



City of Belfast, Maine Passy Rail Trail Project



PARTNERS

City Point Central Railroad Museum, Brooks Historical Society and Coastal Mountains Land Trust

PROJECT DESCRIPTION (completed June 2013)

This grant is for a conceptual design, engineering plan and a feasibility assessment for future construction of 2.15 miles of a multi-use path within the railroad right-of-way located along the Passagassawakeag River. The Feasibility Study has allowed the City to cultivate extensive public participation and procure the necessary survey and engineering services to determine the appropriate shared use configuration for the tourist excursion train and new recreational opportunities. Additionally, key stakeholders have worked out a series of reciprocal easements and operating agreements to allow for the fundraising, construction and maintenance of the future Passy Rail Trail.

APPROACH

Vanhasse Hangen Brustlin, Inc., (VHB) was selected as the City's consultant engineer through an open and competitive process. The Council concluded that the topographic constraints make it infeasible to pursue a "Rails WITH Trails" or side-by-side configuration of the excursion train and a future walking, biking and cross country skiing trail. VHB concluded that a "Rails WITH Trails" solution would likely cost at least five times as much to construct as a trail using the existing rail bed. The Council therefore directed VHB to continue the feasibility study based exclusively on a "Rails TO Trails" concept.

RESULTS

Through extensive public participation the City Council, with VHB's assistance, has determined that the existing site of the City Point Central Railroad Museum will serve as the location of the trail head and train station. A design has been furnished by VHB showing bathrooms, septic system, information kiosk, ticket booth and parking lot areas to be shared by the stakeholders through a series of reciprocal easements and operating agreements. Coastal Mountains Land Trust has taken the lead role in fundraising for the project.

NEXT STEPS AND OPPORTUNITIES

The City's next step is to encourage and support the Coastal Mountains Land Trust in its private fundraising campaign on behalf of the Passy Rail Trail. The City must also pursue the Shoreland Zoning and Wetlands permitting processes. The City has an application pending before the federal government which will ensure that any possible return to commercially viable railroad operations in the future cannot be prevented by the City, the other current stakeholders nor any future owner/operator of the trail.

NEEDS

State agency permitting; funding for construction of the Passy Rail Trail expected to be raised privately; and a solution for long term maintenance and repair combining paid staff time and volunteer work, such as through the City's Parks and Recreation Commission and/or through Coastal Mountains Land Trust.

LESSONS LEARNED

Among the lessons learned is the importance of arm's length real estate transitions to ensure positive public perception of the project. The City's outright purchase of the former Railroad right-of-way, in addition to payments to homeowners for marginal easement rights, gave the City Council credibility with the public and avoided any eminent domain proceedings. The slightest appearance of an eminent domain proceeding or intent would have deterred many private donors from participating in the fundraising campaign.

APPLICABILITY FOR OTHER MUNICIPALITIES

The general purpose of the Passy Rail Trail Feasibility Study is applicable to any municipality looking to expand pedestrian circulation and recreational opportunity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the extent that other rails-to-trails projects are anticipated, it might be helpful for the appropriate State agencies to learn more about the federal Railbanking process and prepare a guidance document for municipalities. The City Attorney's Office has found the process to be challenging and we would be happy to share more of the City's experience after it is complete.



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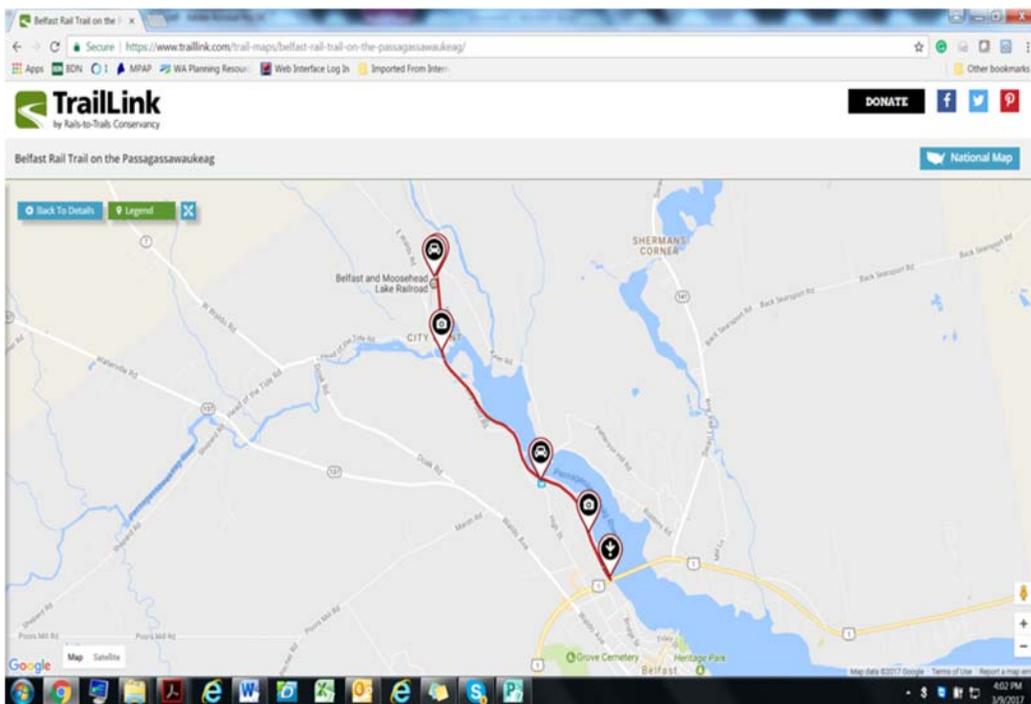
FOR MORE INFORMATION

See:<http://bangordailynews.com/2016/09/06/outdoors/new-recreational-trail-connects-the-jewels-of-belfast/>

CONTACT

Wayne Marshall, City Planner planner@cityofbelfast.org and 207-338-1417 x 25

James P. Francomano, Assistant Planner City of Belfast (2012-2013) served as PM for this Project.



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