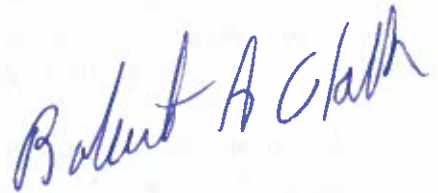


December 9, 2022

TO: Josh Stephens, District 1, Board of Supervisors  
Steven A. Baker, District 2, Board of Supervisors  
Bradley G. Pollack, District 3, Board of Supervisors  
Karl Roulston, District 4, Board of Supervisors  
Dennis Morris, District 5, Board of Supervisors  
Timothy F. Taylor, District 6, Board of Supervisors

FR: Robert A. Clark  
Senior Extension Agent, Agriculture and Natural Resources

RE: Considerations for Rails to Trails in the Shenandoah Valley



There is significant interest in pursuing the concept of converting the railroad system in Shenandoah County into a trail system. This idea has the potential of providing lots of benefit to the community in terms of tourism and overall community well-being. The vast majority of this rail system passes through farmland. While there are many potential positives there are also potential negative impacts. Farmers who farm land adjacent to public spaces report a multitude of problems. Farmers in Page County report people often camp on their property while canoeing on the South Fork of the Shenandoah River. Crop farmers report citizens will damage their crops by walking into their crop fields for family pictures and/or for sight-seeing. Fields adjacent to river access points receive significant litter and river goers often walk along the river bank. Farmers report citizens often hit golf balls onto their property from adjacent land. Many fields along roadways receive litter from passing vehicles. There are multiple negatives to this litter. It gets baled up with the hay and can harm livestock if it is consumed. Some of the debris can damage farm machinery.

Thus, while there are many potential positives to converting the rail in Shenandoah County into a trail system, it is important that if it is installed it be done so in a manner that is compatible with the farming community. In order to better understand the situation, I reached out to farming communities in multiple states including California, Indiana, Iowa, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia to learn about rail-trail systems and interactions with the farming community.

The following is information that would provide for a successful trail system while minimizing the negative impact on the farming community:

- Section 56-429 of the Code of Virginia requires the owner of the railroad to construct fences if the adjoining landowner requests a fence. If the rail system is converted to a trail, the fence still serves a very important purpose. Many farmers are hopeful that if the rail is converted to a trail, the fences are maintained as they have been in the past. Farmers have reported to me instances where unleashed dogs (from trail goers) end up chasing cows. The situation becomes dangerous for the cows, the dog, and the dog owner (often the dog runs back to the owner while the cow is chasing it and this puts the dog owner in harms way). A well-maintained woven wire fence with a strand of barbed wire on top will help to ensure that trail goers and their pets stay on the trail side of the fence. It will also help ensure that livestock stay on the farmer's side of the fence.
- Much of the current rail system through Shenandoah County contains brush along the edges of the rail. I spoke to farmers from multiple states who have rail trails adjacent to their farms. Everyone felt that the brush was either helpful to minimizing conflict or they felt the brush would be beneficial. Some adjoining landowners may request that a "living fence" be installed where one does not currently exist. Ironically, many species typically called "brush" (red cedar, multiflora rose, brambles, poison ivy, locust, etc.) might make the lowest cost and best barrier between farmland and the rail system. This "brush" provides three benefits. First, it provides shade and visual diversity to trail goers. Secondly, it provides visual and literal barrier between farm activities and trail activities (noise, dust, manure application, fertilizer application, pesticide applications, livestock, and crops that trail goers might be tempted to pick for their own consumption). It also serves as a barrier to prevent trail goers from throwing trash onto farmland. Finally, it serves as good habitat for wildlife and pollinator species. Based on dialogue with membership of the local Rails to Trails Committee, the right of way is roughly 60 feet wide. This means there can easily be a 10-20 foot area of vegetation (brush, trees, etc.) on both sides of the trail without restricting use of the trail.
- Several local farmers have requested that noxious weeds be controlled along the rails. The Virginia Department of Agriculture has a list of weeds classified as noxious at this web site (<https://www.vdacs.virginia.gov/plant-industry-services-noxious-weeds.shtml>). Also, several farmers wanted to prevent weeds and brush from growing in the fence row. It is very difficult to maintain a fence that is overgrown. Also, the limbs grow out into the farmers land and inhibit machinery and shade crop ground. Many said they would be willing to "keep the fence row clean of brush" at their expense as long as they were able to use herbicide. If noxious weed control and/or fence row weed/brush control is part of the

conversation, it will be important to make sure that including this requirement does not have unintended consequences.

- The trail system will cross multiple streams. To my knowledge, the only thing the railroad had to do with the streams is with the maintenance of their rail (i.e., the rail crossed the stream but the stream was not used for any purpose). Water features are very attractive to trail goers and once people gain access to creeks or rivers they tend to walk up and down the streambanks regardless of right-of-way privileges. It will be important that stream access be restricted with signage and, if needed, a physical barrier.
- Several farmers from other states mentioned that it is important for the trail system to have adequate bathroom facilities to minimize the number of people who need to "go to the bathroom" along the trail.
- A lot of farmers access fields by crossing the rail via private crossings. Many local farmers are hopeful that they will be allowed to continue crossing at these points. These crossings could easily be maintained with gates.
- Many local farmers want to continue being able to move cattle across the rail. Farmers move cattle across the rail system as part of their grazing management system. Rotational grazing of this type is beneficial to both the farmer in terms of grass productivity and farm profitability. Rotational grazing is beneficial to the public because a healthier sod means less runoff and better water quality. Livestock crossings might be a little more complicated. While some livestock producers might want their livestock to cross back and forth constantly, most would likely want to have crossing events (i.e., move livestock across a few times each year). Some farmers might find times when they can move their livestock without disrupting trail goers. It might be necessary to temporarily close small sections to allow this activity.

Feel free to reach out if I can be additional assistance with the rails to trails system.

cc: Evan Vass

