



Agenda Action Form Overview

The Board is requested to review this informational update regarding the development of the Durham-to-Roxboro Rail Trail Plan. The plan is currently nearing completion, and a comprehensive version will be presented for formal review and adoption at a forthcoming meeting. This memorandum provides an overview of the plan's status, background, and next steps in the planning process.

The Durham-to-Roxboro Rail Trail Plan outlines a comprehensive plan to convert an 18-mile segment of inactive rail corridor within Durham County into a multi-use trail. Combined with approximately 8 miles of additional trail in Person County, the project will create a continuous 26-mile network linking downtown Durham to the City of Roxboro.

Background/Justification

The Durham-to-Roxboro Rail Trail follows a corridor with deep historical, cultural, and environmental importance in the region. Originally built in 1890 as the Lynchburg & Durham Railroad, the line played a major role in local transportation and commerce, especially for moving agricultural goods like tobacco and textiles. Rail service ended in 1983, and since then, community members and local plans have supported turning the unused rail corridor into a public trail.

Support for this idea goes back decades. The 1991 Little River Corridor Open Space Plan emphasized protecting the corridor for public benefit. Later, the 2011 Trails & Greenways Master Plan highlighted it as a key part of Durham's future trail system. The 2023 Durham Comprehensive Plan continued this vision, focusing on safer, more connected ways for people to get around without needing a car.

Although the rail line has been inactive for many years, it is still fully owned by Norfolk Southern. The Conservation Fund plans to purchase the corridor in winter 2025, which would make it available for future public use and development as a multi-use trail.

The full corridor stretches about 26 miles from downtown Durham to the City of Roxboro, with 18 miles in Durham County and 8 miles in Person County. In 2024, Person County adopted a trail feasibility study that identified nearly 11 miles of trail within the corridor and another 6 miles outside of it. The Durham-to-Roxboro Rail Trail Plan focuses only on the Durham County section and does not consider alternative routes.

At the southern end, the trail would connect directly to the Downtown Durham Rail Trail, currently in development. This would create access to downtown and the American Tobacco Trail. The northern end would extend into Person County, helping create a regional trail connection.

The corridor passes through a variety of areas, including the historic Bragtown community, and the rural communities of Rougemont and Bahama. It also runs near schools, parks, nature preserves, and other public lands. While much of the nearby land is privately owned, the trail would connect several public and protected spaces, offering new opportunities for outdoor access and recreation.

The Durham-to-Roxboro Rail Trail Plan is a long-term planning document that outlines the community's vision and steps needed to turn this unused corridor into a trail. The trail would support recreation, biking and walking for transportation, tourism, and economic development - while also celebrating the corridor's cultural and natural history. The plan brings the project to 10% design, with suggested trail routes, trailheads, and cost estimates. Detailed engineering and construction would come in future phases.



Durham County Government

Agenda Action Form Supplemental Document – Non-contract

The planning process included a study of the existing conditions along the corridor, community and stakeholder engagement, coordination with local and regional partners, evaluation of trail design ideas, and analysis of funding and implementation options to support the project's long-term success.

Policy Impact

The Durham-to-Roxboro Rail Trail has been identified in multiple local and regional plans as a high-priority project for improving transportation options and access to green space. The 2011 Trails & Greenways Master Plan first proposed the corridor as a major trail route. The 2023 Durham Comprehensive Plan emphasized the importance of trails in helping people reach destinations safely and sustainably.

Other plans, including the 2021 Durham Trails Implementation Plan, the 2017 MPO Comprehensive Transportation Plan, and the 2024 Person County Trail Feasibility Study, also point to this corridor as a valuable resource for health, recreation, mobility, and economic opportunity.

In the long term, the Durham-to-Roxboro Rail Trail is envisioned as a lasting community asset. It would offer a safe, accessible space for walking, running, and biking, for people of all ages and abilities. In addition to recreation, the trail would also serve as a new transportation option, linking neighborhoods, parks, schools, and other destinations while strengthening connections across Durham County and beyond.

Procurement Background

N/A

Fiscal Impact

There is no associated cost for the approval of this plan. The plan is funded through the Triangle West Transportation Planning Organization's (TWTPO) FY2025 Unified Planning Work Program, which supports planning studies of regional significance. As the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) for the western Triangle, TWTPO administers federal transportation funds in collaboration with its member jurisdictions. The Durham-to-Roxboro Rail Trail Plan was jointly requested by Durham County and the City of Durham, with funding approved by the Triangle West Policy Board following a public comment period.

Recommendation

Staff recommends that the Board receive a presentation on the Durham-to-Roxboro Rail Trail Plan and provide feedback and input on the plan's direction. The Board's input will be used to refine the plan further before it is finalized and presented for formal adoption at an upcoming meeting.