



In Idaho, Former Silver Mining Town Reinvents Itself as Trails Destination  
By [Jake Lynch](#)

When we use the phrase "destination trail," the [Route of the Hiawatha](#) in Idaho is exactly what we have in mind. The trail itself is the draw; people come from across the country, and sometimes the world, to ride this 15-mile rail-trail through the spectacular Bitterroot Mountains and wilderness area, including a 1.6-mile tunnel.

The Route of the Hiawatha is famed far and wide by bicyclists, hikers and outdoor recreation enthusiasts as one of those "bucket list" adventures. Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC) named the Hiawatha to its [Rail-Trail Hall of Fame](#) earlier this year, and the trail's managers now use that designation to promote and draw new visitors to this stunning region on the Idaho/Montana border.



RTC's Pat Tomes on a visit to the Hiawatha in 2011.

And Hiawatha business is booming. Both word of mouth and organized promotion have resulted in an ever-increasing number of trail users in recent years. A record-setting year in 2010, when some 32,000 people traversed the Hiawatha in its open season between May and October, will be smashed this year. This growth is particularly impressive when you consider the relative remoteness of the trail and towns along its route. The closest city—Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, population around 44,000—is about 50 miles from the nearest trailhead on the Hiawatha.

Lookout Pass Ski & Recreation Area, which manages the Route of the Hiawatha under an agreement with the U.S. Forest Service, reported 12,844 visitors in August 2011, most of whom paid \$9 to use the trail, in addition to fees for bike and equipment rental, and in some cases a shuttle service. That represents a 4.4 percent increase over the total for August 2010, which had previously held the monthly record.

And the visitors kept flocking to the Hiawatha in September, too, with more than 3,000 people choosing the rail-trail for their Labor Day weekend. Estimates are that by the time the snow returns to close the 2011 trail season (and open the ski season), 40,000 people will have passed along the Route of the Hiawatha—all despite an abbreviated season due to a winter that stretched into June.

"Activity on the trail has just exploded," says Bill Jennings, director of marketing for Lookout Pass. He says that summer use, traditionally an off-season of sorts around the popular winter use of the ski area, has now become a significant part of the Lookout operation. "The more people that ride it, the more people that know about it," Jennings says, crediting a strong mountain bike and hiker network with generating buzz around the trail. "We have also featured the Hiawatha in a strong regional marketing campaign. People are coming from as far away as Australia and Europe."

This area in the Idaho panhandle is known as the Silver Valley, reference to the industry that sustained the towns here, and at one time made nearby Wallace the third-largest city in Idaho. But the population of Wallace, now below 1,000, has declined each year since its peak in 1940s—a story familiar to the thousands of towns and small cities around America whose economic fortunes have faded along with regional railroad and other major industries.

Just as rich veins of silver running through the Bitterroot Mountains once brought people and commerce to the area, now the Route of the Hiawatha runs through the landscape, carrying a burgeoning tourist industry which, though a less lucrative economy than silver, could prove more sustainable.



The town of Wallace, nestled in a valley in the Bitterroot Mountains.

Every strong community has a leader like Rick Shaffer. He's the marketing chairman of the local chamber of commerce, proprietor of the Wallace Inn, key member of the Friends of the Coeur d'Alene Trails, and self-described "Prime Minister of Wallace." Shaffer is as well-placed as anyone to assess what the growing popularity of the Hiawatha, and the nearby [Trail of the Coeur d'Alenes](#), [North Idaho Centennial Trail](#) and Old Milwaukee Road corridor, has meant to local populations.

"The impact is giant, to say the least," Shaffer says, estimating that in July and August trail users account for between 15 and 20 percent of the 106 beds he operates in Wallace. The 72-mile Trail of the Coeur d'Alenes passes directly by Wallace, a geographical key to transferring trail-user numbers into actual commerce.



Located right along the Trail of the Coeur d'Alenes and close to the Route of the Hiawatha, Wallace's local economy has felt a big bump from trail tourism.

The Route of the Hiawatha presents more of a challenge. Both the Pearson and East Portal trailheads are about 20 miles from Wallace. The Pearson trailhead is connected to Wallace by a forest development road, and Lookout Pass operates a regular shuttle bus (\$9) from the East Portal trailhead back to the Pearson trailhead, for those who want to leave their cars there.

Local businesspeople recognize the huge value of linking these two remarkable trails to provide a seamless, and safe, off-road connection from the Hiawatha to the eastern trailhead of the Coeur d'Alenes. Some work has been done blazing a trail from Mullan, running parallel to Interstate 90, to the Hiawatha for that purpose.

Shaffer says that whenever the owner of Excelsior Cycle in nearby Kellogg can spare his trailer, they will take a load of riders from Wallace to the Hiawatha. But that's hardly the regular service that many tourists will demand. There is no cell service in much of the area, so pickups have to be pre-arranged.

Aware of the potential of trails tourism to help their communities prosper, the region's businesspeople and residents are working proactively to build on the gift of their natural setting. Shaffer says the [Friends of the Coeur d'Alene Trails](#) is almost entirely made up of businesspeople. They meet once every two months to discuss new ideas to bring trail users to their main streets. At present they are considering how to extend the Hiawatha south down to Avery, then west to St Maries. The vision for this extension is a 190-mile loop ride around St Joes Mountain, hooking up with the western trailhead of the Trail of the Coeur d'Alenes, and back around to Wallace. Such a ride would draw coverage in trails and biking magazines the world over.

According to Dean Cooper, owner of the 1313 Club restaurant in Wallace, the strong outdoor recreation communities in Portland and Seattle to the west represent enormous trails tourism potential for the old Silver Valley. "There is a lot more we could do to

bring visitors to the area," he says. "As far as the trail infrastructure goes, everything is in good shape. This is such a beautiful place, there is so much history."

This past summer, in fact, the Wallace Chamber of Commerce organized a bike festival around a downtown criterium, the Silver Spokes Bicycle Jam, the reinvention of a bike event that had been held in years past. "We're really hoping to grow that, to be positioned out there in that visitor market," says Cooper.

Earlier this year, [Silver Bike Tours](#), based in nearby Coeur d'Alene, started offering self-guided bike tours designed specifically for the Hiawatha and Coeur d'Alene trails.



The Route of the Hiawatha is famous for its stunning trestles, mountain views and a 1.6-mile tunnel.

The good news is that for communities like Wallace there is support for towns and cities hoping to make the most of their position next to trails. The [Trail Town Program](#) is an economic development initiative working in towns along the [Great Allegheny Passage](#) in Pennsylvania and Maryland. Originally designed by the [Allegheny Trail Alliance](#), with funding from Pennsylvania's Department of Conservation and Natural Resources and The Progress Fund, the mission of the Trail Town Program is to ensure that trail communities and businesses maximize the economic potential of the trail.

Similarly, RTC has authored groundbreaking trail-user [economic impact data in the Northeast](#) and Midwest, which are providing concrete—and awfully encouraging—numbers on the sort of impact trail users have on the communities they visit. Using RTC's methods and data, Friends of the Coeur d'Alene Trails conducted their own economic impact research, concluding that the regional trail system is worth, conservatively, about \$19 million dollars to the Silver Valley each year.

Though the relationship between Lookout Ski Pass Ski & Recreation Area and local businesses has not always been perfectly symbiotic in the past, cooperation has greatly improved these days.



Bank Street in downtown Wallace.

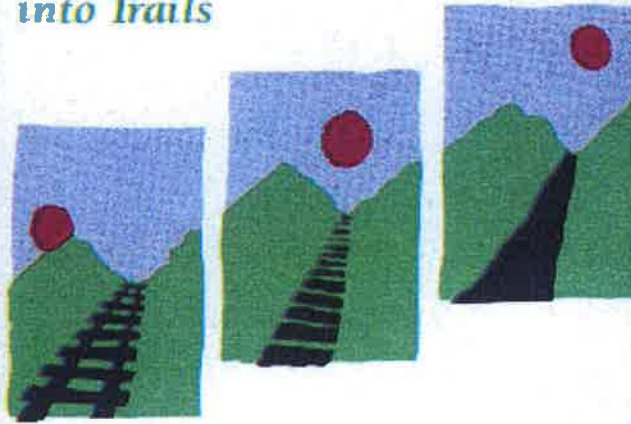
"The whole town piggybacks with Lookout Pass as the outfitter for the Hiawatha," says Shaffer, and Lookout's Hiawatha website includes links to lodging and amenities in Wallace and other communities.

Of course, it isn't all about revenue and commerce. Behind the civic leaders of Wallace's strong belief in the potential of the Hiawatha and Coeur d'Alene is the understanding that trail adventures like these offer American families a uniquely affecting experience. "You watch the cars go by on I-90, and you see that about 1 in 6 has a bike on the back," Shaffer says. "Holidays like this are getting more popular, and it is easy to see why. They're family-oriented, and they're good value, because once you've bought your bike or your boots, you don't have to buy any more gear. I love that families can come to an area like this and have an experience they will never forget."

SECRETS OF

# SUCCESSFUL RAIL-TRAILS

*An Acquisition  
and Organizing Manual  
for Converting Rails  
into Trails*



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**RAILS-TO-TRAILS CONSERVANCY**  
in cooperation with  
**NATIONAL PARK SERVICE**



Note: At the time *Secrets of Successful Rail-Trails* was published, the Intermodal Surface Transportation and Efficiency Act (ISTEA) was the operational U.S. transportation legislation and many references were made to various ISTEA programs in this book. Recently, the Transportation Efficiency Act of the 21st Century (TEA-21) was adopted and now supercedes ISTEA. TEA-21 maintains they basic programs set forth under ISTEA. In creating the web version of *Secrets of Successful Rail-Trails*, the basic text was left as originally published. Thus, where references are made to ISTEA, know that TEA-21 actually pertains, but does not alter in any substantial discussion in the text.

Also at the time of publication the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) was the governing federal agency for railroad activity. The ICC has since been replaced by the Surface Transportation Board (STB). The function of the STB is not significantly different from the ICC, thus any reference to the ICC still pertains under the STB.

## Introduction

In 1916, the world's most extensive railroad transportation network stretched across the United States, with every city and small town connected together by ribbons of steel. At the height of the country's railroading era, more than 270,000 miles of track formed an intricate system that was more than six times larger than today's interstate highway system.

But 20th century economics and politics have led to a major contraction of the rail network. Railroads have disposed of more than 150,000 miles of track and thousands more likely to be abandoned in the near future.

The loss of rail lines is no cause for celebration. Trains are among the most energy efficient modes of transportation, and they are an integral part of this nation's heritage. However, when railroads decide to abandon right of way, RTC works to preserve those priceless corridors for future rail uses and convert them into trails for public use.

The thriving rails-to-trails movement has created hundreds of public trails for running, walking, bicycling, cross country skiing, horseback riding, in-line skating, and other purposes. These trails, which were used more than 75 million times in 1992, serve many purposes: recreation, transportation, historic preservation, economic revitalization, open space conservation and wildlife preservation. Generally, railroad routes have many attributes that contribute to outstanding trails.

Generally, railroad routes have many attributes that contribute to outstanding trails. They traverse every conceivable environment from urban to suburban to rural, including farmland, river valleys, wetlands, residential tracts, forests, industrial zones and lake shores. Often the same right of way will connect several of these different environments within a five or 10 mile stretch.

Rail corridors are flat or have gentle grades, making them perfect for multiple users, ranging from walkers and bicyclists to people with disabilities. In the winter, they are perfect for cross country skiing, snowmobiling and other snow activities. In addition, historic structures, such as train stations, bridges, tunnels, mills, factories and canals, enhance trail users' experiences.

Rail-trails act as linear greenways through congested urban areas, providing much-needed recreation space while also serving as utilitarian transportation corridors between neighborhoods and workplaces and connecting congested areas to open spaces. In rural areas, particularly those suffering economically from a railroad abandonment, a rail-trail can be a significant stimulus to a local economy. Trail users spend money on food, beverages, camping, hotels, bed and breakfasts, bicycle rental, souvenirs and gasoline. Studies have shown that trail users can generate as much as \$1.25 million annually for the towns through which a trail passes.

Many landowners living near rail-trails are realizing the increased value of their

homes because people are willing to pay more to have a multi-use trail in their neighborhood. From Seattle, Washington to Glen Ellyn, Illinois to Fairfax, Virginia, newspaper real estate sections display numerous advertisements touting houses' close proximity to the Burke Gilman Trail, Illinois Prairie Path or Washington and Old Dominion Railroad Trail as a special amenities.

Rail-trails also serve as plant and animal conservation corridors. Many rail-trails are home to birds, small mammals and plants--some of which are considered endangered. In the Midwest, some rail-trails contain valuable remnants of native prairie.

Finally, converting rail corridors into trails also preserves the rights of way for any future train or transportation use.

Despite the overwhelming benefits of rail-trail conversions, they are not immune to controversy. Many fledgling projects meet resistance from adjacent landowners concerned about crime and vandalism, farmers worried about the effects of the trail on their crops or animals or area developers who have different ideas for the corridor.

But *Secrets of Successful Rail-Trails* will help overcome any obstacles that arise during your conversion process. By reading this book, you will learn the three **fundamental "secrets": building a solid, broad-based citizen coalition; forming a strong partnership with a government agency; and developing a written plan of action. These are the key ingredients to any successful rail-trail.**

## Chapter 1: Wouldn't Those Tracks Make a Nice Trail

From the East Coast to the West and from the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico, abandoned rail corridors have successfully been converted into trails, meeting the diverse needs of the communities through which they pass.

In Seattle, more than 1,200 people a day bicycle to work or to classes on the smooth 16-mile Burke Gilman Trail near Lake Washington and the University of Washington. Near the Gulf Coast of Florida, more than 100,000 people stroll, skate and bicycle along the 22-mile Pinellas trail every month. In suburban Washington, D.C., the easy grades and varied topography of northern Virginia's Washington & Old Dominion Railroad Trail annually attract nearly two million users, including bicyclists, runners, equestrians, people with disabilities, skaters and cross-country skiers.

In rural southwestern Wisconsin, the 32-mile Elroy Sparta Trail attracts tourists from the entire Midwest region who generate more than \$1.25 million a year for the small towns of Elroy and Sparta. In Columbia, Missouri, people call the five-mile M.K.T Nature/Fitness Trail the "backyard" of their community--the place where they meet friends and enjoy the outdoors. And, the outskirts of Boston are home to the historic Minuteman Trail, which parallels the route of Paul Revere's famous midnight ride.

This assorted group of trails have something aside from their popularity in common: they were all created from abandoned railroad lines.

Although each rail-to-trail conversion took considerable time and effort, they all began the same way. A few people came across an abandoned right of way, had a vision of the recreation and transportation resource it could become, and began articulating a dream that captured the public's imagination.

You now have the opportunity to help create a new, successful rail-trail, one that meets the needs of your town or region.

If you want to create a rail trail, you have two options: you can work with an already abandoned corridor or a corridor that is about to be abandoned by a railroad. In many respects the effort involved with the two options is similar, but the latter offers some useful legal handles that make the acquisition process easier. (Both of these options are discussed in detail in chapters 6, 7 and 8.)

If you have your eye on a corridor in your community, conduct an initial "assessment" of the corridor's condition. Ask one or more friends to investigate it with you to gain more observations and different perspectives.

Walking alongside the tracks, jot down your some initial, basic observations of the corridor. Think about the following questions:

- Are the tracks still used?
- Are the tracks and ties still in place?

- Is the route scenic and does it have views?
- Does the corridor connect to other community resources such as a river or a lake front, parks, playgrounds, schools or stores?
- Does the corridor have historical structures?
- If developed into a trail, could the corridor become a tourist attraction?

Make sure you also note any aspects of the corridor that are not amenable to trail conversion. Not all abandoned corridors are appropriate for trail use for various reasons. Some issues that might make it undesirable for trail use include: the route is dangerous because of erosion problems or multiple highway crossings; key portions of the corridor broken up; segments are developed for other uses.

At this early stage, you are merely looking at the corridor for its potential as a trail and how it would fit into the context of your community. It might be helpful to find a good map of the area through which the corridor runs to see the physical characteristics, such as, wetlands, forests, fields and development surrounding the route.

Once you have conducted your initial assessment and have decided that your corridor would make a great trail, the next step is to build support for your idea.

## **Chapter 2: Building and Strengthening Your Coalition**

By now you and at least several other people are convinced that you have one great idea! You can imagine people of all ages and abilities walking, bicycling, skating, horseback riding--even cross-country skiing--along the future rail-trail. Keep that vision in mind. Those future users and the organizations to which they belong are your potential supporters and will form the foundation of your support.

### **Develop a Broad-Based Constituency**

Converting a rail line into a trail requires the help of a broad-based constituency. Keep in mind that others may have different plans for the railroad right-of-way. Adjacent landowners may be skeptical if they are unaware of the positive benefits of rail-trails. You may also face political, legal and financial challenges along the way. Your goal is to develop a diverse trail coalition group, strong enough to overcome any hurdles along the way.

Fortunately, trails appeal to a variety of groups and many different types of people. Start looking for support in your local area, but also think of regional and statewide organizations. Rail trails often attract interest from many miles away. Potential supporters include:

- bicycling, running, walking, skating, horseback riding, hiking and cross country skiing clubs, both locally and statewide
- environmental organizations
- neighborhood associations
- government agencies working with parks and recreation, transportation, open space, physical fitness, schools, economic development and air pollution
- tourism councils, chambers of commerce and other entities interested in promoting economic development
- youth oriented organizations such as the scouts, Parent-Teacher Associations and church youth groups
- historical and railway historical societies
- bird watching and other habitat and wildlife preservation groups
- groups working to provide various opportunities for the elderly, such as the American Association of Retired Persons and people with disabilities, such as the Paralyzed Veterans of America
- land trusts
- sports organizations
- hospitals, insurance companies and other corporations interested in improving the quality of life in their community
- businesses that may benefit from a trail, such as skiing, cycling, camping and fishing outfitters and rental shops, as well as motels, restaurants and nearby stores.

Some of these organizations will be well-established with offices, staff and a listing in the phone book, but some of the clubs may be harder to find. Even if no bicycle or running group's are listed in your community's Yellow Pages, do not