

Mineral Wells to Weatherford Rail-Trail

Mineral Wells, Texas

In the early 1890s, the Weatherford, Mineral Wells and Northwestern Railroad completed a 22-mile spur from Weatherford to Mineral Wells. In its hey day, Mineral Wells was renown for its “Crazy Water” baths and had numerous bath houses and luxury hotels. The trains carried health-conscious tourists in to Mineral Wells and its highly touted mineral water out to Ft. Worth, Dallas and beyond.

RAIL-TRAIL CONVERSION PROCESS

When Union Pacific announced its intent to abandon the line in 1988, the city of Mineral Wells attempted to maintain freight service with a short line. By 1992, the short line subsidy could no longer be afforded and the city turned to trail conversion as a more cost effective economic development alternative. The trails program at Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) offered assistance. The city appointed a citizen advisory committee to develop a proposal for rail-trail conversion. Public meetings were held to present the advisory committee’s suggestions and hear public concerns. Residents from both Mineral Wells and Weatherford showed strong support for conversion. An accessible, multi-use trail would connect the cities with each other and Lake Mineral Wells State Park.

With TPWD as the lead sponsor and the two cities willing to share the 20 percent match with TPWD, \$1.6 million in Transportation Enhancements (TE) awards were provided in 1994 by the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT). In 1995, a portion of the TE awards were used to acquire the railroad right-of-way and preserve it for future public use. The remaining funds were used for trail development, including



redecking of 15 railroad bridges and construction of three of four trailheads—each including parking lots and restrooms.

HEALTH, TRANSPORTATION AND ECONOMIC BENEFITS

The trail’s gentle grade lets people of all age groups and abilities enjoy the landscape and get heart-healthy exercise while biking, walking or skating. Two miles of asphalt surface in Mineral Wells allows easy access for the disabled or elderly using wheelchairs or walkers. Equestrians use the trail on the more rural 18 miles of packed, crushed stone.

The transportation benefits of this small town trail are significant: In Mineral Wells, a city of 15,000, the trail provides off-street bicycling and walking access from residential neighborhoods to downtown and retail shopping. The trail also provides traffic-free access for many students of Travis Elementary School. Residents along the corridor outside of either city use the trail to visit friends, shop or run errands in town. A local school has added bike racks for students commuting by trail and may add a horse stable.

Located 50 miles west of the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex, the economic benefit of this trail could be significant. The number of annual visitors to the state park has been approximately 300,000, generating local revenues of \$2 million. The trail is projected to attract an additional 100,000 people annually, which could generate \$500,000 to \$750,000 in revenue.

INNOVATIVE FINANCING SAVES PROJECT

Effective partnerships allowed for critical changes to the financial plan as the project

evolved. In 1995, TxDOT accepted the 1992 appraisal for corridor acquisition, but TPWD found that it needed to lower the right-of-way costs to ensure that sufficient funds would be available for other project components. As part of the railbanking process, TPWD negotiated a bargain sale, whereby Union Pacific was paid for part of the corridor—and donated the remaining land. This donation was credited toward the local match.

When complications delayed completion of the Weatherford trailhead and the contribution of Weatherford’s portion of matching funds, the creative financing came in handy. Because the Union Pacific donation covered much of the local match requirement, the Weatherford trailhead was dropped from the project scope and the city was freed from its obligation to provide a local match. Overall trail development went forward and Weatherford was able to contribute by building its trailhead with all local funds at a later date.

SUMMARY

A rising star in the Lone Star State, strong public support and flexible financial partnerships helped make the Mineral Wells Rail-Trail a reality. The two towns mutually benefit from the increased economic, recreational and transportation activities the trail makes possible.

CONTACTS

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