

The benefits of rail trails

Like the trains that preceded them, rail trails are all about connecting people, places and markets.

The best part about rail trails is the absence of cars. For locals, rail trails provide a place for recreation and exercise. For many people they're a safe, off-road route to school or work or the railway station. But it's not just locals who use rail trails. Visitors come exploring for a day to walk or pedal a section, or for an extended trip.

Cycle tourism forms a growing niche market that offers potential for a range of economic and social benefits to regional and rural areas. Cycle tourists tend to be slow moving and on average spend slightly more than other tourists, so they represent a high yield market. They can make the difference between a small town retaining its local shop and pub or losing them.

Because rail trails offer low gradients and a safe route away from traffic, they are becoming very popular. The longer the trail, the more places it connects, the more attractive it becomes for people to visit from further afield – even overseas. The 150 km Otago Rail Trail in New Zealand attracts over 14,000 visitors each year, 20 per cent of those from overseas. It's now the backbone of a tourism industry with a calculated economic impact of over \$12 million each year.

That's the potential of a trail joining Wallan, Heathcote and Bendigo, and ultimately Melbourne and trail networks throughout central and eastern Victoria.

Want to know more? Get in touch with us.

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Other supporters of the Wallan to Bendigo trail.



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Old railway line: new connections



Imagine taking the kids for a ride or the dog for a walk along a trail right near your home.

Imagine travelling on a bike path between home and the next town.

Imagine packing your bike for an off-road adventure stretching all the way from Melbourne through central and eastern Victoria.

*We don't want to imagine it.
We want to see it happen.*



The vision

Until 1958, towns like Wandong, Kilmore, Tooborac and Heathcote were connected to each other, and Melbourne and Bendigo by a railway line. Part of that line is now the O'Keefe Rail Trail linking Bendigo and Heathcote. In 2009 extending the trail from where it finished outside Axedale seemed like a crazy dream. Yet six years later the extension to Heathcote was finished.

We'd like to see the trail travel all the way from Wallan-Wandong to Heathcote and then on to Bendigo. The first stage might be as simple as a trail joining Wallan and Kilmore.

Land ownership has changed since the railway was closed, but we think it's still possible for an off-road trail to follow or parallel the alignment of the old line fairly closely. And this would be a really special trail, traversing some fabulous countryside and passing through some marvellous towns.

But the vision is even grander. This trail would be around 120 km long once complete, and form the backbone that connects other significant trails:

- the Great Victorian Rail Trail that runs 134 km from Tallarook to Mansfield and Alexandra, and
- the Goldfields Track that runs 210 km between Bendigo and Ballarat.

When the new rail trail joins Heathcote and Wallan, it's not that far to connect Wallan to Craigieburn and the Melbourne network of trails.

Mitchell Shire Council listed development of the trail among its priority needs before the 2014 state election. A feasibility study is now under way to determine possible routes, potential return on investment as well as plans and specifications for construction. Once that's complete, the support of local communities in turning this part of the dream into reality will be vital.

