

STOP TURNING RAILBEDS TO TRAILS



DOWNTOWN MARKETING & DEVELOPMENT By Barry Cassidy

Not every barn needs a group of kids saying, "Hey, here's a vacant barn! Let's put on a show." Similarly, not every railbed needs a trail. I am sure that many people use the trail system in the Philadelphia area and support the conversion of railbeds to trails passionately. I admit that the trails are used quite often by people.

In many cases there is an easement right that goes with the railbed, that it could always convert back to a railroad, but once that trail goes in there, it is practically impossible to take it back. I have never tried it, but I could envision myself at a public meeting with people in jogging suits screaming in my face. So, it is with that vision I write this column, because we need to STOP NOW before all of the good connecting pathways are formal trails.

I never liked the idea of formal trails to begin with. I am a primitive trail kind of guy, a few wood chips to show the way, with maybe a branch or so hanging low to make it interesting. A true natural process. Instead, we are paving our way through wooded areas to make things more like walking on a sidewalk with trees on either side. In many cases, the weeds and branches are trimmed so one does not have to interact with nature too much and provide a tasteful experience. I don't know why there is not a demand that we create running tracks instead.

Normally I would just let things like this pass, but this is important. When I wanted to run a train from Phoenixville to Paoli, the Chester Valley Trail would have saved me a lot of money if it were reconverted back to a rail line. In addition, the Chester County trail coordinator tried to buy the rail line I was seeking to purchase out from under me, because of a

plan that they had that was not finished which I dubbed their "secret plan", but I digress.

Technology has a way of recycling lost intent. Technological advancement has brought us the autonomous vehicles. These are unmanned cars or small buses that can bring you to a destination based upon GPS and smart driving technology.

Imagine how much it costs to run a train... I can tell you, it costs plenty. The automatus vehicles will cost a fraction of what it costs to run a train, and it can do so with smart technology that will not require a fancy switching system. In this particular instance, it would make some of the single-track railways perfect for conversion to autonomous vehicle lanes (AVL). Many of the railroad right of ways are 66 feet wide, and you could probably put in a trail next to the AVL so there could be a multi-purpose space created. Right now, I suppose that the shoe is on the other foot, so one can afford to be magnanimous about sharing the space, in theoretical sort of way.

Now, one could think that there is a limited use to this idea of railbeds and right of ways as an AVL, but one must look around the local surroundings. At one point or another there were rail lines that ran through cities and towns across America.

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In many towns, there was a mill or an industrial facility that had a rail siding to move the goods to and from the facility. If that is your town, there is a good chance you have a railbed right of way, or better yet an in-fee parcel in your town.

In some cases, the railways have been abandoned, but in other cases they still survive. If used as AVL, towns could create an area in each town and have their own taxi shuttle for limited costs. It could be run through the use of a bank card or there could be a transit card that is purchased and inserted in the area in front of your seat. Full automation, no labor costs, no sick days, a 365-day-a-year 24-hour transit service to take you the length of the route. This would help people who are having mobility problems as they might not have a car at all, because of whatever condition that inhibits their mobility imposes upon their motor skills.

I believe there is some utility in taking a cautious approach in reuse of these rail lines and the right of ways. More than anything, it is the culture of the reuse for trails that is ingrained in the common

mindset of the population as a recognized good. Any attempt to encroach upon the good, even it is a better idea, is not welcomed. So, if advocating for AVL's on old railbeds, one must be uncompromising.

I believe that autonomous vehicles are the future. Soon manned vehicles will be the minority. People can devote the time to doing what they do, instead of paying attention to the road. Of course, remember these vehicles will be slower moving to a certain extent, because they are not going to be programmed to break the law. It is probably a good idea to keep them separate in the early days. Manned vehicles will have a problem, or at least the driver will have an issue with the slower moving traffic. Wanting to go 70 in a 55 zone will be tough if the road is full of programmed cars that want to stay within the limit of the law. I think for the most part it would be a good idea to regulate their use in-town, instead of using buses, which in many cases could not be supported in smaller towns.

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