



Agenda Action Form Overview

The Durham-to-Roxboro Rail Trail Plan outlines a long-term vision for transforming an 18.2-mile rail corridor in Durham County into a multi-use trail that supports transportation, recreation, sustainability, community connectivity, and public health. Developed through comprehensive public engagement and interagency collaboration, the Durham-to-Roxboro Rail Trail Plan includes planning-level recommendations, cost estimates, and implementation strategies to guide future trail development. Based on the outcomes of this planning effort, the County Manager recommends that the Board of County Commissioners adopt the Durham-to-Roxboro Rail Trail Plan as a foundational first step in ensuring the ultimate development of a safe, accessible, and connected trail system that will serve residents and visitors for generations to come.

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.

Shortly after the railroad ceased operations, the project was included in the 1985 City Trails and Greenways Master Plan, the 1989 Durham County Open Space Plan, the 1991 Little River Corridor Open Space Plan, and the 1992 Durham County Open Space Corridor System plan. It has continuously been identified in subsequent City, County, and regional open space and transportation plans as a potential greenway project. The 2023 Durham Comprehensive Plan continued this vision, focusing on safer, more connected ways for people to get around without a car.

The Durham-to-Roxboro Rail Trail Plan outlines a vision for transforming a 26-mile former rail corridor into a regional multi-use trail connecting downtown Durham to the City of Roxboro. Approximately 18 miles of the corridor lies within Durham County and 8 miles in Person County. In 2024, Person County adopted a rail trail feasibility study of their own, laying the groundwork for future regional connectivity and planning efforts.

The Durham-to-Roxboro Rail Trail Plan focuses exclusively on the Durham County segment. At its southern end, the trail would connect to the City of Durham's future Downtown Durham Rail Trail, providing access to downtown and the American Tobacco Trail. To the north, it would extend into Person County, supporting a regional greenway network. The corridor traverses a variety of landscapes and communities, including the historic Bragtown community and the rural areas of Bahama and Rougemont. It also passes near schools, parks, nature preserves, and other public lands. While much of the adjacent land is privately owned, the proposed trail would link several public and protected spaces, expanding opportunities for outdoor access, recreation, and community connection.

The one-year planning effort was a collaborative initiative led by Durham County, the Triangle West Metropolitan Planning Organization (TWTPo), the City of Durham, the North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT), and the East Coast Greenway Alliance. Additional guidance was provided by representatives from 12 community organizations and government agencies, with a focus on historical, cultural, and environmental considerations.

Community engagement was a key component in the planning process and occurred in two phases. Engagement activities included two community surveys, six public workshops, seven focus group meetings, 24 pop-up events, twelve interviews and property visits, seven general information sessions,



and three project coordination meetings. The first phase, from January to April 2025, focused on trail visioning and data collection. These efforts informed the creation of draft trail concepts, which were shared for public input during the second engagement phase from April to September 2025. Final recommendations and the complete plan were finalized in fall 2025.

The plan divides the 18.2-mile corridor into five planning sections, each with recommendations for trailheads, community connectors, crossings, and stream infrastructure. It also includes planning-level cost estimates, implementation strategies, and potential funding sources to guide future development. While additional design and community engagement will be required, this plan represents the first step in realizing a safe, connected, and community-supported trail system that reflects Durham County's long-term commitment to active transportation, equitable access, and regional collaboration.

The Board of County Commissioners received updates following each engagement phase, on April 7 and October 6, 2025. Based on the outcomes of this planning effort, the County Manager recommends that the Board adopt the Durham-to-Roxboro Rail Trail Plan as a foundational step toward advancing trail development and securing future funding and partnerships.

While the planning study was underway, Durham County staff and partners simultaneously advanced efforts to acquire the rail trail corridor. On November 3, 2025, the Board approved a budget amendment recognizing over \$1.1 million in funding for the Durham-to-Roxboro Rail Trail Corridor acquisition. This included two state grants totaling \$928,445 to support the project, \$500,000 from the Great Trails State Program and \$428,445 from the East Coast Greenway Alliance NC Department of Natural and Cultural Resources Complete the Trails Program Grant. With the two state grants, Durham County's net cost will be \$223,000, which represents 1.7% of the total corridor cost. NCDOT intends to preserve the land for future public transportation and trail use under its Rail Corridor Preservation Program.

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. Shortly after the railroad ceased operations, the project was first included in the 1985 City Trails and Greenways Master Plan, the 1989 Durham County Open Space Plan, the 1991 Little River Corridor Open Space Plan, and the 1992 Durham County Open Space Corridor System plan. It has continuously been identified in subsequent City, County, and MPO open space and transportation plans as a potential greenway project.

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. Durham County's adoption of the Durham-to-Roxboro Rail Trail Plan enables the County to advance the development of a long-standing priority project.

Procurement Background

N/A

Fiscal Impact

Planning Study: Adoption of the Durham-to-Roxboro Rail Trail Plan does not have a direct fiscal impact. However, the plan outlines recommended trail design, amenity improvements, community connectors, and trailhead concepts with associated projected cost estimates and potential funding sources for future



iterations of the trail’s phased development. The total estimated cost of the 18.2-mile trail including all recommended amenities is \$45.6-\$56.7 million.

Acquisition: On November 3, 2025, the Board approved an agreement with NCDOT requiring Durham County to contribute \$1,151,445 toward the rail corridor acquisition. Of this amount, \$928,445 was covered by two state grants and \$100,000 had already been appropriated, resulting in a net County cost of \$223,000. Thanks to strategic partnerships and grant funding, Durham County significantly reduced its financial burden. Future trail development would require a lease agreement with NCDOT and additional County funding for construction and ongoing maintenance.

Recommendation

The County Manager recommends that the Board of County Commissioners adopt the Durham-to-Roxboro Rail Trail Plan.