



# Dryden Rail Trail FAQ

*Recently, a small but vocal group of individuals in our community has been spreading false information about the planned Dryden Rail Trail pedestrian bridge over Route 13. To clarify and set the record straight, the Dryden Rail Trail Task Force compiled the following answers to frequently asked questions.*

## What is the Dryden Rail Trail?

The Dryden Rail Trail is a recreational and commuting bicycle and pedestrian path that follows the route of the decommissioned Lehigh Valley Railroad along a 14-mile corridor from Dryden to Ithaca. It will provide a continuous off-street connection through the Town of Dryden to Ithaca and Cornell University, passing through the communities of Dryden, Freeville, Etna, and Varna.

The Dryden Rail Trail will link to Tompkins County's 240 miles of interconnected hiking trails, including the Finger Lakes Trail—a nationally recognized destination trail. Locally, the Dryden Rail Trail will connect to other trails including the Cayuga Trail, Cornell Botanic Garden's Monkey Run Natural Area trails, and with Ithaca's and Cornell's pedestrian and bicycle networks.

## What will the positive economic impact of the Trail be for the Dryden community?

**Trails are an unparalleled driver of tourism and economic growth.** According to a study conducted by the Finger Lakes Trail Conference, the economic impact of New York State's nearly 10,000 miles of trails is significant. Each mile of non-paved sport trails generates \$231,779 in economic activity annually, which means that the Dryden Rail Trail could generate millions each year in local economic growth.

Rail Trails are also a key land use development tool, as outlined in the Tompkins County Comprehensive Plan. Multiple communities in the plan—including Varna, Etna, Freeville, and the NYSEG area around the intersection at Route 13 and Route 366—would be served by the Dryden Rail Trail. The Trail is already serving as an economic driver for Varna and is a signature component of the proposed 36-unit townhouse project called the "Evergreen Townhouses" at 1061 Dryden Road. **The Dryden Rail Trail is a priority strategy in comprehensive plans for the Towns of Ithaca and Dryden, and Hamlet of Varna,** and can serve as a supporting strategy in helping meet the County's affordable housing goals by increasing accessibility options to these same communities.

## What is the Trail's environmental impact?

The Dryden Rail Trail is simply not just a recreation trail. **It will also provide an alternative commuter and transportation option** that will reduce vehicle traffic and associated greenhouse gas emissions, in support of the Town's Comprehensive Plan, Tompkins County's 2020 Energy Strategy and Cornell University's Climate Action Plan. To meet these goals, the Dryden Rail Trail will need to be more than a hiking trail, and will require making it bike friendly, following the shortest possible routes while providing safe highway and road crossings.

Additionally, trails and rail trails support related natural area and green space conservation, housing and development, and sustainability goals. Trail development is a key conservation strategy that often leads to

the formal voluntary protection of private land, while retaining property tax income for local governments and school districts.

## What sections of the Trail are already completed?

On the east end, the Dryden Rail Trail joins the existing Jim Schug Trail, alongside Dryden Lake, which extends from East Lake Road into the Village of Dryden to Route 13. The Trail is also open from the Village of Dryden to Johnson Road in the Village of Freeville.

On the west end, the Dryden Rail Trail is open from Stevenson Road near Ithaca, through Varna and up to Route 13. The westernmost section of the Trail—from Stevenson Road to Game Farm Road—is currently under renovation and will connect to the East Ithaca Recreation Way. This section is expected to be open by August 2021.

## How did the Town acquire the properties for the Trail?

Presently, 8 of the 10.5 miles from the Village of Dryden to Ithaca (the current project), are under formal easements or have been pledged, representing a secured trail along 42 of the needed 48 parcels. All easements have been provided voluntarily by the property owners, and allow a 10-foot wide trail and buffer.

Conversations with remaining property owners alongside or adjacent to the original rail bed continues as options and alternatives are being worked out. The Town and Dryden Rail Trail Task Force members have made accommodations to property owners and neighbors to resolve individual concerns for positive outcomes.

## How is the Town funding the construction of the Trail?

The Town has secured **numerous grants** to fund trail construction and has had significant volunteer support, highlighting the broad support that the project has in the community. Grants received to date include AARP (\$8,000), New York State Parks (\$365,000), Tompkins County Strategic Tourism Grant (\$26,000), Tompkins County Tourism Capital Grant (\$50,000), a Multi-modal Grant from New York State (\$500,000), and New York State Department of Transportation, Transportation Alternatives Grant (\$1,450,000). **In total, the Town has raised nearly \$2.4 million in outside funding for the project.**

The project has also received **significant contributions in time and materials from volunteers, currently exceeding \$150,000**, as well as financial support from the Triad Foundation and Cornell University.

The Town of Dryden is also providing limited financial and logistical support for the trail pursuant to the local match requirements of the grants received.

## How will the trail get across roads and highways?

The Dryden Rail Trail follows the old Lehigh Valley Railroad route, which crosses many local, County, and State Highways. In most cases, the planned crossing will be at road level (at-grade), with appropriate signage and warnings for trail users and motorists.

For the former railroad bridge east of Varna over Route 366 (known as the “F.H. Fox Bridge”), the Town of Dryden received the necessary permits from the New York State Department of Transportation (NYSDOT) and secured ownership of that bridge. For the Route 366 crossing near Etna, the Town plans to seek an at-grade crossing from NYSDOT once all trail easements are secured and the alignment is finalized.

For the Route 13 crossing, the Town plans to construct a pedestrian bridge to get all trail users safely over the highway.

# What are the alternatives to a bridge over Route 13?

## AT-GRADE (ROAD LEVEL) CROSSING

Since its inception in 2016, The Rail Trail Task Force has been working on finding the best way to cross this very busy highway. The initial approach was to consider an at-grade crossing that included user-activated stoplights. In exploring the option, NYSDOT officials cited concerns about trail user safety, including the high rate of speed for vehicles (55 MPH), poor sight lines, traffic congestion, and limitations for pedestrian activated controls. For these reasons, this option was rejected.

## CROSSING AT EXISTING INTERSECTION OF ROUTES 13 AND 366

The Task Force then explored the alternative of taking the trail to the existing intersection of Routes 13 and 366 and requiring trail users to use crosswalks to get back to the original railroad bed. In exploring this alternative with NYSDOT and others, the crossing was determined to be too dangerous for trail users and would create added traffic delays and rush-hour congestion. For these reasons, this option was also rejected.

## PARALLEL TRAIL ALONG ROUTE 13 DOWN TO FALL CREEK AND BACK

The Task Force considered an option where the trail would leave the historic rail bed and parallel Route 13, go under the Route 13 Bridge at Fall Creek, and then parallel Route 13 back to the original railroad alignment.

This alternative raised several issues and concerns. The Trail is not intended to only serve recreational purposes, but is required to meet the needs for bicycle and pedestrian commuting as an alternative to vehicles. Adding an additional 2/3 mile to the route with steeper slopes near the creek would not serve the commuter requirement. If this bypass were the only option, many users would attempt a high-risk, at-grade crossing at this unapproved crossing location, rather than take the bypass down to and under the Fall Creek Bridge.

With input from stakeholders, planners, and NYSDOT engineers, we also determined that signage and fencing would be ignored and circumvented, and therefore would be ineffective as a deterrent. Additionally, the trail would have to parallel Route 13 within 10 feet of the highway for a distance over 1,750 feet on the east side. The close proximity to this high-speed state route presented an unacceptable hazard for trail users and a less-than-desirable experience. **Importantly, no easements have been granted to us through private property that would allow us to angle the trail route away from the east edge of the highway.**

In reviewing these concerns and issues collectively, the Rail Trail Task Force, Town of Dryden, and NYSDOT agreed that diverting the trail was not an acceptable option, and that a direct crossing on the old railroad alignment was the preferred alternative. This left two options: building a tunnel under Route 13 or building a pedestrian bridge over it.

## TUNNEL VS. BRIDGE

In 2018 the Rail Trail Task Force applied for and was awarded a \$26,000 Tompkins County Strategic Tourism Initiative grant to study the two direct crossing alternatives—a bridge and a tunnel. The Town hired the engineering firm of Barton and Loguidice to conduct a study of these two alternatives. The study indicated that the cost of a bridge would be \$1.84M and a tunnel would be \$4.33M. With this significant cost difference, it became clear to the Task Force that a pedestrian bridge was the safest, most economical, and most direct alternative. Following this decision, the selection, Tompkins County and New York State officials encouraged the Rail Trail Task Force to apply for a Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP) grant for the bridge.

## How much will the bridge cost, and how is it being funded?

Using the cost figures from the Barton and Loguidice study, in 2018 the Task Force applied for several grants to fund the bridge. These grants include the Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP) grant, which was successfully awarded and will provide \$1,476,540 with required matching funds by the Town of 20%. The Town also received a grant through the Tompkins County Capital Grant Program for \$50,000, and received a Multi-modal grant through New York State for \$500,000. A portion of the trail on either side of the bridge will be funded by the New York State Parks Grant, which totals \$365,000 with a required 50% match by the Town.

With the TAP grant funding, the Task Force developed a request for proposals for design, engineering, and costing for the project, and the Town eventually hired Erdman Anthony Associates as the firm to design the project. Their more detailed design which included the bridge, approach ramps, and stretches of trail on each side, yielded increases in the cost, which is now expected to be \$2.75M.

## Do you have all the necessary easements or property ownership to construct the bridge?

### RESIDENTIAL PROPERTY

The Rail Trail Task Force has negotiated and received sufficient voluntary easements to construct the Trail west from Route 13 to Game Farm Road and east from Hall Woods Road to Pinckney Road. From Hall Woods Road (which is Town-owned), to Route 13, **the Task Force already received a voluntary easement from a privately-owned portion needed for the trail.** It was later determined that the easement did not explicitly include language for the ramp for the pedestrian bridge crossing over Route 13 and the **Task Force concluded that an amendment would be necessary.**

### ACQUISITION OF PROPERTY FOR MODIFIED EASEMENT ON PRIVATE PROPERTY

**The Task Force attempted to communicate with the out-of-town property owner on numerous occasions through phone calls, emails, and postal mail to discuss alignment of the ramp away from the property and to pursue a voluntary amendment. Unfortunately, the property owner was unresponsive.** Left with no alternative, the Town vote authorized NYSDOT to manage various land acquisition options for the total area needed (0.16 acres). The Town's preference is that the acquisition should occur on a willing seller basis with appropriate financial compensation.

### PRIVACY

After receiving input from Hall Woods Road neighbors who were interested in maximizing visual privacy for their residences, the Task Force considered various trail footprints that would shift the trail away from the Town-owned road to a location that would retain existing vegetation alongside the road and a row of spruce trees along the rail bed, providing screening to the homeowners on the opposite side of Hall Woods Road. **This change in alignment was specifically made to appeal to the Hall Woods Road residents' concerns about their privacy.**

### COMMERCIAL PROPERTY

The acreage for the proposed new location of the trail and a portion of the pedestrian bridge ramp totals 0.7 acres at the site of a printing company that closed down in September of 2018 and is owned by Brown Dog LLC. **Despite five years of concerted efforts by members of the Task Force, we have not been able to obtain an agreement with these non-resident owners about the project.**

## ACQUISITION OF COMMERCIAL PROPERTY

In spring of 2021 the Town authorized NYSDOT to manage various land acquisition options for the total area needed (0.7 acres) on the 23-acre commercial property. As with the residential property, it is still our sincere hope that acquisition will happen on a willing-seller basis with appropriate financial compensation.

## ENCUMBERED LAND

The Town of Dryden and the Rail Trail Task Force prefer to seek easements whenever possible on the former rail bed right-of-way. This is because the **Town already has a below-ground right-of-way on the entire rail bed** for water and sewer easements. This easement restricts certain uses or development on these portions of properties, whether commercial or residential.

## EMINENT DOMAIN

Some opponents of the project are expressing outrage about the perceived misuse of eminent domain. We want to assure them that any use of this **Constitutional legal right will be carefully considered and extremely limited**. If it is used, the property owners will be fully and justly compensated. The Town of Dryden and the Dryden Rail Trail Task Force believe that in this special case of the Route 13 pedestrian bridge, the benefits to the public—thousands of weekly trail users safely crossing Route 13—vastly outweigh the narrow interest of one out-of-town property owner who opposes the trail. **Because a bridge is the only viable option** for completing the Dryden Rail Trail, the use of this Constitutional process is justified in this case— as it was in the creation of projects ranging from the Cayuga Waterfront Trail to Gettysburg National Park.

## What kinds of surfaces will the Trail have?

Since the **TAP grant is ultimately federally funded**, the project must meet Federal Highway Authority regulations, including meeting standards outlined in the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), certain sections surrounding the proposed pedestrian bridge will be surfaced in stone dust. Other sections, built with different funding sources have different requirements, so some are stone dust and others dirt or mowed grass. However, the ultimate goal is to have the entire Dryden Rail Trail be stone dust and fully ADA compliant in the future. **Importantly, the TAP grant cannot be used for a different project, such as paving a road.**