

DURHAM COUNTY

## In Durham, another old railroad line could become a long greenway trail

By **Richard Stradling**February 01, 2025 7:00 AM | 

Trees growing on an abandoned section of railway in downtown Durham that will become the Durham Rail Trail. The city and county are now looking at another unused rail corridor to extend the trail north to Person County. Casey Toth



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## DURHAM

More than three decades ago, a plan was hatched to turn an abandoned railroad line south of downtown Durham into the walking and cycling path that became the [American Tobacco Trail](#).

Now local governments and a nonprofit are looking to do the same thing on an old rail corridor north of Durham. The Durham-to-Roxboro Rail Trail would stretch 26 miles from Old North Durham into Person County.

Planners are kicking off the process with two public workshops on Feb. 4 and 5. They've also posted [an online survey](#) that asks how people might use the trail and what features they would like included.

The planning at this stage focuses on the 18-mile portion of the line in Durham County; Person County completed a feasibility study for its 8-mile section last year. Together, the two studies will provide a guide for developing the trail in stages over the coming years.

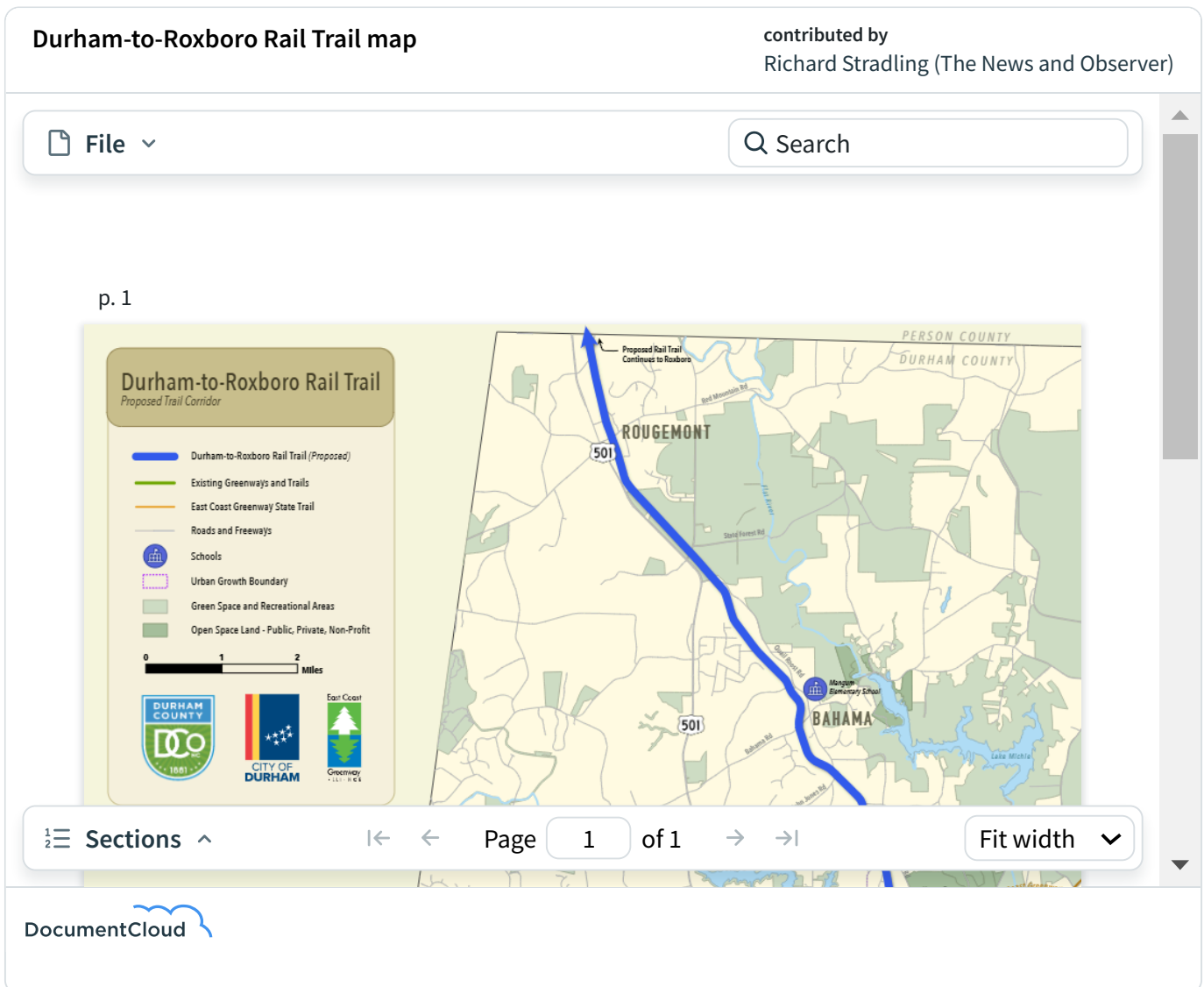
They will also indicate how much the project will ultimately cost, said Ellen Beckmann, transportation director for Durham County.

"This is a significant project and is going to be delivered in segments over many years," Beckmann wrote in an email. "The American Tobacco Trail was a similar rail-to-trail project, and it was designed and built in segments by the local governments using a combination of federal, state, and local funding. This study is the first step to identify a vision for the corridor."

The rail line was completed in 1890 by the Lynchburg & Durham railroad and later taken over by Norfolk & Western before it became Norfolk Southern. The railroad stopped using the line in the early 1980s and doesn't plan to put trains on it again.

Street crossings have been paved over, and 40-year-old trees grow between the rails in many places.

The Durham-to-Roxboro trail would extend the Triangle's network of greenway trails to a part of Durham that's been left out. From near downtown Durham, the line passes through Bragtown and Bahama before paralleling U.S. 501 to Rougemont and Person County. It passes near four schools, two community centers, a library, several parks, [Durham Technical Community College's](#) northern campus and the Treyburn community and corporate park.



It also crosses five creeks and rivers, including the Eno and Little rivers. The engineering work to determine if those trestles and bridges can be reused still lies ahead, said Andrew Meeker, North Carolina manager for the [East Coast Greenway Alliance](#).

“Even though they’re old, we’re hopeful that if they could take heavy freight trains that they would be able to accommodate, with a face-lift, walkers and bikers,” Meeker said.

The East Coast Greenway, [a planned 3,000-mile trail from Florida to Maine](#), would use the southern eight miles of the new trail, before veering northeast near [Stagville state historic site](#) toward Butner and Oxford. The East Coast trail encompasses parts or all of 17 different local trails in the Triangle, including Black Creek Greenway in Cary, [Reedy Creek Trail through Umstead State Park](#) and the [American Tobacco Trail](#).

## Trail would extend planned downtown path

The Durham-to-Roxboro trail would intersect with the north end of the Durham Rail Trail, a 1.75-mile trail being developed on a stretch of track once known as the Durham Belt Line. Three years ago, [the city received a \\$9 million federal grant to develop the paved trail](#) that will loop from West Village, at the Amtrak and bus stations, north between Duke Park and Old North Durham to the Avondale Drive bridge.

The city is [working on final designs for that trail](#) and hopes to begin construction in early 2026.

Building trails on old rail lines has many advantages, Meeker said, including that they’re generally level and can be acquired all at once.

“What makes a good rail corridor also makes a good trail corridor in many respects,” he said.

Durham-to-Roxboro Rail Trail is a working name, and planners hope to find a better one, Beckmann said.

“We have a question in our survey to submit potential names,” she said. “We hope to receive creative ideas from our residents.”

The planning team for the project includes Durham city and county, the [Durham-Chapel Hill-Carrboro Metropolitan Planning Organization](#), the N.C. Department of

Transportation and the [East Coast Greenway Alliance](#). They'll hold two informal workshops where people can learn about the project and provide their thoughts:

- Tuesday, Feb. 4, from 5 to 7 p.m., Durham County Main Library, 300 North Roxboro St. downtown.
- Wednesday, Feb. 5, from 6 to 7:30 p.m. at Durham North Regional Library, 221 Milton Road.

For more information, go to [durham2roxborotrailplan.com/](https://durham2roxborotrailplan.com/). The survey can be found at [bit.ly/3CwLD2s](https://bit.ly/3CwLD2s).



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A section of the old Durham Belt Line, near Fuller Street in downtown Durham. The old freight rail line is being turned into the Durham Rail Trail. Richard Stradling [rstradling@newsobserver.com](mailto:rstradling@newsobserver.com)

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