



Durham Open Space & Trails Commission

101 City Hall Plaza ▪ Durham, NC 27701

October 21, 2025

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To: Durham County Commissioners
From: Durham Open Space and Trails Commission (DOST)
Re: Durham-to-Roxboro Rail Trail

The Durham Open Space and Trails Commission (DOST) urges you to support the acquisition of, and development plan for the Durham-to-Roxboro rail trail. DOST members are appointed by the City Council and County Commissioners to advise on the development of trails to provide recreational and environmental benefits for all residents of Durham and Durham County. We have determined that the Durham-to-Roxboro rail trail will be of enormous benefit to Durham, and advise that you take advantage of this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

This trail has been publicly discussed since the 1980's, included in the 1991 Little River Corridor Open Space Plan, 2006 Durham County Capital Improvement Plan, and 2011 Durham Trails and Greenways Master Plan. Thousands of hours have been invested to imagine and develop plans so that this trail can best serve **all** Durham residents. The current plan incorporates extensive community input and engagement, and garnered the **support of 81% of residents** attending public sessions. It is a collaborative effort between multiple departments in Durham and Person Counties, Federal and State partners, and national and local non-profit organizations.

This trail supports multiple goals that Durham has adopted, as it:

- Addresses **multiple** policy goals in the 2023 Comprehensive Plan (CP) including Public Spaces and Recreation (Equitable, Safe and Well-Maintained Public Spaces, Affordable and Intentional Activities and Events), Environment (Equitable Access to Green Spaces), Transportation (Healthy, Safe and Dignified Transportation, Connectivity) and Education;
- Provides resources to underserved areas of Durham County, which have neither sidewalks/shoulders, nor access to a nearby recreational facility. Exercise is an important part of a healthy environment¹ for

Durham residents (CP Policy #103), and public trails promote physical activity for those at highest risk for inactivity.² Walking on the street is dangerous, and studies show that people in low-income communities and communities of color suffer much higher pedestrian and bicycling injury and fatality rates than the general population³;

- Promotes local history, culture, small farmers and other small businesses. Trail waysides and entry points will provide information on area history (CP Policy #29);
- Identifies and prioritizes innovative and beneficial uses of surplus land to provide access to green space, recreation, cultural and historical sites. (CP Action Item #24, Environment and Public Spaces);
- Provides a framework to help connect other greenways and parks. By connecting parks and trails to schools, it supports CP policy #158.

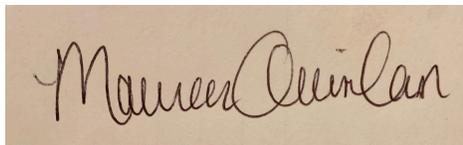
While most residents support the trail, 15% of those attending community engagement sessions strongly oppose it. We take these residents' concerns seriously, but want to clarify certain key pieces of misinformation:

- Crime in public spaces is always a serious concern, but 40 years of experience with existing trails in the US show that crime on rail trails is **lower** than surrounding areas.^{4,5} In a comprehensive study of 255 rural rail trails, most trails had **no** reported crimes over a 2-year period of study.⁵ The data shows that residents are safer on rail trails than ½ mile away! The current plan incorporates lessons learned to make new trails even safer.
- Data shows that rural rail trails have good usage and are a highly valued amenity.^{5,6} With no sidewalks and shoulders, County residents would walk more if they had access to a nearby, safe place to walk.⁷
- The rail corridor is 100 feet wide and heavily wooded, combined with setbacks, buffers, and minimum lot sizes required by the UDO, which are particularly large in the rural tiers. The American Tobacco Trail demonstrates how a properly designed rail trail minimizes intrusions on neighboring property owners. The Durham County Transportation Office offered critics in North Durham a tour on the Tobacco trail, but nobody participated.⁸
- The majority of trail funding will come from State and Federal grants, local cost sharing and philanthropies; money which cannot be used for other purposes. Multiple studies have shown that public rail trails have a huge economic return on investment⁹, an annual average

return of \$100,000 per mile, and benefits worth at least 3 times the cost.^{10,11} The American Tobacco Trail, for example, is a substantial economic engine and reduces health care spending.⁶

The responsibilities you have assigned to DOST include fostering the wise use of the City's and County's natural resources and involving all segments of the Durham community; the Durham-to-Roxboro trail fits these criteria superbly. We urge you to take advantage of this valuable opportunity to acquire and develop the rail trail to benefit the health and wellbeing of all Durham City and County residents for generations to come.

Sincerely,

A rectangular image showing a handwritten signature in cursive script on a light brown background. The signature reads "Maureen Quinlan".

Maureen Quinlan, Chair, Durham Open Space and Trails Commission

References

¹American Heart Association, 2019, "Creating Spaces that Promote Active Living."
<https://www.heart.org/-/media/files/about-us/policy-research/fact-sheets/physical-activity/active-transportation-fact-sheet-2019.pdf>
[a=en&hash=F98B6BE12D9C61B6AEAB157B51FE2A89845B6C90](https://www.heart.org/-/media/files/about-us/policy-research/fact-sheets/physical-activity/active-transportation-fact-sheet-2019.pdf)

²Brownson, R.C., Housemann, R.A., Brown, D.R., Jackson-Thompson, J., King, A.C., Malone, B.R., and Sallis, J.F., 2000. "Promoting Physical Activity in Rural Communities: Walking Trail Access, Use, and Effects." *American Journal of Preventative Medicine*, 18(3): 235-241.

³Zimmerman, S., Lieberman, M., Kramer, K., Sadler, B., & Benjamin, K., 2015. "At the Intersection of Active Transportation and Equity: Joining forces to make communities healthier and fairer." Centers for Disease Control.

⁴NC State University, 2014, "Social Justice as it Pertains to Safety on the American Tobacco Trail".
https://d.lib.ncsu.edu/collections/catalog/mc00618_596767_20220118_31774#?c=&m=&cv=&xywh=-3578%2C2384%2C12301%2C4219.

⁵Tracy, T., and Morris, M., 1998. “Rail-Trails and Safe Communities: The Experience from 372 Trails”. The Rails to Trails Conservancy, in cooperation with The National Park Service, Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program.

<https://cdn2.assets-servd.host/material-civet/production/images/documents/Safe-Communities.pdf?dm=1620062724>

⁶Institute for Transportation Research and Education, Alta Planning and Design, 2018, “Evaluating the Impact of Shared Use Paths in North Carolina, 2015-2017.” Prepared for North Carolina Department of Transportation, Division of Bicycle and Pedestrian Transportation, February 2018.

⁷Goodman, A., Sahlqvist, S., Ogilvie, D., 2014, “[New Walking and Cycling Routes and Increased Physical Activity: One- and 2-Year Findings From the UK iConnect Study.](#)” American Journal of Public Health **104 (9)**: e38-e46, <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2014.302059>.

⁸Email thread between Durham County Transportation Department, Durham Open Space and Trails Commission, and the North Durham Focus Group, August 8-20, 2025.

⁹Ozarks Transportation Organization, 2019, “The Value of a Trail”. August 2019.

https://www.ozarkstransportation.org/uploads/documents/Economic-Benefits-of-Trails_-_A-Summary-of-Research-5.pdf

¹⁰Pennsylvania Land Trust Association, 2011. Economic Benefits of Trails, Nov 14, 2011.

<https://library.weconservepa.org/guides/97-economic-benefits-of-trails>

¹¹Verughese, J. et al., 2024, “Parks, Trails, and Greenways for Physical Activity: A Community Guide Systematic Economic Review.” Am J Prev Med.; 66(6): 1089–1099. [doi:10.1016/j.amepre.2024.01.021](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amepre.2024.01.021).