

CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

In the past 30 years, outdoor recreation has increased substantially in the United States. Changes in lifestyle with an expanded leisure time and an emphasis on physical fitness and exercise have contributed to this renewed interest in the outdoors. The Outdoor Recreation Policy Review Group, chaired by Lawrence Rockefeller, concluded in February, 1983 that:

"...outdoor recreation is more important than ever in American life - as a fundamental expression of our national character, [and] for its benefits to individuals and to society... (Cordell, 1983:42)."

But at a time when more recreational opportunities are needed to meet the increasing demand, available open space in many parts of the country is at a premium. Our growing population with its expanding built environment, has increased competition for land use, especially near the urban areas. Due to the rising costs for traditional recreational sites, property that was considered undesirable or inappropriate in the past, is now more attractive for converting into park land.

One option which offers unique opportunities, is recycling abandoned railroad rights-of-way into recreational trails. These linear routes are accessible to a large number of people and are ideal for many outdoor activities such as hiking, bicycling, jogging, cross-country skiing, and horseback riding.

But recreation is not the only application for these linear trails. Some corridors could be used to gain access to rivers and public land for hunting, camping, and fishing, while others would be excellent transportation links for non-motorized vehicles. Many rights-of-way are ideal for conservation trails in nature interpretation and wildlife protection. Unique routes could be used to preserve our historical and cultural past and our natural scenic beauty (Burwell, 1986). These corridors may be scenic, historic, a refuge for plants and animals, ideal for gaining access to public areas, or a combination of several possibilities.

CONVERSION PROBLEMS

Recycling abandoned rail corridors into park land offers many advantages, and yet a number of obstacles can block the proposed project. Obtaining funds can be a problem, depending on the location of the trail. Several states have active agencies in place to coordinate the conversion process, but most funding comes from appropriations by the state legislature or from local city or county government. These governmental bodies may be unwilling to invest money in a trail unless there is a grassroots or broad based support for the project.

Even when there is major support, the complexity in establishing legal ownership with a clear title can prevent trail development. In

some states, adjacent landowners have the first option to purchase the abandoned railroad land. In these areas, it is virtually impossible to obtain a right-of-way with continuous linkage. The state may have the right to condemn land, but this option is generally employed only on a limited basis. In other states, the legal rights to the abandoned tracks are more clouded. In many instances, the court system has to decide legal ownership of the property.

But one of the most serious obstacles to trail conversion is the organized opposition of nearby residents. To these owners, the possible advantages of the trail do not outweigh their fears and the perceived negative impact on their property. This is a problem faced by all public facilities, which can be expressed with this statement: "Sure power lines (sewage treatment plants, fire stations, etc.) may be necessary, but I don't want one in my back yard (CACEQ, 1975:28)." To some extent, linear trails may have an added burden because the need for more recreational areas is not understood.

When major landowner opposition exists, there is an increased possibility that money or title problems are also part of the picture. The key to avoiding obstacles in the conversion process, is answering the concerns and fears of landowners before organized opposition is established.

An excellent resource guide on the problems with rail-trail conversion is the Recreational Reuse of Abandoned Railroad Rights-of-Way: A Bibliography and Technical Resource Guide for Planners (1981) by Gregory Ames. This reference includes a wide range of topics from basic policy guides to feasibility studies and impact statements.

STUDY ISSUES

Planners and supporters of railroad trails should be aware of the reasons which may cause landowner opposition. Many residents have valid concerns about the impact of the trail on their property. The fear of increased crime, the loss of privacy, and lowered property values are some of the issues that need to be addressed. Where violent opposition is evident, the concerns of owners near proposed trails, greatly exceed the problems experienced by residents adjacent to existing trails. If nearby landowners could be assured that their fears are exaggerated, many problems associated with trail conversion could be avoided.

The focus of this study is to compare past landowner concerns with their current problems. This comparison will document the changing attitudes of owners. The data will indicate an increased desirability rating for trails. The information gathered in this document could be used to generate public and landowner support for converting abandoned railroad rights-of-way into trails. The result would be additional recreational opportunities that offer unique experiences.