



Project Summary

Texas Department of Transportation

0-6268: Acquisition, Uses, & Funding Options for Abandoned Rail Corridors

Background

The purchase of abandoned rail rights of way has been a proven method of acquiring linear corridors for the construction of roadways since the original formation of the Texas Highway Department (now the Texas Department of Transportation). Paralleling existing rail lines or re-using corridors first used by railroad companies has been widespread since urban centers developed along the railroads prior to the road building era.

Railroad system consolidation over the past several decades has resulted in the loss of many former rail corridors to non-transportation uses. Preserving these former rail corridors would be extremely beneficial to transportation planners if they could be employed either as new transportation corridors (roadway, transit, etc.) or multiuse recreational trails (hiking, biking, skating, etc.).

What the Researchers Did

Researchers from the Texas Transportation Institute (TTI) and the Center for Transportation Research (CTR) undertook a multifaceted study to examine several issues associated with acquisition, preservation, and re-use of abandoned rail corridors in Texas. Primary among these issues was a legal review of the Texas Administrative Code to determine what, if any, changes would be necessary for the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) to more readily take advantage of future opportunities to acquire and preserve abandoned rail corridors. Secondary issues that were researched included a review of past rail abandonment policies within Texas, an examination of best rail abandonment practices in other states, identification of past Texas rail abandonments, documentation of the existing status of previously abandoned rail corridors in the state, and creation of a primer on rail abandonment issues for use by transportation planners.

Research Performed by:

Texas Transportation Institute (TTI),
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What They Found

The research team found that, although current Texas law explicitly allows for TxDOT purchase of abandoned rail corridors only for the purpose of continued freight rail operations, there is sufficient legal precedent and authority to allow TxDOT to purchase and/or use other legal means to preserve abandoned rail corridors for alternative transportation uses. Legislative clarification of specific goals for rail corridor preservation by TxDOT, while favorable for consideration in future legislation, is not required for TxDOT to actively preserve and redevelop abandoned rail corridors statewide.

The research team also determined that lengthy rail corridor abandonment by the large, Class I railroads, while common during the 1980s and 1990s during the early years after deregulation and following several major rail industry mergers, is unlikely to occur in the near future. The remaining risk of rail abandonment comes mainly from smaller, underutilized branch lines of the Class I's and the lines of marginally capitalized "shortline" or Class III railroads. Many of these lines serve fewer carloads per year and are more vulnerable to economic downturns or policies that would increase the use of heavier trucks on state roads.

What This Means

TxDOT and local/regional planners should continue to monitor the rail system for low-traffic freight rail lines that may be in danger of abandonment. Planners should work cooperatively with private railroad companies to explore options for keeping freight rail lines in service, but should abandonment be imminent, options for preserving the corridors should be investigated. Care and forethought must be taken in how such policies are implemented.

For example, the federal "railbanking" concept is one possible policy option for rail corridor preservation. Putting a corridor into "interim trail use" status under this program leaves the corridor susceptible to future reactivation by the railroad company when/if sufficient freight traffic in the corridor warrants. As a result, such programs must be used with prudence to ensure that large public infrastructure investments in a corridor are not later lost to rail line reactivation. On the other hand, corridors capable of being purchased as "fee simple" from the railroads or adjoining land owners have been successfully used in the past for roadway construction and expansion and transit development.

Preserving abandoned rail corridors as future transportation assets should become an accepted and promoted practice within TxDOT. Legislative changes to make abandoned rail corridor preservation and re-use more clearly within TxDOT's authority, while desirable, are not required for TxDOT to take a more proactive role in doing so. Preserving all potential transportation corridors for rail or alternative uses will increase in importance as the state's population grows.

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