

# Chapter 5

## The Railroad Corridor as a Trail Corridor

The intent of this chapter is to identify how the rail corridor, if available for lease or purchase in all or part, could be incorporated into the core trail route. A range of potential scenarios is described below and each section of the corridor evaluated for feasibility as either a part of the core trail route or replacing the core trail route.



### Background

The Union Pacific Railroad and the Southern Pacific Railroad were approved for merger in 1997 by the federal government's Surface Transportation Board (STB). Included in the merger application was a request to abandon the 179-mile Tennessee Pass line from Canon City, Colorado to Sage (Gypsum), Colorado. Operational difficulties associated with the high altitude portion of the line were cited as the major reason for the abandonment request.

The merger was approved but the abandonment was not. The STB questioned the Union Pacific's ability to reroute traffic from the Tennessee Pass line to other track lines north and south of Colorado. The STB stated that they would reconsider the abandonment after the traffic rerouting had successfully occurred. Despite solving problems associated with that transition, UP has opted to not resubmit their request for abandonment of the Tennessee Pass line because of concerns about future demands for service and issues related to the Moffat Tunnel near Winter Park, Colorado.

At the time, the portion of the line through Eagle County remains wholly under the ownership of Union Pacific Railroad (UP).

### Options for Trail Use of the Rail Corridor

Each of the options defined below is entirely depended on approval action from UP as current owners of the corridor. As of October, 2000, representatives stated that the company is not interested in selling the entire corridor at this point in time. However, if their position were to change at some time in the near (1-5 years) or long term (5+ years), the following options could become possibilities:

- Option 1: Railroad sells to another railroad or non-railroad private sector owner.**  
Impact on Core Trail Plan: The Core Trail can be constructed without using the rail corridor, but along many sections would be more expensive and less direct than if the railroad corridor were available. The Core Trail Plan does depend on obtaining permission to cross the railroad corridor in a minimum of four locations so cooperation

from the railroad or other owner is critical for implementation. If a private, non-railroad party were to acquire ownership, negotiations for purchase of sections, edges, or crossings would occur with that entity.

- Option 2: Railroad corridor is acquired by state or local government and the existing rails remain intact** for future commuter rail use and some possible freight traffic.  
Impact on Core Trail Plan: There are many locations along the length of the track line through Eagle County where rail and trail can share the corridor. There are other sections where it is extremely difficult or impossible. The section by section analysis below addresses those locations.
- Option 3: Railroad corridor is acquired by state or local government and the rails are removed, but future rail transit use is planned.** Trail shares the corridor.  
Impact on Core Trail Plan: Same comments as above.
- Option 4: Railroad corridor is acquired by state or local government and rails are permanently removed** with no future plans for rail. Bridges can be easily retrofitted if only for trail use. All other constraints can be addressed with the exception of the contamination and hazard issues that exist in the area of the Gilman mines.  
Impact on Core Trail Plan: Trail could be constructed directly on existing rail platform. From a trails implementation viewpoint, this is the ideal scenario.
- Option 5: Railroad agrees to sell selected portions of the corridor** to local government for the purposes of completing critical section that are difficult to construct along the non-rail core trail alignment.  
Impact on Core Trail Plan: This option would allow bottlenecks in the core trail route to be resolved. By purchasing outside edges of the corridor in key locations, the rail operations would not be impacted and the trail implementation would not be curtailed or halted in certain areas such as Avon, Sage to Eagle, or Minturn.

## Summary of Options:

Option 4, trail on rail corridor after rails are removed, is most ideal from a trail building perspective and since is the easiest option to implement, it is not part of the section by section analysis that follows.

If at any point in the life span of this plan any of the above options become available, the rail corridor should be employed as the way to close the gaps that remain in the trail system at that time. Option 2 and 3 feature transit options which can blend easily with trails, although a rail freight component complicates matters.

The following summarized analysis identifies issues that would be faced under Option 2 and 3 “Trails with Rails”; and Option 5, pursuing purchase of narrow corridors on the outside edge of the corridor in the most critical locations. The following maps depict the width of the railroad right-of-way through Eagle County and constrained areas for shared rail and trail.

Railway Corridor map 1 of 3 here

Railway Corridor map 2 of 3 here

Railway Corridor map 3 of 3 here

## Analysis by Section:

**The majority of the corridor can accommodate the rail and trail together** but in many areas a separation barrier should be installed and in all cases minor and larger bridges will require retrofitting.

There are some segments where **it is not feasible for the rail and trail to share the corridor** due to severe constraints such as steep banks above and/or below the platform, sensitive areas such as wetlands on both sides, or hazard areas such as in Gilman and Belden. In these areas, it would be necessary for the trail to depart the corridor and be located in another alignment in existing road-rights of way or on private property easements. These areas include Eagle-Vail to Minturn North Bridge and Battle Mountain to Red Cliff.

The railroad was evaluated from Sage to Red Cliff. Red Cliff to Tennessee Pass was not included in this evaluation because trails in the populated areas are the priority focus of the current version of this trails plan. Each section of railroad corridor was evaluated in the field and with railroad maps for widths (varies from 75 feet to 250 feet), terrain constraints, demand for trail from the surrounding population, cost to mitigate shared rail impacts or costs to retrofit for trail, comparative cost of the non-rail core trail route, and ability to transition back and forth from the rail corridor to the core trail, if necessary.

### Sage to Downtown Eagle (Eby Creek Road):

Railroad corridor is very conducive to shared use with trail on outer edge of corridor, north edge best. Rail power lines located on south side from Sage to Brush Creek. Width is 100' for the majority of the distance between Sage and Eagle.

There are some short sections of double track line. Obstacles include narrow Brush Creek railroad bridge and Eagle River railroad bridge, bridge over Eby Creek Road and two other small bridges/box culverts along the route.

There is a high demand by the local population to link Gypsum and Eagle via a trail. Non-railroad Core Trail routes are hampered by timing issues (e.g. airport interchange in 2004, Cooley Mesa Road in 2003) or property ownership issues (e.g. Highway 6 trails near airport).



### Eagle (Eby Creek Road) to Wolcott:

The railroad corridor is generally very conducive to shared use with trail on outer edge of corridor, best on the northern edge because of railroad power lines along the south side of the tracks. Width varies from 100 feet to 200 feet, with a section of 60 feet on the west side of Red Canyon, but the terrain is relatively flat through the 60 foot wide section.

Pockets of wetlands exist on the north edge of the tracks, including man-made near irrigated fields and natural wetlands near Milk Creek.





Small bridges and box culverts do exist along this stretch including one bridge over a perennial stream, Milk Creek. It is possible to retrofit all spans for shared trail use. Closer to Wolcott, a bigger challenge exists to retrofit two Eagle River rail bridge crossings between Milk Creek and Wolcott.

Also just west of Wolcott, the rail corridor is constrained by steep slopes on the north side of the river near the BLM campground and across from the Department of Transportation yard.

At this time, there is low demand for this trail section for transportation purposes because there is no nearby population center. This section would function primarily as a very scenic recreational route for the foreseeable future.



If the corridor is not available, there are Core Trail route options through planned development in the Red Canyon area east of Eagle. Public land through Red Canyon and into Wolcott could accommodate some sections of the core trail, but in several locations it would have to follow the Highway 6 corridor because of the steep terrain and narrow valley through this area.

## Wolcott to Edwards:

The railroad corridor through this section is the best route option for the trail because of the narrowness of the valley from Wolcott to Edwards. The other routes for the core trail are very constrained by the locations of Highway 6, Interstate 70, the Eagle River, and the hilly terrain. There are several constrained areas along this portion of rail corridor but they appear to be mitigatable. Obstacles include the Eagle Springs Golf Club, cliff areas and close proximity to the river in a few locations. There are no major railroad bridge crossings of the Eagle River on this section that would require a bridge retrofit to accommodate the trail. Width varies between 100 feet to 200 feet. The south side of the tracks is more conducive to a trail platform. At this time, this section ranks as a low demand because there is not a population center nearby but it is very likely that Wolcott will experience development within the life of this plan and demand for a trail route will increase substantially.



## Edwards to Avon:

If the railroad corridor were to become fully available for public uses, this section would be part of providing a continuous trail experience through the valley. If it is an interim matter of purchasing the outside edge of the existing corridor to create links between communities, this section is not a high priority for acquisition because a continuous separated trail that parallels Highway 6 and the Eagle River will exist from West Edwards to West Beaver Creek Boulevard in West Avon by mid-2001.

## Avon to Eagle-Vail:

Use of a few select portions of the rail corridor in Avon would be very helpful in creating a continuous trail through Avon to Nottingham Ranch Road such as near the wastewater treatment plant in West Avon and crossing Avon Road. Otherwise, a significant portion of the trail through the town of Avon can be realized through development that is planned on land adjacent to the railroad corridor. At least one crossing of the railroad corridor will be necessary to create a continuous system in the Chapel Square area. Because Avon is a population center, the dormant track line is already heavily used by pedestrians. The corridor through Avon is predominantly 100 feet wide with short 200 feet wide sections. The railroad power lines are generally located along the north side of the tracks making the south side more viable for locating the trail.



## Eagle-Vail to Dowd Junction Pedestrian Bridge:

This rail corridor section is seriously constrained by either man-made or natural obstacles including Interstate 70 structures causing narrow underpasses, cliffs, falling rock, steep river banks, retrofit of long railroad bridges and adjacent cut slopes. Widths vary from 100 feet wide to 200 feet wide.





Demand is very high for a safe trail route through this narrow area of the valley but if the corridor must be shared with rail, it is impossible except for a few short stretches.

The non-rail core trail route in this area is also very difficult and will involve expensive construction but few route options exist through this area.

## **Dowd Junction Pedestrian Bridge to Downtown Minturn:**

This rail corridor section is physically too narrow for a shared rail and trail location until it intersects with the County Road bridge over the Eagle River. At that point, the rail corridor is wide and level, ranging from 100 feet wide to over 250 feet wide. There are multiple track lines because of the rail switching yard that formerly operated in Minturn but the corridor could be shared and still maintain distance between all of the track lines in place and a trail. The corridor is already used by pedestrians, bicyclists and even vehicles. Demand is high and constraints to construction are minimal. The other Core Trail routes are difficult because of terrain, such as on the Highway 24 side of the Eagle River, or would be relegated to following the right-of-way of the county road on the east side of the railyard. The ideal location for the trail, as reflected on the core trail maps in Chapter 3 is on the western edge of the railroad property, paralleling the Eagle River.

## **Downtown Minturn to Battle Mountain:**

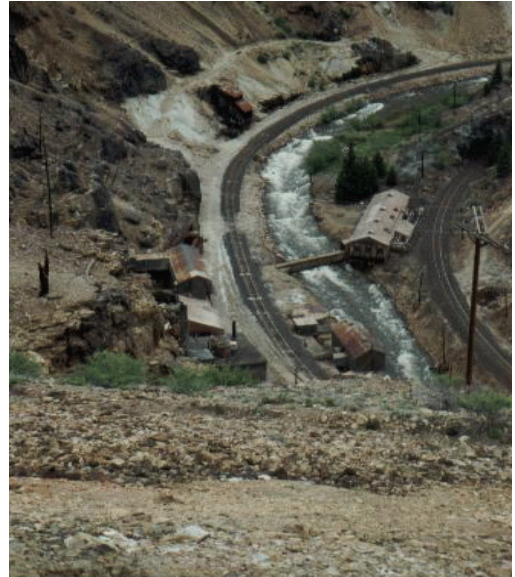
At the south end of the railyard, the rail corridor becomes constrained by cliffs on the east side for approximately ½ mile. It becomes more conducive for shared use after that cliff section and remains viable until west of the Two Elk trailhead area where there is another cliff area. These two sections could possibly be mitigated for shared use (e.g. cantilevered trail or separated by fence) depending on the type of rail use. Otherwise it requires costly sections of trail to be built away from the rail corridor on the hillside benches above. The rail corridor through this portion of Minturn ranges between 100, 200 and 250 feet wide. Demand is potentially high. Dormant corridor already heavily used by local residents walking, driving or snowmobiling.



## Battle Mountain to Red Cliff:

This section of rail corridor is very dramatic and scenic but also features several types of natural and man-made hazards including cliffs, rock fall, mining shafts, mine building and hazardous or “hot” tailing piles. For much of the distance between the base of Battle Mountain and Red Cliff, there is a track on both sides of the Eagle River which would seem to allow for train traffic to occur on one side while a trail occupies the other side but the issues noted prevent that seemingly simple solution.

The corridor through this section is 200 feet wide. The use would be as a recreational route as opposed to transportation although a few hardy citizens may use it to commute to and from Red Cliff in the summer season. Winter use of this section would not be recommended due to avalanche hazards.



The other Core Trail route into Red Cliff features its own set of issues, primarily navigating around or through the abandoned mining town of Gilman, also a hazardous waste site. In this case, the issues associated with the Core Trail route may be easier to overcome than those that accompany the rail corridor down in the canyon.

## Red Cliff to Tennessee Pass:

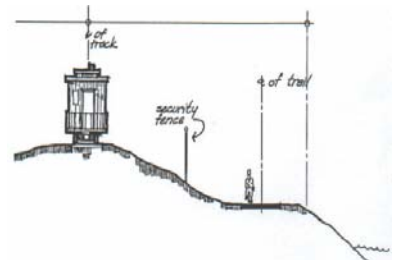
This section is very scenic and it would function as a recreational route only since it is well removed from population centers. There are sections of the corridor that land itself to shared use and others that are constrained by adjacent slopes. Additional study would be required on this section, if it were to become available for rail with trail or trail only use. The majority of the corridor through this section is 200 feet wide.

## Summary of the Rail Corridor Analysis:

At this point in time, **the highest demand for Core Trail completion is in the Minturn to Edwards area and the Gypsum to Eagle area.**

If the **entire rail corridor is not available**, and only narrow edge portions of these individual sections can be obtained (as depicted by the illustration below) from the railroad either by lease or by purchase, the recommended priorities for partial acquisition are:

1. Dowd Junction to Downtown Minturn through the railyard
2. West Avon from West Beaver Creek Boulevard to Avon Road
3. Sage to Downtown Eagle



If the **entire rail corridor is available** and it is not financially or physically feasible to develop the trail as one project, the recommended priorities for construction of a trail with or without the tracks left in place are:

1. Dowd Junction to Downtown Minturn
2. West Avon to Avon Road
3. Sage to Downtown Eagle
4. Minturn to Battle Mountain
5. Wolcott to Edwards
6. Eagle to Edwards

Finally, **if neither of the two above scenarios** materializes within the life span of this plan, at minimum the following at-grade trail crossings are needed to successfully complete the Core Trail on its non-rail corridor route through the valley:

1. East of Eagle at Red Canyon (convert existing private crossing to public)
2. From Hurd Lane to proposed Village of Avon (new pedestrian-only crossing)
3. West of Dowd Junction, across the river from the Colorado Department of Transportation yard (new crossing)
4. In Dowd Junction, a new crossing under the railroad bridge at east end of River Run condominiums.