

## **Executive Summary**

Executive Summary In 2007, the federal Surface Transportation Board granted Norfolk Southern Corporation's request to formally discontinue rail service on the 6.6 mile long Phoenixville Industrial Track between Phoenixville and Devault in Chester County. At that time, over two years had elapsed since a train had served the last freight customer on the line. More recently NS has indicated willingness to discuss selling the line, which is also known as the Devault Branch, as it reportedly has no plans to resume freight service.

This study analyzed the feasibility of constructing a multi-use trail on the unused Devault Branch rail bed, as well as the feasibility of constructing a multi-use trail on either of two alternative alignments. All three alternates are approximately six miles in length. The north end of all three alignments connects with the Schuylkill River Trail in Phoenixville. The south ends converge and connect with the proposed three mile long Warner Spur, which will in turn connect with the Chester Valley Trail.

In this study, the Devault Trail's potential alignments are summarized as follows:

**Alternate A:** Bridge Street; multi-use side path along Charlestown Road

**Alternate B:** Multi-use trail on unused Norfolk Southern Devault Branch

**Alternate C:** Bridge Street; Starr Street; Main Street; multi-use side path along State Road (Route 29)

The study team assessed each trail alignment for conformance with the goals of Chester County's Landscapes 2 Comprehensive Plan and Charlestown Township's Comprehensive Plan. Each alternative was evaluated and ranked based upon relative cost of trail construction, right-of-way availability, constructability, safety, connectivity to destinations, and the quality of the trail experience. The proposed trail design accommodates walkers, runners, and bicyclists, with an adjacent parallel path for equestrians where space permits. The trail surface is envisioned as crushed stone comprised of fine limestone screenings. Limestone screenings provide a stable yet not overly hard surface, and are also resistant to erosion by storm water. With Alternate B, the existing stone ballast would serve as a sub-base for the trail. As the Devault Branch was constructed as a single track railroad through hilly terrain with significant earthwork (much of the line is through rock cuts and atop high fills) the trail width is planned to be 11 feet: 8 feet wide shared-use path plus 3 feet wide equestrian track. Because the northern mile of the trail corridor is in the Borough of Phoenixville and Schuylkill Township, Alternates A and C utilize existing streets and sidewalks. In Charlestown Township, Alternates A and C would require easements negotiated or rights-of-way purchased from sixty-two and thirty-two separate property owners, respectively, along with other owners in Schuylkill Township. Alternate B utilizes just one property, the railroad, for its entire length. An important criteria that cannot be met by Alternatives A and C is relatively easy grade that give more accessibility to all persons. Alternate A in particular has severe grades which are prohibitive for many people. Based on the criteria, this study determined that Alternate B is a feasible alignment. For reasons set forth in detail in this report, Alternates A and C were determined to be not readily feasible.

## Purpose of the Study

This study determines how best to link Phoenixville and the Great Valley Route 29 corridor in Chester County, with a multi-use trail that connects people and neighborhoods with parks, community services, recreation, schools and the regional trail network known as the Circuit. Foremost among the criteria by which potential trail alignments were assessed, is how well each furthers the goals of Landscapes 2, Chester County's Comprehensive Plan.

A multi-use trail in this corridor would create a connection between two major components of the Circuit, greater Philadelphia's regional trail network. The north end would connect with the Schuylkill River Trail at Phoenixville. The south end would connect with the proposed Warner Spur and with a proposed trail along PA Route 29, either of which would connect to the Chester Valley Trail.



In addition to creating a connection to the Schuylkill River Trail and the Chester Valley Trail, the Devault Trail has the opportunity to create numerous inter-connections between recreational facilities, parks and trails, community services, and schools. Connections could include the sports complex at Marosek Park, the Phoenixville YMCA, Pickering Preserve, Great Valley Nature Center, the Horse-Shoe Trail, French Creek Trail, Pickering Preserve Trail, Great Valley Middle and High School, Charlestown Elementary School, the Technical College High School and accompanying playing fields, the Phoenixville Area High School on Pothouse Road and much more.

This trail provides an opportunity to create a multi-use trail that will not only support cyclists, runners, and equestrians with a new recreation and travel facility, but also to access to the unique and contrasting environment along the proposed trail corridor. From downtown Phoenixville's shops and restaurants, to urban and suburban residential areas, dramatic view sheds from the Pickering Creek Trestle over State Route 29, the rural solitude of Pickering Creek, and the

developing Devault area, the Devault Trail could provide almost unlimited opportunities to residents and visitors alike.



There are numerous economic, social, and environmental benefits that have been associated with the development of trails throughout the region. Increased use and demand has been evident for the Chester Valley Trail and Schuylkill River Trail since their opening, both of which would be connected via the Devault Trail. In 2009, Rails to Trails Conservancy found that over 800,000 people used the 98.5 mile Schuylkill River Trail per year; an activity that directly contributes \$7.3 million to the local economies annually. Additionally, according to a recent public opinion study by the Bicycle Coalition of Greater Philadelphia, high levels of support for trails in the region were reported. The telephone survey that was conducted in May, 2015 aimed to gather an understanding of the general population's awareness of the Circuit and their opinions on demand for more trails in the region. Sixty percent of respondents said they would like to have access to a trail, or more trails within 10 minutes of their homes. Overall, 85 percent support building more trails in their counties and 70 percent were in favor of spending \$2 per person in public dollars annually to pay for new miles of trails. With the success of adjacent regional trail investments and the high levels of support for developing the Circuit trail network, there is a greater demand for trail connections within our communities. Recent population growth in downtown Phoenixville and old and new residential and commercial developments along the proposed trail corridor could benefit from the trail and help to promote healthy, vibrant, and economically viable communities that facilitate and encourage walking and biking. Dramatic View of Pickering Creek Trestle 50' Above State Route 29 and Pickering Creek (Photo from the Historic American Engineering Record)

Devault Trail Feasibility Study Charlestown Township, PA October 15, 2015 Page 6 Bridge over Buckwalter Farm Lane in countryside of Charlestown Township Within this study, three alignments were investigated in detail: a side path along Charlestown Road, a rail-trail constructed on the inactive Norfolk Southern Devault Branch railroad, and a side path on State Road / PA Route 29. This study refers to these as Alternates A, B and C respectively. In addition to each trail alignment's conformance with the goals of Chester County's Landscapes 2, the alignments were evaluated and ranked based upon relative cost of trail construction, right-of-way availability, constructability, safety, and the quality of the trail experience. A summary in tabular format is included in this report as Appendix B. Details on the relative cost of trail construction can be found in Appendix D.