

## Will Belmont rail become a trail?

[Diane Turbyfill](#)

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BELMONT — The future of a segment of railroad tracks through Belmont will likely be a commuter train that carries residents to and from neighboring Mecklenburg County. But that train is far from leaving the station.

The North Carolina Department of Transportation is getting a clear message from Belmont stakeholders about the 1.63-mile stretch of track that runs through the city. Whether or not that message will change the fate of the rail is still unclear, said Shirley Williams, director for environment and planning with

NCDOT.

A group of Belmont residents approached Belmont City Council Monday with a petition in hand requesting that the track be turned into a walking trail, possibly tying into the Carolina Thread Trail.

"We're trying to gather community support for a possible rail trail here," said Wendy Hostetler, a member of the focus group. "We think the trail would be better used for walking. It could connect Belmont Abbey to the Sacred Heart Campus."

Belmont City Council has discussed the possibilities for the track, speaking out against the use of carrying or storing freight cars.

"We've gone on record as saying we're against any use of that line for freight or freight storage," said Belmont Mayor Richard Boyce.

Williams said the city's voice has been heard and that the DOT doesn't see a great benefit to using the rail for freight.

Converting the stint of railroad tracks into a walking path would connect Belmont Abbey College to downtown.

Students could commute on foot or bicycle to classes on the old Sacred Heart Campus and have a safe path to city amenities, according to Abbott Placid Solari, chancellor of the college.

A shuttle now takes students back and forth between the campus and classes across the interstate at Sacred Heart.

Solari, who has walked the tracks from the Abbey into the city, said he thinks many students would take advantage of riding bikes on a trail. Some pedestrians drive to the college and use the campus as a favorite place to walk, and they might also make use of a refined path onto the campus.

"Right now it's terribly unsafe for anyone to walk from downtown Belmont to Belmont Abbey College," said Boyce.

But the DOT isn't ready to rip up rail lines and create a walking trail, said Williams.

If the tracks were pulled up, the DOT's right of way would revert back to property owners, and removing the rail lines would derail the ultimate goal — to eventually run passenger trains.

Boyce suggested the tracks be filled in for now, saying that would also preserve the steel.

Filling in the tracks with asphalt or gravel would not protect the rails, Williams said. In fact it could damage them, she said.

"That's not something that we would propose doing," said Williams.

If DOT doesn't want to rip up or fill in the tracks, is a walking track feasible?

"At this time I don't know. We're still working through that," said Williams.

Even if a solution is reached to create the foot path, funding likely wouldn't come from the state, Williams said. Some state grant money is attainable for rails to trails projects, but private donors and a fundraising campaign might be needed.

"We don't have money to do a trail so we're going to have to work through a lot of other things before we get to that point," she said.

Is it too soon to tell?

Williams has met with representatives for Belmont Abbey, Belmont City Council and the Sisters of Mercy, the three major players who own property around the rights of way of the track.

Homeowners on Circle Drive could come into play if the use of the tracks changes and easements are lifted.

Each of the three major property owners has weighed in against a freight use for the rails and supports investigating other options.

The more pressing concern for the DOT right now is securing an operating agreement for the stretch of rail between Gastonia and Mount Holly. Once a lease has been negotiated, the spur to Belmont can become more of a focus, said Williams.

The Belmont spur will not be included in the lease agreement being ironed out for freight operations.

What about the rest of the rail?

The first four miles of track between Gastonia and Ranlo are ready for service. The second phase of the project, restoring the line to Mount Holly, is scheduled to be completed a year from now.

The restored P&N Railroad, originally built in 1911 by James B. Duke, will offer connections to two Class One operators — Norfolk Southern in Gastonia and CSX in Mount Holly. CSX still owns and operates freight service on a portion of the P&N Railroad between Mount Holly and uptown Charlotte.

The rail division purchased the idle portion of the P&N Railroad in 1991 to preserve it for future transportation use. Although it would not be covered in the initial lease agreement, local leaders have expressed an interest in seeing passenger service eventually restored on the railroad.

Is there a future for a commuter train?

Boyce has talked with excitement about the possibility for commuter use for more than a year. Though he supports the idea of a walking trail, his enthusiasm for passenger trains through Belmont has not waned.

"We don't want any current use to rule out future commuter use," said Boyce.

Donny Hicks, Gaston County Economic Development Commission director, said there's still a lot of work to be done before a final decision can be made.

"I think we've got a long way to go," he said. "I think DOT is trying to evaluate what the best opportunities might be."

Could those opportunities equal linking into Charlotte's light rail system? Or should a trolley connect Abbey students to downtown Belmont?

Time, growth and population could be the key components in the decision. A verdict may not come quickly, said Williams.

"As the population grows there you'll be able to better tell what the best use would be," said Williams.

You can reach Diane Turbyfill at 704-869-1817.

<http://www.gastongazette.com/news/belmont-46891-become-rail.html>