Rock Island Trail Update May 23, 2019

At 240 miles, Katy Trail State Park is our nation’s longest fully developed rail-trail. Missourians love it, as do tourists from around the globe. With its phenomenal success, Missouri State Parks has wanted to add another major rail-trail since at least 1993 when the former Rock Island Railroad corridor was nearly acquired. The inactive westernmost 47 miles opened as a state park in December 2016, connecting the Katy to greater Kansas City <https://mostateparks.com/page/65916/rock-island-spur> . After years of urging by Rock Island communities and Missouri State Parks, Ameren agreed in 2015 to donate 144 more miles to create a world-class loop <http://www.lakenewsonline.com/news/20161222/rock-island-trail-on-track-for-future-development> .

The 2016 election of a new governor precipitated Missouri State Parks announcing a pause to study the project. The study portal is at <https://mostateparks.com/rockislandlinecorridor> . The Surface Transportation Board deadline for acceptance is August 20, 2019. The STB’s goal is to rail-bank corridors as recreational trails. The salvaged corridor could be used largely as-is: “The corridor is being used by locals for both transportation and recreation.” <https://mostateparks.com/sites/mostateparks/files/RILC_EngineerReport_Summer2018.pdf> . Roughly 90 of the 144 miles are along a major highway. About 30 miles are in the city limits of 18 towns. Many towns have expressed interest in partnering with Missouri State Parks to provide maintenance and security. Some adjacent city parks provide water, parking and camping. To strengthen feasibility MoRIT has begun a campaign for trail construction with $600,000+ in pledges to date. The recently passed Rock Island Trail State Park Endowment provides a restricted account and signals the legislature’s expectation that Ameren’s gift of the corridor will be accepted https://www.senate.mo.gov/19info/pdf-bill/tat/SB196.pdf .

A 2012 study found Katy Trail State Park to have a direct economic impact of more than $18.5 million per year <https://mostateparks.com/sites/mostateparks/files/Katy_Trail_Economic_Impact_Report_Final.pdf> . The 47 mile segment connecting the Katy to greater KC is breathing new life into Pleasant Hill, Chilhowee, Leeton and Windsor. International visitors are spending money <http://www.joplinglobe.com/news/lifestyles/andy-ostmeyer-rock-island-rocks-windsor/article_3fc6d78b-45f7-514d-9bb6-fd7cece53a1a.html> . Dormant properties are now grocery stores, restaurants and B&Bs. Cattle move across the trail through specially designed gates.

The Rock Island will have high usage and economic impact. More than 20% of the 144 miles are in the city limits of 18 towns and 41% of Missourians live within 50 miles. Tourists will enjoy tunnels 2-5 football fields under Eugene and Freeburg, and near Meta <http://www.railstotrails.org/trailblog/2016/december/05/missouris-rock-island-trail-state-park/> . Spectacular bridges span the Gasconade, Osage and Maries Rivers. Short videos are at <https://vimeo.com/203368673> and <https://vimeo.com/238664842> .

Towns every few miles have restaurants and convenience stores; others offer lodging, grocery stores, ice cream and frozen custard shops, wineries, bar and grills, parks, camping, and a distillery. There is a Walmart within a half mile of the trail at Versailles, Eldon and Owensville. It will connect KC to Missouri’s largest state park at Lake of the Ozarks and fill a long gap between state parks <https://mostateparks.com/page/57778/locator-map> .

The Missouri Chamber of Commerce notes significant economic growth in communities along the first 47 miles

<https://mobizmagazine.com/2017/08/17/plans-for-rock-island-bike-path-prompt-small-town-entrepreneurship/> . New businesses have sprung up: Katy/Rock Junction in Windsor, Rock Island Village in Eldon, Rock Island B&B in Rosebud. In the works are Rock Island Trail Retreat in Gerald and Rock Island Station in Beaufort.

The 43 mile segment nearest **St. Louis** has only two bridges to repurpose for hiking, mountain biking and horses. The cost estimate is $700,000. **Beaufort** has convenience stores, plans for a new restaurant, and is only 31 miles from Six Flags. The next town is just 2 miles away at Leslie. Many food/drink options are 7 miles away at Gerald, then 4 miles at Rosebud, 7 miles at Owensville, 8 miles at Bland, and 5 miles at Belle.

Missouri State Parks requested public input. The more than 10,500 public comments are 98.6% positive <https://mostateparks.com/rockislandlinecorridor>. Letters of enthusiastic support include the cities of Springfield, Rolla, Chesterfield, Owensville, Versailles and Warsaw, and two regional planning commissions.

**Springfield and Bolivar** want to connect their 39 mile <http://www.friscohighlinetrail.org/> through Warsaw to the Rock Island Trail at Cole Camp via the historic Butterfield Stage Overland Trail route. The Capital Area Metropolitan Planning Organization wants to connect the Katy and Rock Island Trails through Jefferson City.

The **Kansas City** trail network will be further connected when 14 miles of trail from Lee’s Summit to I-70 opens in 2019-20 <http://fox4kc.com/2017/03/06/18-mile-trail-coming-to-east-side-of-kc/> . In **St. Louis**, <http://greatriversgreenway.org/> and <http://trailnet.org/> are eager for the Rock Island Trail to approach their regional trail network. The bike-friendly Highway 64-40 Boone Bridge over the Missouri River connects the Katy Trail to Chesterfield Bottoms and a new bike-friendly Highway 47 Bridge is nearly completed at Washington. Train shuttles along the Katy/Rock Island Trails are possible from STL, Kirkwood, Washington, Hermann, Jefferson City, Sedalia and Lee’s Summit <https://www.amtrak.com/bring-your-bicycle-onboard> .

**Owensville will get a Safe Route to School** from the trail. Their schools are east of 45 mph Highway 19 and the town is mostly to the west, so students have not been allowed to walk or bicycle to school. The trail will pass under Highway 19 and provide students a safe alternative from as far away as Gerald, 10 miles east.

**Eldon’s future** is being shaped by its 3 miles of corridor through their city limits. Lake Regional Health Center expanded its outpatient care facility next to the trail. The 48 place Rock Island Village senior living facility opened in August, 2017. Both take advantage of the trail as a new community asset for transportation, recreation and exercise for their clients. A donor has given Eldon $150,000 in matching money to rebuild the former railroad depot as a welcome center, museum and offices for their Chamber of Commerce.

This trail infrastructure will improve health, quality of life and property values, making communities more attractive to new residents and to industry. It will provide a safe, non-motorized alternative to an estimated 90 miles of highways between towns. Horses and buggies may be allowed on the trail in the Versailles area where Groffdale Conference Mennonites now share the 60 mph two-lane Highway 52 with motorists.

The next 144 miles of Rock Island is expected to produce more than a 20:1 return on investment. However, Missouri State Parks does not get that revenue. Their budget is limited to a 1/20 of 1% sales tax and whatever revenues they can generate [https://mostateparks.com/page55069//parks-soils-and-water-sales-tax](https://mostateparks.com/page/55069/parks-soils-and-water-sales-tax) . Creative public/private partnerships with communities, individuals and philanthropists will be critical.

Accelerating this trail’s development is the mission of Missouri Rock Island Trail, Inc., a 501(c) (3) nonprofit.

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