

Rails-to-trails legislation goes off track

By: Molly M. Fleming The Journal Record March 13, 2017 0



A bicyclist rides along the Bert Cooper Trails at Lake Hefner in Oklahoma City Monday. (Photo by Mark Hancock)

OKLAHOMA CITY – Cycling advocate Pete Kramer thought the state would be riding toward a tourism attraction.

Kramer worked with state Rep. Lewis Moore, R-Arcadia, on House Bill 1725, which outlined how abandoned railroad lines could be transformed into bicycle trails. Moore had helped designate other cycling trails such as the Chisholm Trail route.

Kramer researched programs in other states and even contacted

Jerel Cowan. In 2009, Cowan wrote a doctoral dissertation on the rails-to-trails program in Oklahoma.

The program, outlined in Moore’s original bill, would permit a railroad company that discontinues service on a line to designate that line for recreational use. The line would not be legally abandoned. When the railroad company turned over the line, the Oklahoma Department of Transportation, a city, a non-for-profit organization, or other entity could make the line useable for walking, running, hiking, cycling, skating and horseback riding.

It was important that the lines not be legally abandoned because then they can only be used by larger cities, such as Oklahoma City and Tulsa.

“I got into overdrive mode. I did my research,” Kramer said.

Converting railroad lines to trails is a huge transportation movement.

The national Rails-to-Trails Conservancy has worked since 1986 converting old railroad lines into multi-use trails. Nationwide, there are more than 31,000 miles of rail-trails and multi-use trails.

The trails attract visitors from outside their states, according to a survey by the conservancy. On the Virginia Creeper Trail, more than 50 percent of riders were non-local, spending an average of \$13 per visit on soft goods. In Pennsylvania, at the Pine Creek Trail, 69 percent of trail visits were non-local, spending an average of \$30.30 a trip on soft goods. More than \$3 million was spent on soft goods on the Pennsylvania trail, according to 2009 survey information collected by the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy.

“Bicyclists from Oklahoma go to Missouri to ride those (rail-to-trails),” he said. “We don’t want that to happen. We want people to come here to ride Route 66.”

Kramer’s and other cyclists’ hopes for a rails-to-trails program this session seems to have died on March 2. HB 1725 was gutted and replaced with language that updated Oklahoma Statute 66, Section 128. It would add a two-foot designation for where a crossing must be built.

When Kramer saw the change he contacted Moore.

“I immediately started to send messages to Lewis,” he said.

Moore said when BNSF Railway heard he had a railroad-related bill filed, the lobbyist asked him to put in this language instead. Moore said he’s hopeful this act of goodwill with the industry will help when he works on rails-to-trails again.

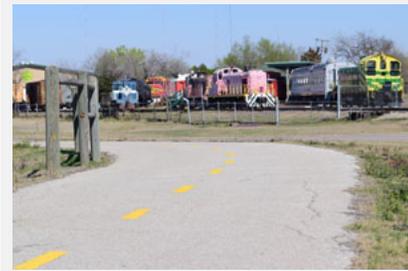
“I’m still pressing for rails-to-trails,” he said.

He said he thinks a lot of progress can be made on rails-to-trails outside of session.

It won’t be an easy battle though, as Cowan reports in his paper.

Historically, landowners’ rights groups have been involved when other states have tried similar measures. He said in his paper landowners were often concerned about their property values decreasing. In reality, homes closer to the trail sold at nearly the entire value, compared to those farther away.

“It’s really disappointing,” Kramer said. “I feel like I wasted close to a month of my time in researching.”



The Katy Trail across from the Oklahoma Railway Museum in Oklahoma City. (Photo by Mark Hancock)

Tagged with: HOUSE BILL 1725 RAILS-TO-TRAILS CONSERVANCY

RELATED ARTICLES



ABLE working on new rules to go with new law
🕒 March 17, 2017



Cole: Cutting NIH budget is a mistake
🕒 March 17, 2017

Grants tomb: Community development money eliminated from Trump budget
🕒 March 17, 2017