Let's start with a “birth of a rail-trail” story: In 1993, officials in the growing city of Denton, Texas, struck a deal with Union Pacific railroad for the rights to an unused stretch of freight track. With the decline of rail business in the area, the eight-mile line running southeast from the city center had become a financial liability to the railroad company. However, the people of Denton were able to make good use of the corridor: In 1998 the Denton Branch Rail Trail opened, launching a sustained growth in biking and walking in the city that continues today.

But Denton officials had their eyes on an even bigger prize. Their city is just 38 miles as the crow flies from the center of Dallas, and the leaders of Denton looked into their crystal ball and predicted their city would do some growing in the decades to come. Their hunch was that this expansion would require capacity for mass transit, and that the eight miles of corridor they now controlled—heading
directly from Denton toward downtown Dallas—would one day be worth much more than the $10,000 they paid for it.

"We always recognized we had to preserve this corridor for future transportation uses," says Bob Tickner, Denton’s former superintendent of parks planning. "We knew it would one day become passenger rail; we just didn’t know when."

Tickner’s predictions about population growth and rail service were right on the money. When Dallas Area Rapid Transit (DART) began buying up sections of line for its burgeoning light rail system, Denton found itself in a strong position, owning rights to a corridor that had become a key piece of the transportation plan for the Dallas metropolitan region.

And the federal railbanking legislation that enabled the disused corridor to be converted into a rail-trail in the first place now made possible the reactivation of train service on the same corridor.

Over the previous decade, the rail-trail had become such a popular amenity that simply erasing the trail in order to build the new rail line wasn’t an option. Conscious of the need to get the most out of this valuable corridor in an increasingly built-out environment, the city’s planners got
creative. As the Champagne bottle was being smashed to christen Denton County Transportation Authority's (DCTA's) A-train in 2011, the people of Denton were celebrating the reopening of their new Denton Branch Rail Trail. A busy trail popular with bike riders, walkers and joggers, now runs alongside the commuter train line, separated from it by nothing more than a broad ditch. Hello, rail-with-trail.

A Changing America
For those used to a more traditional definition of rail-trail, the reactivation of a rail line on a rail-trail corridor, or the presence of a regularly running train adjacent to a trail, is a jolting anomaly. However, rail-with-trails—trails alongside active freight, passenger or tourist train lines—account for 10 percent of America’s more than 1,800 rail-trails. They are in the biggest cities and most isolated landscapes. They are long and they are short. They run alongside giant, chugging freight engines and beside quiet, sleek light rail cars. Like rail-trails everywhere, rails-with-trails defy pigeonholing.

And their numbers are increasing. In 2000, Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC) recorded 61 rails-with-trails in 20 states. As of 2014, RTC has recorded 188 trails in 42 states, a growth of 308 percent. For many rail planners and advocates, rails-with-trails represent the next great frontier.

"Rails-with-trails aren’t new," says Kelly Pack, RTC’s director of rail development and lead author of the 2013 report, America’s Rail-with-Trails: A Resource for Planners, Agencies and Advocates on Trails Along Active Railroad Corridors. "Part of the Illinois Prairie Path runs alongside an active line. But even rail-trail users and supporters are just now becoming aware of how common they are."

Pack says that, in the same way the rail-trail movement of the 1970s and 1980s was born from a shift in the nation’s development away from rail transportation, the burgeoning popularity of rails-with-trails reflects the next phase in the evolution of transportation—a more built-out environment coupled with a resurgent interest in urban transit. With fewer idle rail lines available for conversion, trail and transit developers are turning to active lines. And at the same time deactivations are decreasing, construction of new transit systems, particularly light rail, is increasing. So is the number of Americans biking and walking, as well as the demand for safe places to do so. These converging patterns have created a perfect storm for rails-with-trails.

"These are rail corridors around which there is a clear need to provide access for people walking or riding," Pack says. "They are in busy, populated environments where people must get from A to B. On top of that, the success of transit systems relies heavily on people being able to quickly and conveniently get to the stations. The combination of a trail with new rail systems is a match made in heaven in terms of urban connectivity, and that’s why we’re seeing the growth that we are."

Heavy Load
While transit rail has been supportive of rails-with-trails, the story is often different when it comes to freight. The handful of railroad companies that control the bulk of America’s freight traffic continues to express formal opposition to the concept of a trail alongside their lines. Unlike public agencies providing transit systems, which have an interest in improving people’s accessibility to their stations, companies whose business is carrying freight typically do not see anything to gain from encouraging human traffic along or near their tracks. Some of these major carriers, including CSX, Burlington Northern Santa Fe (BNSF) and Union Pacific, have policies that explicitly discourage rail-with-trail development. The sticking point is liability: the threat of expensive legal action should a person be killed or injured by a train while using a rail-with-trail.

"The liability issue is real, and it runs into the tens of millions of dollars," says Charles Marshall, a longtime RTC board member. Marshall well understands the
viewpoints of both the rail and trail sides. He occupied key executive positions with Conrail and, later, Genesee & Wyoming Inc., which operates short-line and regional freight railroads in the U.S. and overseas. “Yes, it is becoming increasingly accepted that rails-with-trails are safe. But irrespective of how small the level of risk is, the liability issue is still there. For these freight railroads, there has to be an answer to the question, Why should I allow a trail?”

Marshall believes one thing trails can offer freight carriers is a solution to the problem of trespassers. Providing a safe, convenient and intentional pathway has been shown to reduce the incentive of people to walk along the tracks illegally—itself a liability issue for the corridor owner.

“It is the challenge for the trail-building community over the next decades to give the major freight carriers a reason to be invested,” Marshall says. “Trespasser prevention is certainly one opportunity. Another is working to change state liability laws. By providing greater protection for railroads from prosecution in the event of an accident, the quid pro quo could be that railroads have to allow trails alongside their rights-of-way.”

**Cost and Liability**

Despite his patient optimism, Marshall is right about the liability issue. The Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) has proven itself to be incredibly supportive of repurposing its disused rail corridors, and has created 10 rail-trails throughout its region. But SEPTA Real Estate Director Gerald M. Maier makes no bones about the fact that, for his agency, trails alongside active lines are a whole other ballgame.

“We are in the business of providing transportation options, and that’s why we’ve supported the trails that we have,” Maier says. “We have looked at rails-with-trails, and we’re concerned about the safety risks. SEPTA is sympathetic, but very averse [to the risk]. The issue really goes to safety and liability.”

Maier references a proposal currently before SEPTA to extend the Pennypack Trail in Montgomery County across the regional rail system’s West Trenton Line.

“The extension will cost Montgomery County $900,000 over the next 30 years, mostly for at-grade crossing devices and maintenance costs,” he says.

Elsewhere in southeastern Pennsylvania, local advocates for development of the Chester Creek Branch Rail Trail are seeing firsthand that if a rail corridor is under consideration for reactivation, it adds a layer of complexity to even the best laid rail-trail plans. Almost 12 years after the Chester Creek Rail Trail Feasibility Study proposed a trail along a corridor that SEPTA is considering for future reactivation, the plan still sits on the drawing board. "Railroads are very formal organizations and are subject to numerous laws, regulations and governing authorities," the study authors wrote. “It is important to realize that, [because we are working with] a bureaucratic organization, the process will not be quick.”

“Not quick” is putting it delicately. In nearby Philadelphia, the story of how CSX came to allow the Schuylkill River Trail to cross its active line at grade is a 14-year epic, brought to a conclusion in favor of the trail planners only after a CSX lawsuit backfired and trail advocates created a groundswell of public pressure.

Worn in but not worn down by the CSX/Schuylkill River Trail experience, Sarah Clark Stuart, policy director for the Bicycle Coalition of Greater Philadelphia, says that rail-with-trail presents a far greater challenge than developing a trail along a disused corridor. “But all the easy-to-build corridors have already been built,” she says. “Now, many of the major gaps in trail systems are where the only opportunity is rail-with-trail. It’s a much harder next step.”

Stuart’s organization currently is working with SEPTA on the possible extension of the Radnor Trail northwest of Philadelphia. But SEPTA has put evaluation of the trail plan on hold as it eyes part of the corridor for possible activation of high-speed transit service. Stuart says the wisest course of action has been to proceed with great patience and try to appreciate the concerns of the rail agency.

“We scaled back the feasibility study for the time being. We’re studying several shorter sections not next to the rail corridor,” she says. “We’ll move forward with these, and we’ll just wait. Allowing a trail next to their high-speed rail line would be precedent-setting for them, so they’re proceeding very cautiously. We appreciate their concerns. In the end, we just have to be patient.”

**The Keys to Success**

Patience is a word that appears again and again in stories about how rail-with-trail projects get built. So is insurance. During her study of successful rails-with-trails across the country, RTC’s Pack found one thing many of them had in common was the insurance support of the local municipality or governing agency.
“More often than not, local governments that manage rails-with-trails include them within their existing umbrella policy for recreation facilities,” she says. “Sometimes there is no additional cost. But in some instances, the railroad has insisted the trail manager increase or carry an additional policy.”

In the single fatality involving a trail user on a rail-with-trail recorded during research for America's Rail-with-Trails, both the railroad and the trail manager were cleared of any liability because ample safety measures had been applied. In making its ruling in the case, the court found that the trail, in Bellingham, Wash., had in fact been effective in improving safety for pedestrians and cyclists.

For people who regularly ride, walk, jog or skate along rails-with-trails, the safety issue seems to be barely a thought. “I can’t really imagine why the train would be a problem,” says Ann Groninger. A personal injury lawyer based in Charlotte, N.C., she regularly rides the Charlotte Trolley Trail, a rail-with-trail through her city’s downtown that runs alongside a busy commuter light rail line. “I take my 4-year-old son on the trail. He’s learning how to ride a bike. I don’t think anything of it.”

Groninger was surprised to hear that concerns about safety continue to impede rail-with-trail projects. “It’s the road that presents my only safety concerns, not the train,” she says. She adds that the Charlotte Trolley Trail has had a transformative effect on the city. “If you could have seen what that corridor was like before the trail and train—there was nothing there,” she recalls. “Now, there are 10 new residential developments, micro-breweries and lots of people using the trail for getting around or just for exercise.”

More than a thousand miles to the west, back in Denton, Texas, users of the Denton Branch Rail Trail describe a similar experience. “When I rode next to the commuter train, the experience as it passed was quite charming and pleasing, if anything,” recalls Howard Draper, one of the founders of Denton’s now vibrant bike advocacy culture. “There’s a good-sized buffer, so I was never scared to ride next to the train.”

Similar to the Trolley Trail in Charlotte, the ability to co-locate multi-transportation modes in one corridor has had an outsized impact on the success of Denton’s development. “I think accessibility to education and employment opportunities made a convincing argument to keep the trail when they were planning reactivation of the train line,” Draper says.

**Access and Connections**

This idea of accessibility and mobility strikes at the core of the rail-with-trail debate. Many argue that, because rail corridors physically interrupt and divide existing neighborhoods and communities, disconnecting people from destinations that might be nearby but on the other side of the tracks, rail companies have a responsibility to address the resultant mobility problems for nearby residents. “Saying that ‘No, a trail has no place around a rail corridor,’ is essentially a value statement that the mobility needs of the train passengers trump the mobility needs of all those people who live nearby,” says Tracy Hadden Loh, RTC’s director of research. “And when you consider the fact that oftentimes neighborhoods near train tracks are lower-income communities, the effort to build rails-with-trails to improve local mobility and safety becomes an issue of social justice.”

In Washington, D.C., creating safe connections between neighborhoods on both sides of a busy rail line was a prime consideration in planning the Metropolitan Branch Trail. The initial 1.5-mile section of this urban trail-in-progress has seven access points. “It was important to consider not only the neighborhoods adjacent to the trail, but also those across the active tracks,” says Heather Deutsch, trail planner for the District Department of Transportation (DDOT). To that end, DDOT is building a $9-million pedestrian-bicycle bridge where hundreds of pedestrians used to cross the active tracks, putting themselves in danger.
Designing for Safety

Although chain-link fencing is one of the most common barriers used, a number of design options have been shown to keep trail users off the tracks and trail managers out of court. In Denton, only a broad ditch separates the trail from the live line. In downtown Pittsburgh, a short fence and a wide buffer separate the Three Rivers Heritage Trail from the active freight line it parallels. Alongside many trains, including the Reading and Northern Railroad in eastern Pennsylvania, riders and walkers happily enjoy the trail separated from the trains by nothing except the fresh breeze.

Things get complicated when the trail has to cross the tracks, hence the cost of Gerald Maier’s crossing lights and signage. Crossings are a flash-point issue in that bridges or tunnels are expensive, while at-grade crossings present challenging design issues. Even railroad companies that are supportive or tolerant of rails-with-trails can object to at-grade crossings, partly because they are concerned that they are where an accident is most likely to occur, despite their almost impeccable safety record.

Stuart believes that concerns about crossings are not reason enough to prevent construction of a rail-with-trail. “I do wish the railroad industry would work with communities to foster a culture of safely co-existing with their neighbors,” she says. “Being willing to accommodate public access under some conditions is a step in that direction.”

All Aboard

The Great Allegheny Passage (GAP) in western Maryland is an example of a symbiotic relationship, where a trail has benefited the train operation as much as the train has benefited the trail. Picture a recent October morning: the platform of the Western Maryland Railway Station in downtown Cumberland is packed with hundreds of sightseers awaiting the arrival of the restored 1916 Baldwin 2-8-0 diesel engine and carriages, a handsome old train that will carry them up into the Allegheny Mountains to enjoy the spectacular colors of the fall season.

Among them is the Foresman family, from Fredericksburg, Va. The parents and two children wait eagerly at the front of the long line with their bikes and helmets. The bikes will be loaded onto the Mountain Thunder for the 10-mile journey uphill to Frostburg, Md. There, the family will offload and enjoy a leisurely pedal back down the GAP to Cumberland. For many, it’s the perfect introduction to trail riding. “This is new for us,” says Piper Foresman, adding, however, that the adventure taps into a distant memory. “I remember going on a cross-country train trip when I was the children’s age.”

The Foresman’s visit to Cumberland for the train and trail ride includes a stay at a local hotel, a common visitor pattern that both trail and train supporters point to as evidence of the economic significance of rail-with-trail tourism.

Some 250 miles to the northeast, in Pennsylvania’s beautiful Lehigh Gorge, the evolution of rail-with-trail partnerships continues. Paul Fogal, co-owner of Pocono Whitewater in Jim Thorpe, Pa., is finalizing an agreement with the Lehigh Gorge Scenic Railway for a limited run of bike-carrying trains in the spring and fall. The railway line, operated by the Reading Blue Mountain and Northern Railroad, parallels the spectacular Lehigh Gorge State Park Trail as it runs north along the Lehigh River.

“Unless you live in New York City or another big city where you catch the train every day, this would be a remarkable experience,” Fogal says. “Many of the people that come up here have a strong interest in local history, and the railroad is a big part of that. The goal is to encourage people to visit the town and spend money with us and the railroad and the restaurants and all the other businesses in town.”

A Way Forward

Marshall believes the strategy for the rail-with-trail movement should be to continue to develop trails in these more favorable environments in order to build, over time, a solid appreciation of the safety benefits. Eventually, that will help reassure major freight carriers and generate greater public support for such trails. “When the day comes, when rails-with-trails are commonly supported and built, that will represent a terrific victory for the people of America,” he says.

A future encompassing rails-with-trails is one that many are working hard to realize. In September, RTC staff convened a historic meeting of trail and rail interests, bringing together for the first time around one table representatives of freight, transit and excursion rail industries with trail planners and advocates. The result, says Tom Sexton, director of RTC’s Northeast Regional Office, was a step forward in acknowledging concerns and constraints and in seeing where opportunities for cooperation exist.

“To hear rail and transit representatives say that ‘yes, trails may serve as a safe and effective means of helping to manage people along railroad corridors’ was a significant moment,” Sexton says. “That statement represented an interesting shift in how the major freight movers are even prepared to think about rails-with-trails.”

Maybe Marshall’s America of the future isn’t so far away.

Jake Lynch is the Editor-in-Chief of Rails to Trails magazine.