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Rails with trails project sees movement in Meridian; 35-mile pathway would run through Meridian, Boise, Nampa

By PATTY BOWEN pbowen@idahopress.com Sep 20, 2019

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A railroad car sits on the tracks of the Union Pacific Railroad just west of Meridian Road Sept. 17. Meridian city staff are working to secure Road, roughly 100 feet north of the railroad.

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MERIDIAN — For years, local officials have dreamed about a pedestrian and bike path along the Union Pacific Railroad line starting in Boise, running through Meridian, and ending in Nampa. The pathway would provide a potentially safer way for people to commute between each of the cities on foot or bike, and could encourage economic development around the path.

That 10-year-old vision is starting to come to life as Meridian begins a segment of what will become the path. The segment — a 10-foot wide pedestrian and bike path — will run from Meridian Road to Linder Road, roughly 100 feet north of the Union Pacific Railroad.

City staff are in the early stages of the project. Meridian Parks and Recreation Director Steve Siddoway said staff are in the process of getting easements from landowners.

“We don’t have a project until we have the needed easements,” Siddoway told the Idaho Press, noting the timeline for the project will depend on how long it takes to secure easements.

City staff plan to build the 1-mile trail to align with the rest of the “rails with trails” pathway. That is, if it is built.



This map shows the proposed route for a roughly 1-mile bike and pedestrian pathway between Meridian Road and Linder Road just north of the Union Pacific Railroad tracks.

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CITY OF MERIDIAN

RAILROAD

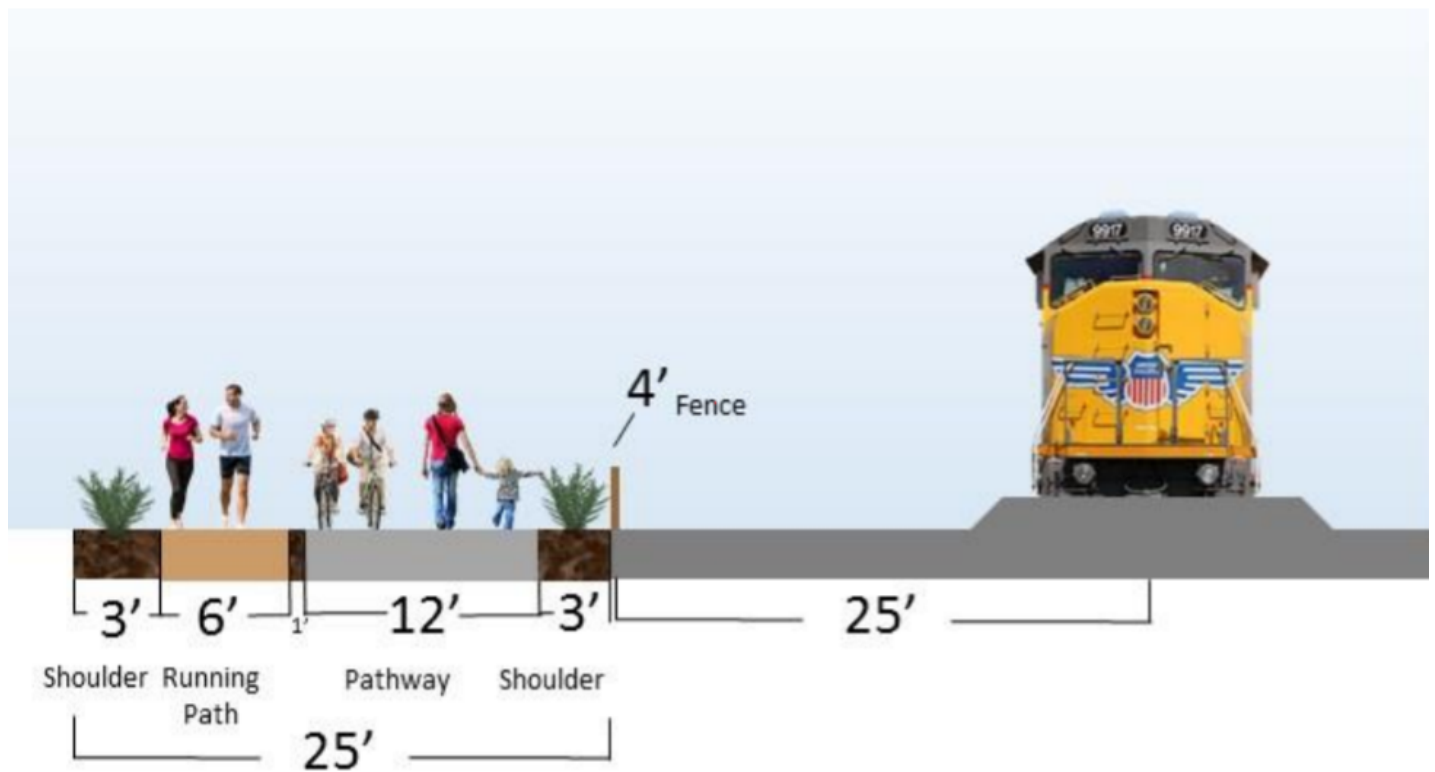
The rails with trails pathway would stretch for 35 miles along the railroad. In order to build the path, local officials would need to strike a deal with Union Pacific to use the company's right of way. As of Tuesday, Union Pacific was opposed to the plan.

“For us it is about safety,” said Kristen South, spokeswoman for Union Pacific’s northern region, which includes Idaho.

South said cyclists or runners often have their earbuds in and might not hear a train coming. “Trains are not nearly as loud as you think they are,” she said.

Union Pacific is open to having conversations with city officials and the Community Planning Association of Southwest Idaho, the region’s long-range planning agency known as Compass.

Without Union Pacific’s partnership, the rails with trails pathway won’t move forward, said Rachel Haukkala, assistant planner with Compass.



A rendering of one of the typical sections of the proposed rails with trails path from Boise to Nampa. This section design includes a 12-foot concrete shared-use path, 6 foot jogging plath and 3-foot shoulders with natural vegetation.

COMPASS

Two trains run through the Treasure Valley on Union Pacific’s rails per weekday, Haukkala said. The rails with trails pathway would vary in size depending on the available right of way, she said. Designs show a 12-foot concrete shared-use path with 6.5-foot shoulder of vegetation on both sides. Variations of this design include less vegetation and a 6-foot running path, or a 9-foot mixed-use area with seating or water foundations. All designs have a fence between the path and the railroad tracks. Haukkala said she believes the proposed designs would be safe for users.

It is a fairly common standard to have 25 feet between a path and nearby railroad tracks, according to Haukkala.

“In areas where there is not enough space available, the study suggests moving the pathway outside of the rail corridor, such as near the Boise Towne Square Mall,” she said over email.

Haukkala said decisions about how far the trail is set back from the tracks and what kind of fence the path will have will ultimately “come from discussions with Union Pacific because they may require a different setback from the rail — more or less than 25 feet — or a specific type of fence which may be a different height and/or material than what Alta used in this study.”

FUNDING

If Compass and city officials are able to strike a deal with Union Pacific, they would still need to find funding for the project. A survey looking at the feasibility of the project estimated it would cost \$45.4 million to build and \$4.1 million to get the right of way.

Haukkala noted if Union Pacific agrees to the path, the right of way “could cost a lot more depending on what they want.”

She said paying for the project is “something we still need to figure out.” Compass would likely apply for federal grants and see if cities were willing to chip in, she said. Boise Parks and Recreation Director Doug Holloway said the cost will likely be exorbitant, and the city would likely need federal funding to make any significant progress.

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Boise Parks and Rec has had “some very preliminary conversations internally about the ‘dream’ of getting a ‘rails to trails’ connection on the UP system,” Holloway said over email. Those conversations have not included land acquisition or acquiring easements, he said.

An extension of Nampa’s Grimes Pathway could be used as a segment of the rails with trails pathway. Grimes Pathway dead-ends north of McDonagh Park, according to Cody Swander, Nampa parks superintendent. Staff plan to extend the pathway as far west as Idaho Center Boulevard. The city received a grant paying for the first phase of the extension — taking the path to 11th Avenue North — beginning in fiscal year 2020.

While the Grimes Pathway extension will be close in proximity to the Rails with Trails pathway, it isn’t part of the pathway’s concept, Swander said.

Earlier this month, Alta Planning + Design finished a feasibility study for the rails to trails project. The study was commissioned by Compass earlier this year and cost \$28,695 — which Compass paid for using federal dollars. With the study done, Compass is seeing if stakeholders and Union Pacific’s 60 to 70 customers are in favor of the trail. Customers are on both sides of the track, so the trail would need to weave around them. Compass also plans to work with Boise, Nampa and Meridian and figure out a timeline for the project, Haukkala said.

Siddoway said the project is something Meridian Parks and Recreation is passionate about.

“We know it will take some time, but we are committed to staying at the table and working with our regional partners to see it through,” he said. “It is not a short-term project; it is a long-term project.”



The city of Meridian is working to secure the right of way for a proposed path roughly 100 feet north of the Union Pacific Railroad tracks between Meridian Road and Linder Road. Even without a rails with trails pathway, Meridian Parks and Recreation Director Steve Siddoway said people already walk or jog along the railroad in Meridian.

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CONNECTION TO DOWNTOWN

If it is built, the 35-mile pathway would be within a mile of over 385,000 residents and would provide a direction connection from downtown Nampa to Meridian to the Boise Depot, according to a document from Compass.

“If we had this trail ... it would be a healthy activity for people to do,” Haukkala said. “It might encourage people to commute along the trail by bike. Trails have been shown to bring economic benefit to communities, especially long public trails like these.”

“There would definitely be people who want to ride the whole trail, or maybe they just want to ride the city they live in,” she said. “They’re biking; they want to stop, or get a drink to rehydrate.”

Trails along railroads are shown to bring new businesses and job creation along the path, she continued. It would also be the first bike path connecting Boise to Nampa. That connection could help bring people to each city’s downtown.

Both Meridian and Nampa city staff have been working to revitalize their cities’ downtowns.

One development in downtown Nampa that has drawn in new business is the renovation of the historic public library building, which reopened in June 2018 with almost all of the space filled with tenants, such as the Nampa Chamber of Commerce, the Idaho Press previously reported.

In August 2018, Meridian City Council and the urban renewal agency, the Meridian Development Corporation, approved two four-story buildings in downtown. The buildings will have residential units and commercial tenants. Meridian is also seeking proposals from developers for mixed-use projects on public land that would include a new community center and enhance “the character and economic vitality of downtown Meridian,” according to a request for proposals. The deadline for proposals is Oct. 4.

Siddoway said Meridian’s 1-mile path from Meridian Road to Linder Road likely won’t be ready for use by the time the new four-story buildings open, scheduled for November 2020.

He estimates it will take a year to build the 1-mile pathway after the city secures easements from property owners. Siddoway didn’t have an estimate of how long that would take or how much the project would cost. The costs associated with the project would need council approval.

In surveys and public feedback, pathways and trails show up as the No. 1 thing Meridian residents want from Parks and Recreation, Siddoway said. Even without a rails with trails pathway, people already walk or jog along the railroad in Meridian, he said.

“Technically they are trespassing,” he said. “There is just an interest in areas for walking, jogging, biking and recreating. If we could give them a safer place to do it along that corridor, that would be our goal.”



Meridian Parks and Recreation Director Steve Siddoway points to the proposed location for a 1-mile bike and pedestrian pathway between Meridian and Linder roads, Tuesday, Sept. 17, 2019.

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