Rail to Trail Conversions:
Rail to Trail Conversions - Lessons on Land Assembly and Community Support from the Rossburn Subdivision Trail Project

Gaelen Pierce  BA, MCP Candidate
Katy Walsh  MCP, MCIP Planning Policy and Development |Province of Manitoba
Ilse Ketelson  Secretary/Treasurer |Rossburn Subdivision Trail Association
Tom Lawless  Honorary Board Member |Rossburn Subdivision Trail Association

Abstract

key words: transportation land use community development

This case study explores the formulation of the Rossburn Subdivision segment of the Trans Canada Trail, completed in 2010, running from Russell to Neepawa along an abandoned rail line. Today this section of trail is governed by a volunteer board composed of local community representatives, charged with overseeing the maintenance and administration for the 172 km trail. This case in point will focus on the challenges that organizers faced in gathering land and community support for the project. Rail-to-trail initiatives blend the challenges of land assembly with rail land titles, active transportation and green infrastructure at the regional scale, and rural greening initiatives. This document is intended to provide information on the processes that led to the “first significant length” of Trans Canada Trail in Manitoba (Trails Manitoba). Findings suggest that building a network of supportive community organizations, partnership with provincial and national organizations, and closely protecting the integrity of the route can contribute to successful outcomes.
Background

What is a rail-to-trail?
A rail-to-trail conversion project is a pathway for multimodal transportation built on top of an unused rail line. Often, but not always, the conversion involves removing parts of the existing railway infrastructure, including tracks, ties, and the surface gravel layer known as ballast. The resulting pathway provides a level, wide, and lengthy corridor separated from automobile traffic.

Why do rail-to-trail?
Identifying a full range of impacts that rail-to-trail projects can create is a significant research challenge as individual projects vary widely due to surrounding land uses, trail route, ancillary trail network, integration of existing parks, and the quality of the trail infrastructure. This type of trail blurs the line between transportation infrastructure, recreational trail, and green space. Benefits commonly associated with rail-to-trail projects touch on each of these types of infrastructure, and can include increased transportation options, benefits for local businesses, improved accessibility, boosted real estate values, added tourism potential, and increased recreational opportunities.

Why are rails abandoned?
When railways were first being constructed through Manitoba, development was spurred along their path. Before the network of automobile roads were introduced, these townships formed at “6-10 mile spacing,” a distance which could be travelled by foot, horseback, or wagon (Holweger, 1998). As rural towns became less dependent on rail freight for coal and other freight goods, due to increased truck transport, these lines became too costly for companies to maintain.

How are rails abandoned and purchased?
The rail abandonment process is regulated by the federal government. All railway companies prepare and update a three year plan for each of their lines, which contains information on its intention to use or discontinue operations on the line. This plan is publicly available. When a change is made to the plan, for instance to discontinue the use of the line, the rail company must notify the Minister of Transport, the Canadian Transportation Agency, the provincial minister of transportation, the chair of every transit authority, and senior administrative officer of each municipality which the rail impacts (Canada Transportation Act, 1996). When sale is permitted of a line, it can only be sold when it will be operated for at least three years. To discontinue, the company must first state its intention to do so in its plan at least 12 months before it does so. However, if
a government or community-based group endorsed by a government expresses an interest in obtaining the lands, the company can proceed to the process of transfer ahead of that schedule. The company must advertise the line to any company interested in continuing to operate the line, and state its interest to discontinue. In the case where a municipality or community group is interested in the railway, and no other offers are made, the lands must be offered for not more than its assessed salvaged value. Where no offers are made on the line, discontinuation of the line occurs through application to the Canadian Transportation Agency, eliminating its obligations to operations in the Canada Transportation Act (Canadian Transportation Agency, 2013).

Facts and Outcomes

When CN began to dismantle the rail line between Russell and Neepawa, they may not have expected the outcry from local groups who had a larger vision in mind for the strip of land. It could be argued that CN did not properly consult with local municipalities on what might become of the lands, they simply discontinued them and began to dismantle the infrastructure. As salvagers were working to remove resources along the railway, the valuable steel rails, wooden ties, and importantly, the wooden trestles that traversed the short spans of uneven terrain, community members in Rossburn were mobilizing to protect the line. This is the story of that

Who was involved in the project?

Early on in the project, it was a group of snowmobilers who were interested in maintaining the integrity of the rail lands between Neepawa and Russell. Supporters saw the salvages beginning to remove the timber trestles along the line and were concerned that doing so would negatively impact the snowmobile culture in the area. They began raising the issue to municipalities that creating a route for snowmobilers to use would create tourism revenue in the small towns along the line. A plan emerged early on to preserve the trail.

As the idea for the project built up momentum, champions began to make connections with municipalities, adjacent land owners, and larger organizations. Early on, organizers spent their time running back and forth between RMs and towns to build up support and return to hesitant groups. Later, they realized that it was more efficient to get one or two councilors on board in a town, allowing them to push for the project from within. It was out of this process of gaining support from councilors that the Rossburn Subdivision Trail Committee (RSTC) was organized to maintain and fund raise for the trail.

Ownership of the lands lies with Trails Manitoba, then the Manitoba Recreational Trails Association. The RSTC contacted Trails Manitoba for support in legal costs, funding, and title transfers pertaining to the trail. Trails Manitoba provides it’s funding through support from the Province of Manitoba, allowing them in turn to fund trail organizations, provide resources to associations, promote the Trans Canada Trail, and promote trail use in Manitoba. For the Rossburn Subdivision Trail, Trails Manitoba provides $2000 annually for maintenance. This is
considered a significant amount of money for a Manitoba regional trail association, but other fundraising efforts and volunteer support are still required.

How did different stakeholders respond to the project?

There was considerable dissent about how the abandoned lands should be used, with different groups attempting to sway the interests of municipal governments. Initially, many land owners in the area were concerned about increases in outsiders using the trail. Organizers faced challenges in balancing expectations, they wanted to push the idea that this trail could be valuable to local users and to potentially attract tourism dollars, but also didn’t want to suggest to residents that they would be overwhelmed with future trail usage.

Farmers owning adjacent lands had specific concerns about how the rail lands were going to be used. Some preferred that the RMs take possession of the land and return it to agricultural uses, but largely the issue was around improving access to their lands. The rail line, because of the angle by which is bisected the farmland, disrupted farm operations and created access problems. Farmers wanted some of these issues addressed.

Some towns along the trail have taken steps to integrate their parks and recreation infrastructure. The growing interest in providing fitness opportunities and natural spaces has motivated some of these communities.

What challenges emerged?

Contamination was identified in a number of areas along the Rossburn Subdivision Trail. Often these areas were contaminations in adjacent lands to the rail line, as these areas were used to load and unload fuel and goods. Adjacent properties received support from CN to clean up these sites. On the trail lands, the RSTC undertook a tree planting effort to alleviate contamination impacts along the corridors between Sandy Lake and Russell. Common sources of contamination in rail-to-trail conversions include railroad ties, fossil fuels, metals, spilled industrial fluids, and herbicides (FHA, 2004).

Trail maintenance is a significant ongoing challenge. Above all, it is the integrity of the line as a whole which makes the trail useful, so poorly maintained sections and damage to the trail can significantly impact usage. Because the pathway runs East and West in a region where water runs North and South, the trail often operates as a dike, bringing on the erosion and water management problems associated with that infrastructure. In 2011, heavy snowmelt eroded a section of the trail, resulting in significant costs to the trail. In this case, funding for repairs was provided by the Emergency Measures Organization of Manitoba. The repairs to the trail will continue to be a challenge for the RSTC, who rely heavily on volunteers and support from Trails Manitoba.

Working with rail companies can be a discouraging experience. In the case of the Rossburn Subdivision Trail, CN did not seem interested in collaborating on the project. On the other hand, the salvageable infrastructure along the lines do have value to rail companies, but in the scheme of their operations, they don’t
seem to stand to gain a great deal by Rail routes are often straight, flat, and somewhat boring. Rail-to-trail projects can benefit from municipal park integration, washrooms, tree planting, art, and sculptures, but these options require funding above and beyond maintenance costs. The RSTC has looked at some of these options to make the trail more aesthetically pleasing, but funding must be identified before improvements can be made.

**Lessons Learned**

Through speaking with a number of individuals involved in the RSTC, a number of lessons were gathered from their experience:

1. **Above all, the integrity of the trail must be preserved.** It should have no interruptions and should be kept clear and looking like a cohesive project. Keeping enough people involved, volunteers and staff, to maintain that cohesion is essential to keep the project living.

2. **Finding opportunities for new trail connections enhances that network integrity.** Aggregating recreational spaces like parks, local pedestrian infrastructure, and regional attractions contribute to the durability of the project.

3. **By conducting an annual report, you are gathering valuable information on costs and usage which can be readily provided when grants become available.** Often these grants have a limited time to apply, so preparation is very important.

4. **Without support from the municipalities affected, the project risks losing the unity that a stable political process can provide.** Similarly, support can be found through organizations and groups that have mutual interests. Building that network of support shared goals.

5. **Continue to draw on the wisdom of those with the foresight to initiate a long term project, but recognize the need for the support and engagement of the community’s upcoming generations.**

6. **Connections made to larger organizations can offer diverse benefits.** These connections should be celebrated because they can provide stability through funding, influence discourse around the project in its early stages, build momentum when local support waxes and wanes, and can provoke greater public interest in local projects.

... without the assistance of Trails Manitoba and the thirteen Municipal and Town Councils along our portion of the Trail the RSTA could not exist.

- Trails Manitoba Annual Report

**Conclusions**

The shifts in transportation technologies throughout Manitoba’s history has resulted in a complex interplay of infrastructure and land uses in our cities and our small towns. For many rural communities, the urban form has been dramatically shaped by the influence of freight rail. As these rail lines became less economically feasible, the towns along the lines were left with the challenges of bisection. Rail-to-trails offer a unique possibility to transform the least accessible places in our communities into integrated parks, regional trail networks, and community economic development opportunities.


