

The New York Times

"All the News That's Fit to Print"

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 20, 2024

Reprinted With Permission

Travel

Someday, We'll Bike on a Path Across America. But First, Nebraska.

A pedal-powered tour through the geographic midpoint of the proposed 3,700-mile Great American Rail Trail.

By ROWAN MOORE GERETY

Somewhere near Meadow Grove, Neb., biking on a particularly gusty section of the Cowboy Recreation and Nature Trail, Alex Duryea offered a new way to consider the landscape of wide open cornfields we'd been pedaling through for hours.

"This is Nebraska's mountains — the wind," said Mr. Duryea, the recreational trails manager at the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.

Cyclists and walkers beyond the 187-mile Cowboy Trail will get themselves to actual mountains one day if the planners of the Great American Rail Trail achieve their goal of establishing a coast-to-coast pathway. Proposed to run more than 3,700 miles from Washington, D.C., to Washington State, the Rail Trail would knit together some of the country's existing walking and biking paths with new, dedicated trails — along old rail corridors, highway rights of way, or anywhere else where public opinion, government approval and funding can be steered in unison.

Started in 2019 by the nonprofit Rails to Trails Conservancy in partnership with local governments and recreation groups, the Rail Trail is about 55 percent complete. The finished crossing is likely still decades away.

In September, I joined a group from the Conservancy, along with Nebraskan allies of the trail, to take stock of where things stand. Nebraska is both the geographic midpoint of the cross-country trip and a conceptual one: Like the national crossing, the route through the Cornhusker State is just over half complete. It includes established paths like the Cowboy Trail, but also gaps that range from long-planned connections awaiting final approval to great blank rectangles.

Those boxes, as the Conservancy project manager Kevin Belle explained, are a strategic choice to avoid stirring up opposition. "We know that once you put a line on the map," he said, "it causes a storm."

The particulars of those storms vary



TERRY RATZLAFF FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

The Rail Trail would knit together some of the country's existing walking and biking paths with new, dedicated trails from Washington, D.C., to Washington State.

from place to place, but creating a new trail anywhere tends to upset the status quo. Though large cities like Seattle, Wash.; Columbus, Ohio; and Pittsburgh lie along the trail's route, the Rail Trail will cross scores of small American towns whose fortunes dwindled with the rise of the automobile. Who will maintain fence lines, or pay for resurfacing? Landowners accustomed to a railway without trains may feel that any easement that crosses their property shouldn't be considered public anymore. Then there's the matter of justifying pedestrian paths through sometimes remote terrain in a country that often neglects sidewalks.

"Most of the easy stuff has been done," Mr. Belle said, adding that in the Eastern United States, much of the trail consists of well-established rail-to-trail conversions. What remains, he said, is a "con-

nect-the-dots situation" elsewhere, integrating thoroughfares like Washington's 287-mile Palouse-to-Cascades trail (which crosses the entire state) with the bits and pieces of trails in states like Wyoming (home to 17 completed miles along a projected 500-mile route).

Tiny strips crossing great distances

The Conservancy's founders dreamed of a nationwide path for hikers and cyclists as far back as the 1980s, when the earliest long-distance rails-to-trails conversions, like Pennsylvania's Great Allegheny Passage, were just taking shape. But as tiny strips of land that cross great distances, railways involve special complications

of ownership and jurisdiction. They duck in and out of private holdings, cross town lines, and weave through state or federal jurisdiction as they pass over swamps and along mountainsides.

Local groups often labor for decades to steer rights of way through the cumbersome process of fund-raising, acquisition, planning and environmental review before they become trails. But thanks to those efforts, according to the Conservancy's database American rail trails now include more than 25,000 miles, with thousands of miles more planned and underway.

For the Great American Rail Trail, the Conservancy came to view 50 percent completion as the tipping point for the route's viability. As that target neared, they fixed on May 10, 2019, the 150th anniversary of the completion of the transcontinental railroad, as the right time to advertise



PHOTOS BY TERRY RAITZLAFF FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

The Bob Kerrey Pedestrian Bridge.

their ambitions: a national trail, snaking through Washington, D.C., and 12 states in the northern third of the country, that would improve local connections for commuters and Sunday explorers while opening the way for weekslong or monthslong excursions by the time-rich and adventure-inclined.

Individual segments are plodding forward. During our ride, Jason Buss, who leads the Nebraska Trails Foundation, was making calls about a possible gravel donation in the thousands of tons to help complete one eight-mile gap near Omaha. He explained that supporters were anticipating approval not of the most scenic option they'd proposed, but one that spared the county any major new maintenance obligations. "Truly, the path of least resistance," Mr. Buss said.

Just don't ask when it will be completed. "People have been asking 'When will it be finished?' since the day the Rail Trail was announced," said Brandi Horton, a conservancy spokeswoman. "The answer is never. It's something that will always be evolving."

A view of history from a padded seat

I rode with Mr. Buss, Mr. Belle, Ms. Horton and others, including a handful of fellow journalists, for roughly 80 miles of the Rail Trail's existing Nebraska legs: a Lincoln-to-Omaha stretch and a daylong jaunt on the eastern end of the Cowboy Trail.

The Cowboy Trail strings together 20 former stops on the old Chicago & North Western railroad across open prairie and corn-and-soybean country. Of the 590 miles of the route across Nebraska, some 280 remain as dotted lines waiting to be built, but the sections I sampled give a vivid sense of the state's history.

We'd begun our ride in Neligh, population 1,536, where, at the Neligh Mill State Historic Site, you can still walk the floor

of the flour mill that operated alongside the railroad for nearly a century. It's a brick structure filled with old rollers, steam valves and wooden machines that now functions as a museum. Perhaps you've never wondered how mills kept highly-combustible flour dust from causing explosions. Follow the vacuum tubes up two flights of worn stairs. There, arrays of vibrating cotton sheaths filtered the finest flour particles out of the air. It's the trivia that constitutes one of travel's chief pleasures: answers to questions you would have never thought to ask before a visit.

Beside the trail, milkweed pods released their silk into the breeze, and fields of Maxilian sunflowers alternated with vast tracts of drying soybeans and corn. Mr. Duryea, the trails manager, ticked

through the trail's seasonal highlights: new calves born each April, monarch butterflies migrating in August, blue blankets of chicory blossoms in September, and of course, the fall harvest, when hulking combines chew up 10 rows at a time.

Near the newly revamped TK Starlite drive-in movie theater, we veered off among wide-canopied oaks on the floodplain of the Elkhorn River. The span of an old railroad bridge still stands atop great blocks of sandstone, with a wooden deck for cyclists and pedestrians. Floods in 2019 washed out the embankment on one side, and the channel shifted, so that the bridge is now next to the water rather than over it.

The resulting quandary gives an example of the challenges of maintaining a transcontinental bike trail. Ordinarily, Federal Emergency Management Agency funds can only restore what was lost — in this case, by rebuilding the dirt embankment where the river now flows. But the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, which owns and operates the Cowboy Trail, and the Army Corps of Engineers, tasked with reviewing engineering and design on the project, both favor the more durable and ecological solution of extending the bridge with a new section across the water. There's no disagreement, exactly, but the bureaucratic shuffle of getting FEMA dollars for a new design has taken more than five years and counting.

In the meantime, a gap of less than 100 yards — the only break in the trail in close to 200 miles — requires a three-mile detour along U.S. Route 275, where you can feel the tailwinds from passing 18-wheelers. But at the end of summer, thankfully, the river bottom was sandy and the water knee-deep, and instead of biking the detour, I scrambled down from the bridge and across a field of cottonwood saplings to cross the river barefoot, my bike over one shoulder.

Giving them a reason to stop

One of the central selling points for the Rail Trail is the opportunity to expand and channel tourism. In 2022, an analysis by the nonprofit research group Headwaters Economics found that the trail could eventually spur 25 million annual trips and more than \$200 million in visitor spending for trailside communities.

All six counties along the Cowboy Trail count just 60,000 residents. They use the trail, too: New counters installed along the trail this year recorded 83,000 trips through the end of July, most of which is local traffic. Still, Mr. Duryea said, "A week doesn't go by that we meet somebody from California or D.C. or New York, or Mexico or Sweden."

Giving them a reason to stop can be trickier. In Battle Creek, population 1,194, I picked a front-yard apple from a branch hanging over the sidewalk, but decided a mid-ride \$3 beer at Fight'n River Saloon would be ill advised. Riding the coattails of the Rails to Trails crew gave me access to fabulous chocolate chip cookies, but the only other lunchtime options were a Subway and a gas station corner store.

On our other leg, biking toward the Papio trail in suburban Omaha, more options appeared as soybean fields gave way to subdivisions and apartment complexes. We threaded between man-made lakes and pickleball courts, past the smells of an industrial bakery, beneath overpasses and out a dead end lined with split-levels. It was, at times, the kind of meandering hybrid route familiar to any American cyclist, carved from the in-between spaces of existing infrastructure.

State Senator Rita Sanders, who joined us on part of the ride, told a story from her tenure as mayor of Bellevue, a bedroom community for the nearby Offutt Air Force Base. She had gotten federal dollars to fund protected bike paths along a major thoroughfare, only to have her successor campaign successfully on a plan to remove them.

"The old people couldn't figure out how to turn right," she said.

In Omaha, the Rail Trail leads right to the edge of the Missouri River, where the new Bob Kerrey Pedestrian Bridge is scheduled to fully open in December. It spans the river to Council Bluffs, Iowa, where an old, 2.5-mile railroad corridor is being reimaged by local officials as a multiuse path.

It's currently little more than a strip of "smooth continuous surface," flanked by open land and commercial real estate, like a self-storage building and an adult boutique.

But talking to Council Bluffs' chief of staff, Brandon Garrett, you could tell how much planning and outreach has already gone into these two and a half miles, for the people of Council Bluffs, and for anyone who might arrive on their own power after crossing Nebraska or Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, West Virginia, Pennsylvania, Maryland and Washington, D.C.