

POINT OF VIEW

Rail Rights-of-Way

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*Another
Resource
Endangered*

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A resource that man has fashioned out of nature is at risk. Railroad rights-of-way—unique strips of land with gentle grades and easy curves, longtime transportation arteries—are endangered by urban and suburban development. If lost to development or paved over, rights-of-way are difficult and costly to replace in rural areas and almost impossible to replace in urban settings.

Railroad rights-of-way are choice passageways between localities. Because railroads were built early in the nation's development, they were able to claim the best rights-of-way available.

Abandoned rights-of-way therefore are strategic pathways that may be needed again for future

use—for example, by high-speed passenger lines in rural areas or for access to urban centers. Freight railroads are not likely to tap unused rights-of-way to expand capacity; however, if rising oil prices make truck transportation too costly, freight companies may need the old rights-of-way to expand routes and access. In urban areas, rights-of-way can be revived for much-needed rail transit.

Patterns of Abandonment

The earliest railroad abandonments occurred in mountainous areas after mines had played out or timber had been cleared away; but these closings were not significant. The first major railroad aban-

The mostly private right-of-way for the Creve Coeur Line (Car 712 shown near Crow's Nest in metropolitan St. Louis, Missouri) has been paved over as Midland Boulevard. The line closed in July 1950; the eastern end of the right-of-way came within a few blocks of today's MetroLink light rail.

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donment was the dismantling of the Colorado Midland, primarily a mountain railroad, in the 1920s.

During the 1920s and 1930s, railroad abandonments continued in mountain areas. As the nation's roadway network expanded and the Great Depression took effect, low-traffic railroad branch lines, electric interurban lines, and urban and suburban streetcar lines ceased operation. Many rights-of-way were paved over to serve as roads, particularly in metropolitan areas.

The late 1940s brought the abandonment of the Missouri and Arkansas railroad, as well as the terminations of many urban and suburban streetcar lines. More streetcar lines ended service in the 1950s and railroad secondary and branch lines became a significant part of the abandonment trend.

The modern merger era began in the 1960s, producing additional abandonments. Rail closings continued into the 1970s, hastened in part by the Penn-Central bankruptcy and the subsequent reorganization of several lines into Conrail. Mergers and abandonments kept up through the 1980s and 1990s, with the supermerger era promising more to come as the millennium begins.

Lessons from St. Louis

The first MetroLink light rail line in St. Louis, Missouri, was easy to build because the Eads Bridge over the Mississippi River, the downtown tunnel, and the old Wabash Union Depot Line were intact. Likewise, the MetroLink line to Belleville, now under construction, was able to use the intact Louisville and Nashville right-of-way. Each line cost about \$20 million per mile.

Compare that ease and cost with the planned MetroLink Cross-County line to Shrewsbury via Clayton. A substantial portion of the Cross-County line must be built where the tracks of the Rock Island Railroad and the University Streetcar Line had been removed and the rights-of-way paved for Forest Park Parkway. Projected costs for the Cross-County line are about \$50 million per mile—however, that figure also includes inflation.

Consider a few more examples of the fates of rights-of-way in the St. Louis area. The extensive private right-of-way of the old St. Charles streetcar line was paved over to widen St. Charles Rock Road; a portion remains as a power-line right-of-way west of Lindbergh Boulevard. The private right-of-way of the old Creve Coeur Streetcar Line ran from Kingsland Avenue in University City to Creve Coeur Lake; it has become an extension of

Vernon Avenue and has been used to widen and extend Midland Boulevard. The city-owned Water Works Railway was torn up to become Hall Street.

Public Responsibility

These examples of lost rights-of-way in St. Louis are typical of what has happened around the nation. Although roadway proponents consider the replacement of rail rights-of-way beneficial and necessary, the United States cannot afford to yield established but currently unused rail paths to more roads and highways. Again, the St. Louis Metro Link examples demonstrate the economies of reusing preserved rights-of-way.

The preservation of railroad rights-of-way is a public responsibility and opportunity that should not be left to the railroads. Railroad companies operate in competitive markets and cannot be expected to maintain unneeded land that ties up capital, incurs property taxes, and adds other expenses of ownership.

The federal rails-to-trails law [16 U.S.C. 1247 (d)] is not adequate to protect rights-of-way. Under this law, desirability for trail use—not suitability for future railroad use—is the criterion for preserving a right-of-way. The law can allow a useless right-of-way to be preserved, but one with strategic potential for the future may be lost forever. Moreover, does anyone believe that trail advocates will give back a right-of-way cheerfully and without a challenge?

In the 1990s, more cities were operating, building, planning, or proposing light rail transit lines, and additional mergers reduced the number of railroads in most of the nation to two. Concerned about monopolies, policy makers are unlikely to allow the number of railroads to decrease further. Therefore, the current round of abandonments is likely to be the last big one. It is essential to preserve newly abandoned rights-of-way for future rail transit and railroad purposes.

Another right-of-way in St. Louis, the old Illinois Terminal interurban line from McKinley Bridge to Tucker Boulevard, is now under threat; the right-of-way may be in the path of the planned Mississippi River Highway Bridge. The preliminary bridge designs and maps released to the public have made clear the danger to a valuable right-of-way.

The federal government must act promptly to save railroad rights-of-way. If not, states, cities, and counties must take action.