Acquisition of the Saluda Grade Rail Corridor

FINAL REPORT

September 2026



Photo: Sam Little

North Carolina Division of Parks and Recreation

DNCR
North Carolina Department of Natural & Cultural Resources



176 Overpass



Pavement Under Track 2



Shepherd Street, Hendersonville

The North Carolina Division of Parks and Recreation (Division) has been diligently working to have the Saluda Grade Rail Corridor become part of the state trails system through collaboration with the Saluda Grade Trails Conservancy (SGC) and Conserving Carolina, the North Carolina representative of the Saluda Grade Trails Conservancy.

The enacting legislation that authorized and funded the purchase of the future Saluda Grade State Trail corridor was included in two session laws. The first, Session Law 2023-134, Section 14.5. which allocated $12 million for the purchase of the North Carolina section of the corridor and authorized the Saluda Grade State Trail upon its purchase and transfer to the Department of Natural and Cultural Resources. The second, Session Law 2024-57, Section 2H.7.1 allocated an additional $4.25 million for the purchase of the corridor. These session laws brought the total allocated funding for the purchase of the future Saluda State Trail Corridor to $16.25 million.

The Saluda Grade rail corridor was an active rail-line until 2001. It is known for being the steepest standard-gauge mainline railway grade in the United States. The corridor is envisioned as being transformed into a 31.5 mile multi-use trail spanning from Inman, SC to Zirconia, NC. Of the 31.5 total miles, 16 miles will be in North Carolina.

Below is a summary of progress and tasks completed since the interim report in 2024.

Saluda Grade Multipurpose Active Tourism Rail and Hiking Corridor Feasibility Study

December 2024

Per Session Law 2023-134, Section 14.5 the Division completed a study to determine the feasibility of a multipurpose active tourism rail and hiking corridor on that portion of the Norfolk Southern W-Line rail corridor (Saluda Grade Line) from the City of Hendersonville to either the Town of Tryon or the Town of Saluda. The findings of this report included:

- Multiple, detailed studies need to be conducted on the corridor
- Initial cost estimates show that it will be prohibitive to construct both rail and trail within the corridor.
- Due to constraints in the corridor, it is not possible to construct both trail and rail within the corridor.
- Prior to construction, we need to ensure a concessionaire is willing to manage, maintain and invest into a mutiuse active tourism rail.

View the final feasibility study here.

Regular Collaborative Meetings with Partner Organizations

2024 to Present

The Division has regular meetings with Conserving Carolina to discuss progress on the acquisition, due diligence, trail design, and potential trail projects for the corridor. We also sit on the NC Saluda Grade Steering Committee, which meets every other month, and attend the Saluda Grade Conservancy Board Meetings, which initially met every two weeks and then transitioned to monthly meetings. Division staff provide critical information to these groups regarding future ownership by the state and the requirements of becoming a state trail.









Photos from Celebration for Purchase in Tryon, NC

Purchase of the Corridor by the Saluda Grade Conservancy

June 2025

The Saluda Grade Conservancy successfully closed on the property. After negotiations with Norfolk Southern, the final settlement was lower than initially appraised. The North Carolina portion was purchased for $12,944,855 including some closing costs and due diligence. This left allocated funding unused in the amount of $3,305,145.

Attended the Celebration for the Purchase in Tryon, NC

July, 2025

Conserving Carolina and partners hosted an event to celebrate the official purchase of the corridor in downtown Tryon, NC. The event included informational stations from critical partners and remarks from key stakeholders, including Department of Natural and Cultural Resources (DNCR) Chief Deputy Secretary, Maggie Thompson. The Division attended and promoted this event.

Appalachian Regional Initiative for Stronger Economies (ARISE) program

October, 2025 to June, 2026

Conserving Carolina was awarded a federal Appalachian Regional Initiative for Stronger Economies (ARISE) grant for $450,000 in August, 2024. The project kicked off in October 2025 after being delayed due to Hurricane Helene. A portion of this grant provided funding for planning for community engagement and economic engagement for the future Saluda Grade State Trail. The Division was part of the Saluda Grade Trail ARISE Advisory Group. This group provided input for the duration of the planning process, which produced a Community Engagement Plan, Economic Development Plan, and Destination Marketing Plan for the trail.

View the final reports here:
Saluda Grade Trail Community Engagement Plan
Saluda Grade Trail Economic Development Plan
Saluda Grade Trail Destination Marketing Plan

Collaborated with the City of Saluda on Initial Development

March, 2026

The Division reviewed and approved a conceptual plan for initial development of a parking area within the corridor as a portion of McCreery Park in downtown Saluda. The City completed a master plan for McCreery Park in 2024, which identifies parking and trail within the rail corridor. In the long term, this area will become a trailhead and a portion of the future Saluda Grade State Trail.









Photos from Public Forum in Columbus, NC

Attended the Public Forum for the Saluda Grade Trail in Columbus, NC

April, 2026

As a portion of the ARISE program grant, Conserving Carolina and PAL: Play, Advocate, Live Well (the SC partner of the Saluda Grade Conservancy) held a public forum at Polk County High School on April 23rd, 2026. The Division attended this event and interacted with the over 300 community members, local leaders, and regional planners that gathered to review the project's progress.

Surface Transportation Board Sponsorship Determination

June, 2026

The Saluda Grade Rail Corridor was approved through a Notice Interim Trail Use (NITU) by the Surface Transportation Board (STB) in March of 2025. This interim trail use (railbanking) is done to allow the rail corridor to stay intact and allow for trail use along the corridor, rather than the corridor being abandoned and losing the corridor to individual interests, with the stipulation that if there is ever a need for rail in the corridor in the future, it could be used again for that use. This allows the corridor to be kept intact and act as a corridor for a trail to benefit the communities it runs through and the residents and visitors to NC. Without railbanking, the corridor would be broken up to individual owners and not be a viable rail or trail corridor in the future. However, for interim trail use to be approved a Sponsor must take over the oversight of the corridor to ensure that if needed for rail use in the future it could be converted back.

On December 2, 2024, the Saluda Grade Trails Conservancy, Inc. (SGTC), filed a request for issuance of a Notice of Interim Trail Use or abandonment (NITU) under the National Trails System Act, 16 U.S.C. § 1247(d), to establish interim trail use/railbanking on the Line. This was subsequently approved by STB and SGTC has entered into a Trail Use Agreement with Norfolk Southern Railway Company for the ITU.

It has been determined that upon transfer of the Saluda Grade corridor (the North Carolina section) to the state that DNCR is able to enter into a Trail Use Agreement as the sponsor for the ITU for the corridor.

Technical Correction for Remaining Allocated Funds

July 2026

Due to the purchase of the corridor being lower than originally estimated, there was a remaining legislative appropriation in the sum of $3,305,145. A July 2026 technical correction allows these remaining funds to be allocated toward additional activities such as trail planning, design and development for the future Saluda Grade State Trail in addition to the remaining due diligence activities required for the transfer to the state.



Photo: Traffic Planning and Design, Inc.



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Transfer of Ownership to Ecusta Rail Trail LLC (Subsidiary of Conserving Carolina)

August, 2026

The Saluda Grade Conservancy transferred the ownership of the rail corridor to Ecusta Rail Trail, LLC, which is a subsidiary of Conserving Carolina. This transfer allows Conserving Carolina to continue working through the due diligence with the purchase, which includes handling the encroachments and easements that are currently on the property. Once this process is complete, the property will be transferred to the State.

Request for Proposals for Rail Removal

August 2026

Conserving Carolina and PAL: Play, Advocate, Live Well released a Request for Proposals for removal of the rail and ties in August of 2026. Several contractors have submitted proposals and estimates for the removal of the rail equipment within the corridor. This process is ongoing and removal is expected in early 2027. It should be noted that any profit made by this effort is required to be used for development of the trail.

Application for ARISE Implementation Grant

September 2026

The Division provided a letter of support and entered into a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU with Conserving Carolina; PAL: Play. Advocate. Live Well. (PAL); Saluda Grade Trail Conservancy (SGTC); Town of Tryon, North Carolina; City of Landrum, South Carolina; and Spartanburg County, South Carolina) to submit an application for the federal Appalachian Regional Initiative for Stronger Economies (ARISE) Implementation grant. This grant program is a phase two of the community and economic engagement grant that concluded in June of 2026. This program provides up to $10 million for multi-state projects.