

What Would It Take?

Making Rail-with-Trail a Reality

Each of the alternative uses for the corridor comes with its own benefits and costs. A rail-with-trail solution potentially brings the most potential value to our community, accommodating both the vision for future transit and freight as well as an exceptional recreational amenity. But **creating an opportunity for rail-with-trail along the Nickel Plate corridor will require immediate action, coordination, and commitment:**

ALL ABOARD

If the community has a strong interest in using the corridor for rail or BRT in the future, we must preserve the corridor today. This means placing any projects that would obstruct the corridor, like proposed trails, on hold or designing them to leave space for future rail. Trail projects are generally easier to fund and construct than rail projects and can begin implementation in the near term.

In the near term, this means jumpstarting a coordinated initiative across multiple jurisdictions and organizations, including the City of Noblesville, City of Fishers, City of Indianapolis, Hamilton County, Marion County, and CSX. Our voters, elected officials, staff, owners, and transportation agencies like the Indianapolis MPO, IndyGo, and the Central Indiana Regional Transit Authority (CIRTA) must agree on a clear vision for the future before moving forward. If you support the vision for rail-with-trail in the Nickel Corridor, please contact your elected officials and urge them to make this a priority.



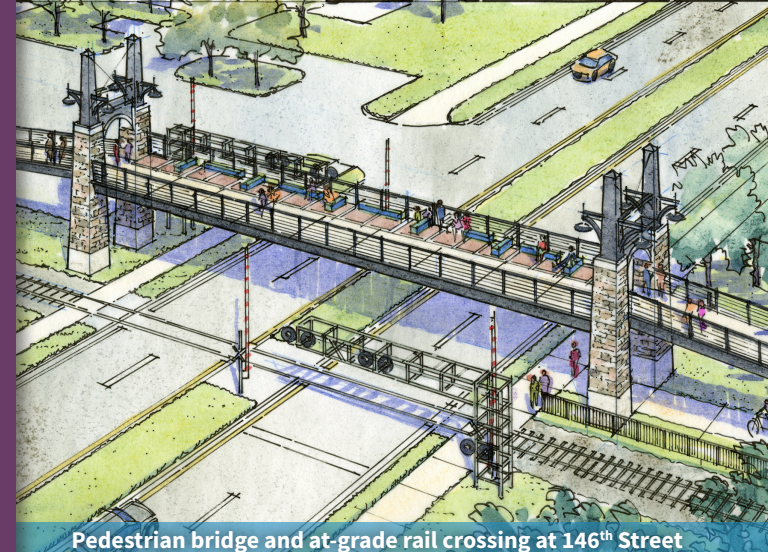
Sketch of potential rail-with-trail at 10th Street, the intersection of the Nickel Plate corridor, Monon Trail, and Indianapolis Cultural Trail.

FURTHER DOWN THE LINE

- Hamilton County's current lack of local transit funding and operations is a significant barrier to potential future rapid transit along the Nickel Plate corridor. To make rapid transit along the Nickel Plate a reality, Hamilton County would need to hold and pass a referendum establishing local transit funding and operations. In some communities, private transit providers have been used where a public entity does not exist or cannot operate certain facilities.
- If transit is to be publicly provided, the community would likely need the support of state and/or federal funding to cover the cost of capital improvements and operations. Because the Green Line is no longer part of the *Marion County Transit Plan*, additional revenue, such as state or federal funds, would be required to pay for the County's portion.
- If light rail were determined to be the preferred mode of rapid transit, state legislation prohibiting investment in light rail would need to be repealed.
- For transit to be successful along this corridor, coordinated land use planning will be required, particularly around proposed station locations.
- If the community wants freight along the Nickel Plate, it would need to identify a private partner to operate the line.

THE LONG HAUL

If the region were to move forward with rail-with-trail along the Nickel Plate, more detailed planning and design work would be required. In addition to coordination with trail projects, several elements may contribute to the complexity of the design, including bridges across major roadways, establishing station locations, and potential renovations to Union Station if it were selected as the terminal station. Though design strategies like routing the trail outside the rail ROW for narrow segments can help minimize the need for property acquisition, some degree of property acquisition would likely be required. Once design and property acquisition are complete, the project would move forward to construction, operations, and maintenance. These processes can take many years to finalize, from the start of the project until the first users hit the trail or rail.



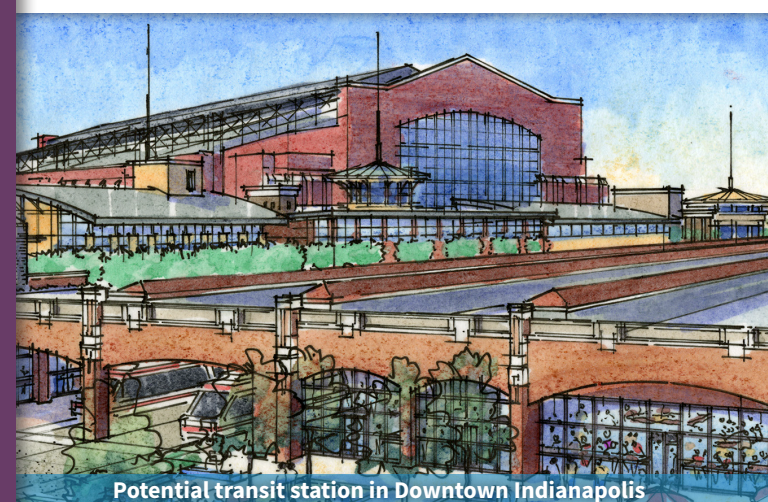
Pedestrian bridge and at-grade rail crossing at 146th Street



Regional transit parallel to the Monon Trail at 23rd Street

NICKEL PLATE CORRIDOR

A Vision for Our Future

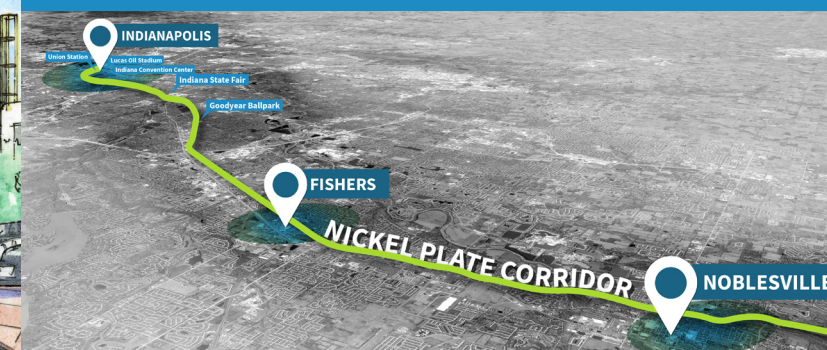


Potential transit station in Downtown Indianapolis

What's Next for the Nickel Plate?

HISTORY

For decades, the Nickel Plate corridor has carried trains into town, bringing goods and jobs into our economy. Spanning 37 miles from Noblesville and Fishers to Union Station in Downtown Indianapolis, it was a critical transportation link in our region until active freight operations ceased in the early 2000s and has supported local tourism with excursion trips in recent years. **The line is currently inactive** and has been railbanked through the U.S. Surface Transportation Board. This designation allows interim trail use along the corridor while preserving the right to re-establish rail service at some point in the future.



FUTURE

The future of the Nickel Plate corridor is up for debate—and the time to plan for its future is now. By 2050, Hamilton County is projected to reach 550,000 residents², a 78 percent increase over its current population³, bringing new mobility challenges along with them. As our region continues to grow, there is increasing pressure to find the best use of the corridor for the community, both now and into the future.

Many ideas for the Nickel Plate have been considered throughout the years, but the **following are the major alternatives still in play:**

1



DO NOTHING

By leaving the corridor as it is, we can preserve the opportunity for a full range of future uses.

2



TRAIL ONLY

Like the Monon Trail and other rail-to-trail projects across the country, it could be converted to a trail for all or portions of the corridor.

3



RAIL ONLY

The Nickel Plate could go back to being an active railroad, serving passengers and/or freight.

4



RAIL-WITH-TRAIL

With smart design, we could configure the corridor to accommodate both modern rail and a new multi-use trail.

To make a thoughtful decision about how to maximize this unique, regional resource for future generations, the community must act now to establish a clear, long-term vision for the future of the entire Nickel Plate corridor.

Visit
www.indyrwt.com
for more information

Prepared By:
Save the Nickel Plate, Inc.

© 2019 Hoosier Rails to Trails Council, Inc.

What Can We Do?

Each option for the Nickel Plate's future has its own set of **local influences, challenges, and opportunities:**

1 DO NOTHING

Doing nothing is always an option. However, without a single vision in place to guide the Nickel Plate's future, the most likely outcome is that over time the corridor will be carved up into different uses. When this happens, **the opportunity for a continuous 37-mile corridor goes away**, ultimately leading to a reduced value for the greater community.

2 TRAIL ONLY

Trail proposals are currently being considered along some portions of the corridor. If these projects move forward, they make it very difficult for other options to be considered.

For example, the City of Fishers released a trail master plan for a 4.5-mile segment of the corridor in February 2019. It stretches from 96th Street to 146th Street and the City plans to break ground in Fall 2019. The design for the trail has not yet been completed; initial renderings show the trail and adjacent amenities like seating areas would occupy the entire right-of-way (ROW), leaving no space for future rail. If the proposed trail is constructed with this design, it is unlikely that rail would ever come back to the Nickel Plate corridor from Fishers north.

3 RAIL ONLY

The Nickel Plate corridor has **frequently been envisioned as a rapid transit route** connecting Noblesville and Fishers to Downtown Indianapolis. Often called the Green Line, it was a proposed long-term rapid transit line in IndyConnect's *2016 Central Indiana Transit Plan*⁵, with both light rail and bus rapid transit (BRT) cited as potential modes. An Alternatives Analysis and Draft Environmental Impact Statement was initiated for this corridor but was not completed; preliminary results showed financial constraints limit feasibility⁶. With recent challenges like the proposed Fishers trail; Marion County's decision to allocate transit funding to other projects and remove the Green Line from its county-level plans⁶; and Hamilton County's decision not to hold a transit referendum, the **Green Line has been put on hold indefinitely** and was not included in the Indianapolis Metropolitan Planning Organization's (MPO) most recent plan, its *2045 Long Range Transportation Plan*. Several challenges must be overcome to put transit back on the table. Check out the "What Would it Take?" section to learn more.

Transit is not the only possible use of the rail. The Nickel Plate could be used for local excursion trips or reverted back to a freight line. Ohio-based U.S. Rail Holdings has expressed interest in operating active freight operations along the line and is seeking a preliminary injunction to prevent the City of Fishers from removing the unused rail infrastructure. This wouldn't necessarily come at the expense of transit: the company has stated an interest in coordinating with passenger rail, with First Transit serving as the operators,⁹ and potentially developing a trail parallel to the tracks.

Transit feasibility is also **affected by state legislation**. Currently, the State of Indiana prohibits Hamilton and Marion County from using funds for light rail improvements, making BRT the only allowable mode.⁷ Seeing the value of transit for livability and economic development, the Indiana General Assembly considered legislation to repeal this ban during its 2018 and 2019 legislative sessions⁸ and may repeal it in the future.

4 RAIL-WITH-TRAIL

Rail-with-trail design allows both a rail and a trail along the same corridor. It is safe and common model with growing popularity nationwide. As of 2018, there are **more than 160 rails-with-trails in the United States**. In this case, the specific mode of "rail" has yet to be determined. It could potentially be rapid transit (light rail or BRT), local excursion trains, or freight.

This option is a **win-win** solution when it comes to both recreation and mobility. Neighbors want more opportunities to get outside, exercise, and socialize. At the same time, our region is growing and we need to plan ahead for efficient, sustainable transportation. Planning for rail-with-trail by **ensuring trail designs preserve right-of-way for future rail** could allow us to meet our current desire for a trail amenity while preserving our future mobility options at a regional scale. As with the Rail Only option, if the community desires transit along this corridor, several significant challenges would need to be overcome.



THE BIGGER PICTURE: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Some of the **challenges and opportunities** extend beyond the corridor itself, including the surrounding area and technological impacts.

EXISTING TRAIL CONNECTIONS

If used as a trail—either with or without rail—the Nickel Plate could serve as a critical link between existing trails in the region. For example, the Monon Trail and Indianapolis Cultural Trail already exist parallel to or near the Nickel Plate corridor downtown. In that area, trail users could connect to existing trails and the entire ROW could be used for rail.

TRANSIT-SUPPORTIVE NEIGHBORHOODS

Context matters when it comes to the success and cost effectiveness of transit. **The most practical routes run through areas with enough homes, businesses, and destinations within walking distance to generate good ridership.** Densities along much of the Nickel Plate corridor are too low today to make rapid transit cost effective; however, the area population is expected to grow significantly in the future. To make it an attractive route, coordinated land use planning will be needed to ensure new homes and businesses are located near future station areas to increase potential ridership, decrease dependence on cars, and ease future traffic congestion.

TRANSIT INFRASTRUCTURE COMPATIBILITY

Different modes of passenger rail use different vehicles and have their own associated infrastructure requirements. Some are compatible with freight and others are not. In some cities, commuter rail (a vehicle that uses the same type of rail as freight) is operated along freight corridors using the same tracks. In this case, regional transportation agencies have determined light rail and BRT would be the most appropriate modes of public transit along this corridor⁵; those modes are not compatible with freight rail infrastructure. Private passenger rail may be compatible with freight rail infrastructure and is used by some other cities to reduce the public costs of transit.

CASE STUDY

Charlotte Rail Trail

Location:
Charlotte, North Carolina

Key Features
Charlotte's Rail Trail spans 3.5 miles through the heart of the city right next to the light rail tracks. The trail is a mix of asphalt trail is less developed areas and concrete trails with enhanced features in more developed neighborhoods.

Distance from rail centerline to edge of trail
Min. 8 Feet; Avg. 15 Feet

Trail Width
12 Feet

Barrier Type
Fence



Rail-with-Trail

Across the Country

Rail-with-trail designs are popping up nationwide as cities seek to maximize right-of-way to achieve both recreation and regional mobility goals. They often incorporate public art and gathering spaces and in many cases have attracted significant nearby redevelopment.

CASE STUDY

The BeltLine

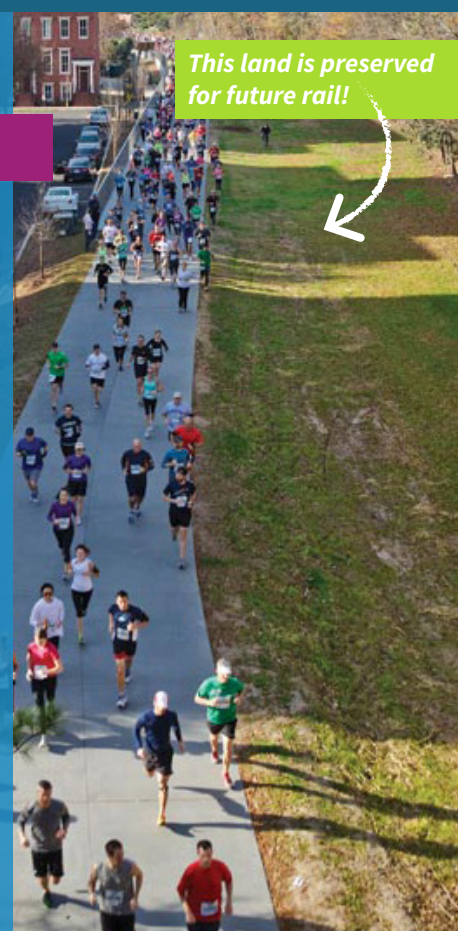
Location:
Atlanta, Georgia

Key Features
22 miles of abandoned rail corridor circling downtown Atlanta are being converted to a trail while preserving ROW for a future light-rail line to parallel the trail once the necessary density has been established.

Distance from Rail Centerline to Edge of Trail
TBD (Rail not yet designed)

Trail Width
14 Feet

Barrier Type
TBD



Sources

¹ National Trails System Act, 16 U.S.C. 1247(d).
² IndyConnect. "Hamilton County Transit Forum Handout." June 2017.
³ U.S. Census Bureau. 2017 ACS 5-Year Population Estimate.

⁴ City of Fishers. *Nickel Plate Trail Master Plan 2040*. May 2019.

⁵ IndyConnect. *2016 Central Indiana Transit Plan*.

⁶ IndyGo. *IndyGo Capital Plan 2018-2022*. December 2017.

⁷ Indiana Code 8-25-2-9 Prohibition on Light Rail

⁸ Indiana House Bill 1365 (2019)

⁹ Indianapolis Business Journal. *Railroad Operator Revives Effort to Restore Trains on Nickel Plate Line*. April 2, 2019.

¹⁰ Rails-to-Trails Conservancy. *Trail Building Basics*.