

# Acquisition of the Saluda Grade Rail Corridor

# **INTERIM REPORT**

## 2024



Photo: Sam Little



North Carolina Division of Parks and Recreation



The Division has been diligently working on the Saluda Grade Feasibility Study as required by Session Law 2023-134, Section 14.5. To date, the Division has worked closely with Conserving Carolina, the North Carolina representative of the Saluda Grade Conservancy. Below are items that have been undertaken to have the Saluda Grade Rail Corridor become part of the state trails system.

1. **Drafted a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)**, which has been approved by the Department’s legal counsel and the Saluda Grade Conservancy and is expected to be signed in the next month.
2. **Drafted a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA)** to allow payment of the \$12 million as identified in Session Law 2023-134, Section 14.5(c) for the purchase of the rail corridor and for earnest money deposit toward the purchase of the Saluda Grade rail corridor, and related assessment, due diligence, and transaction costs.
3. **Drafted MOA for Capacity Building Funds** for the Saluda Grade Land Conservancy for their use in promoting the Saluda Grade Rail Corridor as a State Trail.
4. **Have and continue to meet with Conserving Carolina biweekly** to collaborate on the purchase of the rail corridor from Norfolk Southern and work through any issues that have arisen.
5. **Have and continue to work with Conserving Carolina as a critical stakeholder** in their study to determine the feasibility and cost of conversion of the Saluda Grade rail corridor in Polk County, which will provide a connecting trail from the Ecusta Trail to the French Broad River State Paddle Trail. *(Saluda Grade Trail feasibility study is being developed by Traffic Planning and Design.)*

Per Session Law 2023-134, Section 14.5, the Division is performing 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 Division is studying this feasibility from the North Carolina-South Carolina state line (Town of Tryon) to the City of Hendersonville.

To date the Division has completed or is in the process of working on:

- GIS analysis by staff to study any topography; natural and cultural resources; existing facilities; damage to the existing corridor; and any infringement into the provided railroad right-of-way
  - › **Initial findings:**
    - There has been extensive damage to the railroad corridor. These include washouts and overgrowth of vegetation in the 20-plus years that trains have not run on the corridor and others.
    - There are homes, businesses, and debris well within the provided ROW along the length of the corridor. This will require a survey to verify.
    - The terrain drastically limits the area within the corridor that is sustainable for trail and rail development.
    - There are 7 bridges that will need an engineering study to determine their ability to run either active tourism rail or a trail across.
    - There are 24 on-grade road crossings, 3 overpasses, and 3 pedestrian crossings in the corridor.

■ Establishment of the Saluda Grade Conservation and Development Advisory Council

› **Members:**

- Alan Peoples, Mayor of Tryon, NC
- Autumn Ratcliff, Henderson County
- Janna Bianculli, Henderson County
- Kieran Roe\*, executive director Conserving Carolina
- Mike Reeves\*, Saluda Historic Depot and Museum Board
- Myron Yoder, Polk Co Commissioners, chair
- Sara Bell, President and CEO of Polk County Community Foundation
- Tangie Morgan, Mayor of Saluda, NC

*\*Ex officio members*

■ First meeting held on June 26, 2024

- › **Attendance included:** Alan Peoples, Autumn Ratcliff, Janna Bianculli, Kieran Roe, Mike Reeves, Noah Wood (representative for Sara Bell), Rebecca Robinson, Tangie Morgan, Dave Head, Kat Deutsch, and Smith Raynor

› **Meeting Agenda:**

- Introductions
- **Legislation Overview:** Reviewed the legislation around the Saluda Grade Trail, including the establishment of the Saluda Grade Conservation and Development Advisory Council
- Reason for Council
- State Trails Overview
  - State trails are units of the state parks system that are authorized by the General Assembly.
  - Unlike typical state parks, state trails are owned, managed and maintained by the land manager of the land over which the trail runs.
- State trail standards:
  - Enough potential length and beauty to attract significant use from regions outside the local area. The planned length should be a minimum of 100 miles.
  - The length of the trail needs to span several different jurisdictions and have minimal and surmountable incompatible features such as roads, intrusive development, or large water bodies.
  - Statewide significant natural, cultural, scenic and recreational value.
- Ideally, initial funding will be provided for trail development.
- Once a state trail is authorized, a partner organization is identified.
- The Division oversees a master planning effort for each new state trail.
- Conditions and Initial Findings of the NC State Parks Feasibility Study



Photo: Traffic Planning and Design, Inc.



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