300,000 to nearly $2 million per mile (*see Table 2*). Most communities utilize public dollars—often a "funding quilt" of city, county, state, and federal sources—but others also demonstrate great creativity in bringing in other revenues.

Florida's lengthy and extremely successful Fred Marquis Pinellas Trail, which cost about $34 million in 1997, was paid for largely by the county (31 percent) and the state (68 percent) with the remainder coming from private gifts and grants, including a fund in honor of a bicyclist who was killed by a car. The state money derived from the Department of Transportation under the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA), which directed some road monies to nonautomotive projects. (These funds covered the construction of several expensive bike/pedestrian overpasses to avoid dangerous road crossings.)

Naturally, getting so much government support was not easy. When trail advocates learned that the county did not have available funds, they formed Pinellas Trails, Inc., a nonprofit group, and quickly built political support throughout the 24 jurisdictions along the trail's path. PTI learned of a proposed "Penny for Pinellas" ballot measure—a one-cent tax hike for county infrastructure—and threw itself wholeheartedly into that campaign. When the enthusiasm helped lead to passage, the Pinellas Trail instantly became a top priority. As for the private funding, although those gifts represented less than 1 percent of the total, they covered popular and highly visible amenities like benches, rest stops, and water fountains that Pinellas County could not afford.

The Pinellas Trail's popularity, now standing at more than a million users a year, drives benefits for the communities it connects. The town of Dunedin has been particularly successful in harnessing those 500 to 1,500 daily visitors, rescuing its downtown from a 35 percent vacancy rate in 1990, just before the trail opened. As vacant storefronts filled again, even to the point of forming a waiting list, the town has found new civic pride.[16]

Table 2. Selected Per-Mile Trail Development Costs

Trail	Length (in miles)	Cost per mile (in 2012 dollars)
Cedar Lake Trail, Minneapolis	3.5	$826,000
Legacy Trail, Sarasota County, Florida	12	$1,939,000
Minuteman Bikeway, Boston	11	$297,000
Fred Marquis Pinellas Trail, Pinellas County, Florida	35	$867,000
Shelby Farms Greenline, Memphis	6.5	$420,000

In addition to public funding, communities from coast to coast have been creative in finding alternative financial resources to build and operate trails. In northern Virginia, maintenance of the popular, 45-mile-long Washington & Old Dominion Trail is covered by utility right-of-way fees. Unbeknownst to most of the 1.7 million yearly trail visitors, the Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority receives about $1.5 million annually in fees from power and communications transmission networks located under the trail. Moreover, income is generated by the rental of some slivers of trailside land to neighbors whose property directly abuts it. The rental income is steadily building an endowment for major capital costs and more land acquisition.[17]

JACOB LINDSEY/FABRIC URBAN DESIGN

Proposed Charleston Rail Line Linear Park, before development

A different kind of public-private partnership is supporting the Greenway Trail between the Smoky Mountain cities of Maryville and Alcoa, Tennessee. This eight-mile trail (the same one that had attracted the Ruby Tuesday headquarters) connects the cities' downtowns with senior centers, a new library, and a variety of recreation areas. As it has evolved from a recreation path to a transportation route, the trail has rallied the surrounding community along the way. Corporations including Alcoa and Blount Memorial Hospital have donated more than $300,000 worth of funds and easements, citing its fitness benefits for employees, plus safer routes to schools and recreation areas for their families.[18]

Naturally, after construction, all urban trails need a solid management structure. Many are run by a city, county, or state park department, others by a transportation agency, others by a specially created government entity. A few less heavily used corridors are even operated by a nonprofit organization. In Indianapolis, the Monon Trail is a regular part of the Indianapolis park system. In Washington, D.C., the Capital Crescent Trail is operated by the National Park Service until it crosses the Maryland state line, where the Montgomery County Parks Department takes over. In Milwaukee, the Hank Aaron State Trail is run by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. Florida's Boca Grande Trail is run by the Lee County Department of Transportation. And the Seattle Waterfront Pathway is managed by the Seattle Engineering Department.

Whoever the managing agency is, the trail needs to be patrolled, swept (of debris, leaves, and snow) and kept clean, and properly signed, and the trees and horticulture need to be planted, watered, pruned, and maintained. Trails are not extremely expensive to maintain—and often they benefit from the commitment of dedicated volunteers—but they certainly need to be tended so that they remain safe, beautiful, and well used.

Across the country, some 20,000 miles of railroad lines have been converted to recreation trails. Whether stretching less than a mile or extending for hundreds, all these linear park projects share one key feature: dedicated trail visionaries who saw that the hard work of redeveloping corridors would later yield high value.

In Charleston, the 1.6-mile abandoned railroad line paralleling Interstate 26 from Mount Pleasant Street to Line Street presents rich opportunities to connect people and places. With hard work, this corridor—the Charleston Rail Line Linear Park—could again be a connector, carrying not freight but people on a valuable rail-trail toward downtown.

VIRGINIA REVIEW

Washington & Old Dominion Trail, near Washington D.C.

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