



## **NICKEL PLATE TRAIL FAQ**

### **Project Overview**

#### **What is the current proposal for the Nickel Plate Trail?**

The current proposal includes 9.2 miles of up to 14-foot wide paved trail connecting Fishers and Noblesville from 96<sup>th</sup> Street to Pleasant Street. The project fulfills both cities' dedication to connectivity for pedestrian and recreational activity across communities.

#### **What is the timeline?**

Once the decision is made to pursue the Nickel Plate Trail, the process for rail banking will begin. The federal application process for rail banking should take six to 12 months to complete. Then, construction may begin. The actual construction timeline and possible phasing of the project will vary depending on design and budget approval from both cities.

#### **What is the process to convert the line from rail to trail?**

The federal government adopted a program known as rail banking in 1983 as part of its National Trails System Act to facilitate the conversion of rail to trail. Rail banking allows the owners of the rail corridor to convert the railroad to a pedestrian trail, while preserving ("banking") the right to re-establish a rail service along the line should that ever be needed or desired.

The federal Surface Transportation Board (STB) oversees the railbanking process, which could take anywhere from six to 12 months, depending on response time of the STB. Once the entire corridor is approved by the STB, municipalities are free to begin work converting the rails to a trail on their own schedules.

#### **What will the Nickel Plate Trail cost?**

The estimated cost to convert 9.2 miles from rail to trail from 96<sup>th</sup> Street to Pleasant Street is approximately \$9.3 M, assuming standard crossings at intersections. Additional construction of the Noblesville section of the Nickel Plate proceeding north from downtown has not been estimated to give the Hoosier Heritage Port Authority and the communities in northern Hamilton County an opportunity to evaluate their own interests in rail or trail opportunities.

Total costs are subject to change and value engineering for cost savings will be explored as part of the initial design phase.

### **How will the cost be split between Fishers and Noblesville?**

The Fishers section (96<sup>th</sup> Street to 146<sup>th</sup> Street) is estimated at \$4.4 million. Fishers plans to use a variety of traditional methods of funding infrastructure improvements including: bonds, Parks operations budget, etc.

The Noblesville section (146<sup>th</sup> Street to Pleasant Street) is estimated at \$4.15 million.

The balance is dedicated to track removal. This is subject to change, and value engineering for cost savings will be explored as part of the initial design phase.

### **Will the trail run over the existing tracks or alongside them?**

The trail will be constructed in place of the existing tracks, which will be removed and salvaged. In order to build the trail alongside existing tracks, industry standards require 120+ feet of right of way. The existing right of way ranges from 14-50 feet.

### **How will it affect neighboring properties?**

While neighboring properties will experience increased pedestrian traffic, industry studies have shown that property values and economic impact increase with the development of quality trails such as the Nickel Plate Trail.

### **What are some of the benefits of installing a pedestrian trail in this area?**

Studies have shown dedicated pedestrian trails would:

- Improve safe walkability and connectivity between communities and neighborhoods
- Provide daily, year-round recreational amenity
- Spur economic growth along the trail for local business opportunities
- Contribute to re-development of residential areas
- Capture economic return of \$3-4 per user, per trip
- Increase surrounding property values
- Create new opportunities to enjoy art, history, culture, health and the outdoors

### **Can Fishers and Noblesville combine rail and trail together?**

The Federal Highway Administration recommends the average corridor width to fit both rail and trail be 126 feet with the trail averaging eight to 10 feet.

The existing right-of-way of the Nickel Plate corridor measures at 50 feet on average. Because of this, we determined the option of safely combining rail and trail is just not feasible given the substantial increase in costs to pay for right-of-way, property acquisition and bridge widening. Whereas, the current proposal for trail would not impact adjacent properties.

## **Hoosier Heritage Port Authority**

### **Who owns the Nickel Plate Line?**

In 1995, the Cities of Fishers and Noblesville acquired the Nickel Plate Rail line, which runs from Indianapolis to Tipton. The communities then formed the Hoosier Heritage Port Authority (HHPA) to manage the line as the rail operators and later allowed Hamilton County to become an equal one-third owner of the rail.

### **What is the Indiana Transportation Museum's role with the Nickel Plate Line and HHPA?**

The HHPA contracted with the Indiana Transportation Museum (ITM) to serve as the rail operator. As the operator, the ITM was charged with maintaining the rail and was permitted to run its tourism trains as part of the agreement.

In the summer of 2016, the HHPA suspended the operations agreement with the ITM due to safety concerns, lack of insurance held by the ITM, and allegations of mismanagement.

In December of 2016, the HHPA decided to develop an RFP to seek a new operator rather than re-contract with the ITM.

### **What will happen to the Indiana State Fair Train and Polar Express?**

In 2015, the Nickel Plate Rail's governing body, the Hoosier Heritage Port Authority (HHPA), in partnership with rail line's operator, the Indiana Transportation Museum (ITM), discovered extensive repair to the rail was required to safely operate the line. In addition, HHPA requested several documents from ITM that were not provided in a timely manner, including a maintenance plan; annual budget and grant report; qualifications and certification of locomotive engineers, railroad conductors, brakemen and dispatchers as approved by the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA); etc.

As a result, the HHPA suspended ITM as its rail operator and ceased rail operations until further notice. The HHPA is expected to issue a request for proposal to consider hiring a new rail operator.

The City of Noblesville is waiting to hear from the Hoosier Heritage Port Authority and the communities of northern Hamilton County before considering whether to extend the trail further north from its downtown or allow for a new rail operator for an excursion train.

### **Is there an opportunity to honor the history of the rail line along the new trail?**

During the design and engineering phase, we plan to engage our community partners to seek ways to honor the history of the rail either through public art installations or historical artifacts.

## **Mass Transit**

### **Does converting the Nickel Plate to a trail mean we'll never bring mass transit to this section of Hamilton County?**

The Central Indiana mass transit initiative known as Indy Connect is currently focused on various transit corridors, including the Red line that runs through Westfield and Carmel, as well as the Purple and Blue lines. No local funding has been committed to the Green Line, which has historically been planned along the Nickel Plate line through Noblesville and Fishers. The Green Line would cost an estimated \$300-\$500 million to construct to convert the current rail corridor for either bus rapid transit or light rail technology. However, the federal railbanking program specifically allows communities to revert a trail back to rail if that use is ever deemed necessary again. Officials from both cities encourage transit planners to look for alternative north-south routes if residents someday approve the funding necessary for mass transit.

### **How does this affect the proposed Green Line?**

The Green Line was originally proposed as part of a regional transit plan that connected to the proposed expanded Marion County transit plan. Recent Marion County transit plans no longer include the Green Line and both the environmental study and financial model by the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) on the feasibility of the Green Line was never completed.

### **What about the potential of light rail mass transit?**

In 2014, the Indiana General Assembly passed a law that would allow Indianapolis and surrounding counties to adopt a new income tax to support mass transit in the form of rapid bus transit. Light rail transit was excluded from this law, making the probability of construction nonexistent.

### **I've heard a lot about bus rapid transit as an alternative to the trail. What would that mean for activity along the corridor?**

With the proposed Green Line, the frequency of Bus Rapid Transit would be: M-F: 1 bus every 10 - 20 minutes and Sa-Su: 1 bus every 20 minutes.

## **Safety**

### **I'm concerned about safety of my property with the increase pedestrian traffic. What have other communities experienced in terms of increased crime?**

Fishers Police Department (FPD) conducted research with other regional public safety departments regarding crime on or adjoining trails. Anecdotally, there was no change in crime as it relates to the residences along the trail. In fact, there was a general sense of increased safety because of the increased number of pedestrian traffic.

The one area of increased crime related to the trail was an increase in the number of thefts from vehicles parked in common areas used to access the trail. Specifically for Fishers, FPD's ability to patrol the trail is significantly enhanced because of the location of FPD headquarters, situated along the trail at

the midpoint in Fishers. Officers will be able to easily patrol the trail via bicycle, golf cart, and off-duty use for fitness and pleasure.

According to a study conducted by IU Public Policy Institute on the impact of trails in Indiana, a high proportion of users (79 to 95 percent) in all six communities felt strongly that the trails were safe.

**Will the trail be designated a dusk-to-dawn park or a commuter trail available to use after dark?**

This will be determined after community listening sessions have occurred in conjunction with both city's public safety and parks and recreation staff.

**What is the plan for trail crossings at intersections?**

There are eight major intersections the Nickel Plate Line crosses between 96<sup>th</sup> Street and Pleasant Street. All design is conceptual at this proposal stage. Further input and design would be required to determine the most effective crossings for each street including possible bridges or tunnels at the busiest intersections to ensure pedestrian safety.

Fishers intersections include: Hague Road, 106<sup>th</sup> Street, Lantern Road, 126<sup>th</sup> Street, 131<sup>st</sup> Street, and 141<sup>st</sup> Street. Noblesville intersections include: 146<sup>th</sup> Street, Pleasant Street, and possibly others depending on the potential design of the Pleasant Street expansion project.

Engineering and city Police Departments will work together to ensure there is clear visibility and proper signage for both the trail and roads to properly alert drivers.

## **Trail Connectivity**

**Will the trail follow paths that are already in existence, such as Cheeney Creek Natural Area, or run parallel to existing trails?**

Based on feedback from listening sessions, certain sections of the Nickel Plate Trail may utilize existing trails.

In Noblesville, the Nickel Plate Trail would cross over Pleasant Street where pedestrians can then turn west onto the future and current sections of Midland Trace Trail, which will connect with the future Riverwalk and lead north to the White River Greenway trail heading to Forest Park.

**Is there potential for this trail to connect to others in the county or region?**

We plan to pursue any opportunities to connect the Nickel Plate Trail to others in the region.

## **General**

### **How do trails effect property values or economic impact?**

Locally, a study by the IU Public Policy Institute on the economic impact of the Indianapolis Cultural Trail shows that property values within 500 feet (approximately one block) of the Trail have increased 148% from 2008 to 2014, an increase of \$1 billion in assessed property value.

The Trail has increased revenue and customer traffic for many businesses along Massachusetts and Virginia Avenues. Business surveys reported part-time and full-time jobs have been added due to the increases in revenue and customers in just the first year.

Users are spending while on the Trail. The average expected expenditure for all users is \$53, and for users from outside the Indianapolis area the average exceeds \$100. In all, Trail users contributed millions of dollars in local spending.

Indianapolis visitors are attracted to the Cultural Trail; 17 percent of users surveyed were from outside the Indianapolis area.

A separate study by the IU Public Policy Institute on the impact of trails in Indiana surveyed six Indiana communities with newly developed trails. Of those surveyed, an average of 92 percent of all trail users said they viewed their community more favorably because of the trail. In fact, in both Indianapolis and Portage, all of the trail users surveyed said they viewed the city more favorably because of the trail. Trail neighbors were asked if the trail development had affected adjacent property values and whether they viewed their neighborhood as improved because of the trail. Across the six communities, 86 to 95 percent of the neighbors said the trail had either increased or had no effect on adjacent property values.

The Monon Trail has not had a published study showing the impact, however Carmel City Councilor Ron Carter stated in *Talk of the Town*, a Whitley County news source. The following is an excerpt:

*“The property within a six block radius has become a magnet for \$1 billion dollars in investment. He said that there are now properties valued at \$800,000 to \$1 million adjacent to the trail and that a \$400,000 per property housing area has been constructed specifically to be near the location and to have access to it for their residents.” Carter spoke about companies drawn to Carmel because of the trail, including an employer that brought with it 850 jobs. “We offered nothing in the way of tax incentives, but we did offer a full package of amenities that all of our residents enjoy,” Carter said. That employer, enticed by amenities such as the Monon Trail, has since reinvested further in the community. Carter found that some of the most vocal opponents to the project are some of those who’ve benefited most from its development, finding unique ways to capitalize on the space.*

### **Can we remove stop signs at Rail Road crossing now that tracks are not operational?**

Signage cannot be removed until the railbanking application process is completed.

### **How can I learn more?**

Residents and businesses are encouraged to provide comments, ask questions or to request a meeting with staff via email at [NPT@fishers.in.us](mailto:NPT@fishers.in.us) or [NPT@noblesville.in.us](mailto:NPT@noblesville.in.us).