

POTENTIAL RAILS-WITH-TRAILS CORRIDORS IN SOUTHERN GEORGIA

Background

This report examines the potential for Rails-with-Trails projects in the 18-county region served by the Southern Georgia Regional Commission. Rails-with-Trails (shared-use paths located within or adjacent to active railroad rights-of-way) have been constructed in increasing numbers during recent years throughout the United States, and now exist in 41 states with a total length exceeding 21,000 miles. Rails-with-Trails have an excellent safety record, and can be cheaper to build than other trail types because they utilize existing rights-of-way, thereby reducing the need for right-of-way acquisition as well as grading and clearing. As is the case with other types of multi-use trails, rails-with-trails have been shown to attract tourists, stimulate local economies, and encourage economic development. Examples of existing Rails-with-Trails in Georgia include the Silver Comet Trail in northern Georgia, portions of which run alongside active railroads; and the trail system around Stone Mountain in the Atlanta area, small portions of which also run alongside railways. In addition, rail transit lines alongside the Atlanta BeltLine trail, currently under development, have been proposed (see Figure 1).

In Southern Georgia, many communities have railroads running through their central business districts. These railroad corridors are logical routes not only for trains, but also for cyclists and pedestrians accessing communities' downtown areas as well as other destinations that are along the railroad. Trails along the region's railroads can encourage residents and tourists to visit community business districts, stimulating the economies in downtown areas that are in need of revitalization. This effect has been demonstrated in other regions; for example, survey data showed that in 2012, users of the 25-mile D & L Trail in Pennsylvania spent an additional \$6 million in the surrounding community.



Figure 1. Atlanta BeltLine rendering with trail alongside rail transit line.

Source: Atlanta BeltLine, www.beltline.org

Furthermore, there are high rates of physical inactivity and related health problems in Southern Georgia (according to CDC data, there is a 30.4% physical inactivity rate among adults, and a 32.4% obesity rate; according to Census data, only 1.3% of commuters in the region walk to work and 0.4% bike to work). New trails in the region will serve as a benefit to public health by offering residents an opportunity to combine exercise with cost-effective transportation.

The following sections provide details on specific corridors with potential for Rails-with-Trails projects in the region. The greatest potential for such projects exists along

corridors where the railroad and highway rights-of-way are adjacent and there is space available between the railroad and the highway, in some cases already graded and cleared.

I. US-84 Corridor

US Route 84 runs east-west through the region and, for most of the way, the right-of-way is adjacent to an active single-track railroad (see Figure 2). Where the rights-of-way are adjacent, the total combined width of the corridor right-of-way is typically at least 200 feet. In these areas, there is potential for a trail between the highway and the railroad. However, this in-between area is currently used for drainage, so some grading, filling, and alternative drainage solutions would be necessary. Trail bridges would need to be built for crossing the Alapaha and Satilla Rivers as well as some smaller streams.



Figure 2. US-84 Corridor

Within this region, the US-84 corridor passes through the communities of Quitman, Valdosta, Naylor, Stockton, DuPont, Homerville, Argyle, Manor, Waycross, Blackshear, Patterson, and Offerman, with a total distance of 98.9 miles from the region's western boundary to the eastern boundary. The average distance between these communities is 9.0 miles, a distance easily covered by a leisure cyclist on the region's flat terrain. In some of the communities through which the corridor passes, existing sidewalks could be widened to function as a continuation of a Rails-with-Trails path (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. US-84 Corridor

II. US-41 Corridor

Part of the US-41 corridor, running north-south between the cities of Ashburn and Lenox (approximately 33 miles), has good potential for a Rails-with-Trails project. Through most of this area (except within the City of Tifton), the railroad and US-41 run parallel with a grassy strip in between; this strip is consistently about 40 feet wide. This in-between area does not appear to be used for drainage in most locations and would require minimal grading and clearing for most of the distance from Ashburn to Lenox. US-41 is the Georgia Grown Trail and is also designated as State Bicycle Route 15 from Tifton north to the boundary of the SGRC region. This corridor has particularly good potential for a Rails-with-Trails project due to the existing designated bicycle route and the potential for capitalizing on bicycle agri-tourism along the Georgia Grown Trail. Throughout this corridor, the total width of the adjacent rights-of-way together is typically at least 150 feet, and there is consistently adequate space for a 12-foot-wide trail between the highway and the railroad. No major rivers or streams would need to be crossed.

South of Lenox, the railroad diverges from US-41 and in many places does not run alongside any road. Although the railroad right-of-way is still adequately wide for adding a trail in most of these areas, there is no cleared, graded space present.

III. US-82 Corridor

There is an inactive railroad running parallel to US-82 from Pearson east to Axson. East of Axson to Waycross, the railroad is still in use, but there could be sufficient right-of-way to continue a trail to Waycross.

From Waycross to the eastern edge of the SGRC region (i.e. the Brantley/Glynn County line), US-82 and the railroad right-of-way run adjacent to each other with only minor divergences. This route passes through the small communities of Hoboken and Nahunta. Along this stretch, US-82 is also State Bicycle Route 10. However, the space between the highway and the railroad is heavily wooded and also serves as a drainage area for considerable portions of this corridor. In eastern Brantley County, a crossing over the Satilla River would have to be provided.

IV. Valdosta Railroad and Georgia Florida Railway

A Rails-with-Trails project along the Valdosta Railroad, which leads from downtown Valdosta to the unincorporated community of Clyattville, could potentially connect to the Four Freedoms Trail in Madison County, Florida. This trail, if completed, would provide a direct trail connection from Valdosta to Madison, Florida.

The Valdosta Railroad runs approximately 10.5 miles from Valdosta to Clyattville. The right-of-way is consistently 100 feet wide or more. For most of this route, the right-of-way is undeveloped except for the railroad tracks, and grading and clearing would be necessary for trail development. However, there are some portions (about 1.7 miles total) where the railroad runs parallel to a road, potentially allowing for less costly trail development due to the rights-of-way being adjacent and the corridor already being cleared and graded.

South of Clyattville, the Valdosta Railroad ends, and the right-of-way (or easements) would have to be acquired for the approximately 3-mile remaining distance to the Florida state line and Four Freedoms Trail terminus. A trail bridge over the Suwannee River would have to be constructed in order to complete the connection.

The Georgia Florida Railway runs from downtown Valdosta to Nashville, GA, passing by Moody Air Force Base (one of the largest employers and economic engines of the region, with approximately 6,000 employees). The Valdosta-Lowndes Parks and Recreation Master Plan proposes a trail that would run north-south through the entire county, making use of the Valdosta Railroad and Georgia Florida Railway rights-of-way. The VLPRA Master Plan proposes that this trail could connect to the Four Freedoms Trail to the south, and also to Atkinson County, further to the north.

V. Folkston-Homeland Connection

The City of Folkston is notable for containing the “Folkston Funnel,” a double track that serves as the main artery for railroad traffic into and out of Florida. About 50 trains pass through each day, and a viewing platform in downtown Folkston has been provided for tourists. A Rail-with-Trails project along this corridor could connect Folkston to the nearby City of Homeland; the Cities of Folkston and Homeland have adjoining boundaries and their downtowns are approximately 2 miles apart, with a city park and golf course about halfway in between. Such a trail might be a popular attraction for rail-related tourism as well as for travel between these two small communities. However, the railroad is not adjacent to any roads in this area, and additional clearing and grading would be necessary. Also, there would be safety concerns due to the high volume of train traffic.

VI. Other Potential Corridors

Adjacent highway and railroad rights-of-way, similar to the US-41, US-82, and US-84 corridors described above, also exist for most of the way between Nashville and Ray City (approximately 10 miles); and for approximately 17 miles along US-1/US-23 between Waycross and Folkston.

Many larger communities in Southern Georgia are traversed by several railroads and have the potential for multiple Rails-with-Trails projects within the city, given the necessary funds and cooperation between the local government and the railroad company. Such communities include Douglas, Fitzgerald, Quitman, Tifton, Valdosta, and Waycross. Douglas, Valdosta, and Waycross already have existing short trails (rail trails and greenways), and a new Rails-with-Trails project could connect to existing trails, helping to build a comprehensive trail network. A few examples of such corridors are:

- Railroad St., Douglas
- Malcolm Way, Fitzgerald
- West Crawford St., Quitman
- Forrest Ave., Tifton
- Savannah Ave., Valdosta (there is an existing grassy strip with a “desire line” where people walk between the railroad and the street; the need for grading and drainage would be minimal)
- Memorial Drive, Waycross
- ABC Ave., Waycross

In several small communities that are not along the major corridors mentioned in Sections I through IV, the railroad runs directly through the downtown area. A typical example is the Town of Rebecca (see Figure 4), where the railroad runs past the historic central business district. In several such communities,



Figure 4. Downtown Rebecca

there is potential for a short (2 miles or less) Rails-with-Trails project that would traverse the community and provide a link to the downtown area. The downtown areas of many of these communities are in need of revitalization, and a small-scale Rails-with-Trails project could help to boost the local economy by encouraging more tourists to visit.

The following are examples of such communities in this region:

- City of Ambrose
- Axson (unincorporated)
- City of Lake Park
- City of Morven
- City of Nicholls
- City of Pearson
- City of Ray City
- City of Rebecca
- St. George (unincorporated)

An existing example of a popular rail-with-trail of similar length (although in a larger community) is the 1.3-mile Frisco Trail in Fayetteville, Arkansas. Among other benefits, the construction of the Frisco Trail has been found to reduce incidences of pedestrians trespassing on the adjacent railroad tracks.

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RAILROADS AND MAJOR HIGHWAYS IN THE SGRC REGION

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