

Report
to the
Vermont General Assembly

Pursuant to Act 139 (H.955) of 2020

On the Lamoille Valley Rail Trail

Submitted by

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In consultation with

Susanne Young, Secretary
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And

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Legislative Mandate

The Vermont General Assembly, as part of Act 139 of 2020 (An act relating to capital construction and State bonding budget adjustment) made the following requests:*(d) On or before January 15, 2021, the Commissioner of Forests, Parks and Recreation, in consultation with the Secretary of Administration, shall develop and submit a plan to the House Committee on Corrections and Institutions and the Senate Committee on Institutions on whether the Lamoille Valley Rail Trail may be developed into a linear State park.*

(e) The Secretary of Transportation and the Commissioner of Forests, Parks and Recreation shall develop a memorandum of understanding (MOU) regarding the ongoing maintenance of the Lamoille Valley Rail Trail. On or before January 15, 2021, and prior to execution, the Secretary and Commissioner shall report back to the House Committee on Corrections and Institutions and the Senate Committee on Institutions with a draft of the MOU and an implementation plan for the MOU.

Introduction

The Lamoille Valley Rail Trail (LVRT) is a four-season, multi-use recreation and transportation corridor across Northern Vermont. Once complete, the full route of the trail will extend across five counties and span a total of 93 miles from St. Johnsbury to Swanton.

Since 2002, the Vermont Agency of Transportation (AOT) has worked with the Vermont Association of Snow Travelers (VAST) under a lease agreement to contract for construction and maintenance of the LVRT. Due to the scope of the project, AOT and VAST have relied on assistance from towns along the trail, private donations, and VAST's own investment to support this work. To date, VAST has completed more than 33 miles of the trail.

To accelerate the trail's completion and leverage federal funds, Governor Scott proposed and the legislature approved capital funding to complete the construction of the LVRT by the summer of 2022. Act 139 of 2020 includes \$2.83 million allocated to AOT for these purposes and which will be matched by \$11.3 million in federal funds.

In 2020, AOT contracted with a design consultant to survey the entire length of uncompleted trail and assessing the current condition of the numerous bridges to determine proper treatments. This design work has been completed, and several bridge construction projects have been completed. In 2021, AOT will transition its focus to completing the remaining 60 miles of trail, which run through the towns of Hardwick, Walden, Wolcott, Morristown, Cambridge, Fletcher, Bakersfield, Fairfield, Sheldon, Highgate, and Swanton.

This report provides background, information, and context for the Trail's use and management and preliminary considerations for whether the LVRT could be developed into a linear state park after completion.

The LVRT and Vermont's Outdoor Recreation Economy

The LVRT provides for local and tourism-based outdoor recreation, health, and economic development. The trail is used by snowmobilers, walkers, bikers, equestrians, and others. This continuing and expanding enjoyment of the LVRT will translate into additional recreational opportunities, health benefits, a means of enjoying the natural environment, and attendant economic development opportunities. The LVRT will connect to other recreation trail networks including the 26-mile Missisquoi Rail Trail in Vermont and the 2,100-mile cycling network La Route Verte in Quebec. Marketing of the trail can be expected to bring new visitors to the State and enhance the State's brand – including international visitors.

Towns where the trail has been completed are reaping the benefits and advancing complimentary investments: Cambridge improved its Cambridge Junction trailhead with a playground that includes a miniature train; Hyde Park improved and extended its village sidewalks to make walking to the Depot Street trailhead easier; Johnson has improved the recreation fields near the LVRT; and Morristown has touted the economic aspects of the trail with two popular restaurants located right alongside it parlaying the foot traffic into paying customers. Trail town residents also recognize the valuable contributions to their communities and are volunteering to improve the trail, like a small group trying to

raise money to extend it from Cambridge Junction to the Fletcher town line. Wolcott erected a new structure simply in anticipation of the trail being completed through there.

The LVRT also serves as the connecting spine to several other significant recreational trails in Vermont and Canada, including the VAST snowmobile trail network, the Long Trail, the Missisquoi Valley Rail Trail, and the Cambridge Greenway. When completed, the LVRT will be the longest rail trail in New England and will become a year-round destination for all types of compatible trail uses.

Rail Trail Management Models

Currently, FPR manages several rail trails throughout the state; however, these trails are much shorter in length than the LVRT and either adjacent to or partially contained within a State Park with the exception of the D and H Rail Trail (Castleton, Poultney and Rupert) and generally present simpler maintenance needs. On the D and H, FPR and AOT work cooperatively, with AOT responsible for large-scale repairs and replacements of bridges, culverts and other major infrastructure and FPR responsible for annual maintenance such as mowing.

Models from other States:

Rail Trails around the country rely on a variety of historic and current governance models: some were state-owned tow paths along canals while others are rail-banked railroad lines. The spectrum of management models is being used in other states includes:

- Many similar rail trails initially made improvements through funding from the National Transportation Alternatives program (usually run out of the state Dept. Of Transportation) and federal and state Recreational Trails Programs.
- State Park systems, county park systems, transportation agencies, water districts, and other state or municipal entities have sole or shared responsibility for ongoing management and maintenance.
- Maintenance is performed by a range of entities such as individual municipalities, state parks staff, volunteers, private contractors and private nonprofit groups (“Friends of” groups). These activities are funded through a variety of mechanisms such as onsite parking fees, opt-out vehicle registration fees which funds in-state resident access, general fund dollars, nonprofit fundraising, municipal budgets and special/capital project funds.

Current LVRT Management:

As noted above, since 2002, AOT has worked with VAST under a lease agreement to contract for construction and maintenance of the LVRT. Given VAST’s mission and purpose is to maintain the Statewide Snowmobile Trail System (SSTS), VAST has a clear, on-going interest in the operations of the LVRT. As a four-season trail, however, it is anticipated that the LVRT may have maintenance needs and user management concerns that extend beyond VAST’s traditional scope of work and capacity.

Considerations for the LVRT as a Linear State Park

Transitioning the LVRT into a linear state park upon its completion would be a significant undertaking that would require important additional work including consulting with the current and potential stakeholders of LVRT; and, in-depth research into operational considerations including ensuring sufficient resources for on-going maintenance, staffing, and facilities.

Given FPR's role, experience, and expertise, it is reasonable to contemplate operating the LVRT as a state park. FPR coordinates the planning and implementation of all stewardship activities on more than 360,000 acres of state-owned land which host over 1,500 miles of multi-use trails. In addition, FPR operates 55 developed State Parks which provide world class camping and day use areas that annually greet a million (counted) visitors. Vermont State Parks provide amenities, care and maintenance of public facilities, information sharing, consistency of signage and other infrastructure as well as staff who are adept at user interactions and conflict resolution.

At the same time, it is important to note that access to and use of most Vermont State Parks is typically fee controlled and a significant portion of Vermont State Parks' operating budget (\$13MM) is supported by sale of park services, particularly entry fees (\$8MM). As a unique recreation and transportation asset very different from intentionally developed state park campgrounds, for example, the LVRT is not a good match for fee-controlled use and operations, requiring a different model for financial support.

Next Steps

It is expected that in the next two to three years, construction of the LVRT will be completed through a series of contracts managed by AOT. VAST will retain its lease with AOT for maintenance and operations. Currently, VAST accomplishes annual maintenance tasks such as mowing and minor surface repairs through a combination of VAST operations funds, volunteers, and town appropriations. Based on work done by the Rails to Trails Conservancy, once constructed the average cost per mile to maintain a rail-trail is approximately \$3,600 annually, meaning the funding needed to maintain the full length of the LVRT will be approximately \$350,000 per year. Costs of management include staff, annual planning, mowing and repair work, stakeholder coordination and volunteer management.

VAST and its partners completed a Management Plan in 2016 (<https://irp-cdn.multiscreensite.com/80d50d45/files/uploaded/LVRT-ManagementPlan-Final%20Approved%204-12-2016.pdf>) which outlines a governance structure in relation to the current VAST lease for maintaining and operating the LVRT. This plan is a good starting point for conversations about the on-going management of the LVRT, and should form the basis for engaging with the myriad of stakeholders with an interest in the long-term stewardship of the LVRT in an intentional, facilitated manner to understand community desires and needs as a foundational element of the planning process.

The complexity and challenges of operating and managing a 93-mile federally banked rail trail as a "linear state park" cannot be overstated and many unknowns remain. Given that there is a framework in-place to ensure the maintenance and stewardship needs of the LVRT are met during the construction phase, it is prudent to use this time to more fully develop options and weigh the strengths and challenges of both the current and possible alternative management models for the long-term operations of the LVRT.