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HB 3006-3015-3020: Support Rock Island Trail ARPA Funding

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The Rock Island Trail Is a pathway toward tourism success

Patrick Tuttle and Mac Vorce

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There is much at stake for Missouri this week.

The Senate Appropriations Committee is debating its version of the state budget and nestled in there is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity — \$70 million to kick start development of the Rock Island Trail State Park.

In his State of the State address, Governor Mike Parson called on the legislature to invest a portion of the state's federal recovery dollars to develop the 144-mile corridor, which was officially railbanked in December. The trail will eventually connect to the Katy Trail and into Kansas City, creating a 400-mile trail loop. Governor Parson understands the trail's potential as "a world-class, one-of-a-kind destination for travelers coming to Missouri ... while also supporting businesses and creating jobs"—potential that can only be realized if the trail is built. The House also recognizes the potential and included the \$70 million and more in its budget. Now it is up to the Senate to act and pass H.B. 3020.

In establishing a tourism base, a state's natural amenities play a major economic role. It is not possible to create a mountain or add a beach where there is none. For Missouri, showcasing the state's natural features contributes greatly to the tourism revenue streams of every community.

Trails, like the Katy Trail and the future Rock Island Trail State Park, make it possible to access the wonders of our state through means that support the environment and promote public health. This land that is a part of the Missouri landscape—this unused railway that crosses the midsection of Missouri—is a pathway toward tourism success on many levels.

A study of outdoor recreation found that bicycling participants spend \$83 billion on 'trip-related' sales and generate \$97 billion in retail spending each year in the U.S. In Missouri, our bicycle economy already ranks 13th nationwide—we're a top state for bicycle tourism and the jobs it supports. Missouri's trails alone contribute \$507 million in economic activity to the state annually, which could grow to \$1.05 billion each year as trail connectivity improves.

Considering the totality of economic opportunity that bicycling, trails and outdoor recreation represent for the state, it's hard to understand any opposition to this investment.

It's not every day that the state has a surplus of funding intended for economic recovery. Pair that with a world-class trail network ready to be built and we're sitting pretty for a significant boost to our tourism economy. Based solely on the visitation and economic impact of the Katy Trail, we know this will be a tourism draw for the entire world.

This investment is a smart move. We're all counting on Senate Appropriations Committee Chairman Senator Dan Hegeman, Vice Chairman Senator Lincoln Hough and Ranking Member Senator Lauren Arthur to make the strategic move for our state and vote in favor of HB 3020.

Patrick Tuttle is the director of the Joplin Convention and Visitors Bureau. Mac Vorce is the executive director of the Warsaw Chamber of Commerce.

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Do big things at Rock Island Trail State Park

BY NATE WILLIAMS
Special to The Star



There is much at stake for Missouri this week.

The Missouri Senate Appropriations Committee is debating its version of the state budget and nestled in there is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity — \$70 million to kick start development of the Rock Island Trail State Park.

In his state of the state address, Gov. Mike Parson called on the legislature to invest a portion of the state's federal pandemic recovery dollars to develop the 144-mile corridor, which was officially rail-banked — set aside for possible future use — in December. The trail will eventually connect to the Katy Trail and into Kansas City, creating a 400-mile trail loop. Parson understands the trail's potential, calling it “a world-class, one-of-a-kind destination for travelers coming to Missouri ... while also supporting businesses and creating jobs” — potential that can only be realized if the trail is built. The Missouri House also recognizes the potential and included the \$70 million and more in its budget. Now it is up to the state Senate to act and pass HB 3020.

It's not every day that the state has a surplus of funding intended for economic recovery. Pair that with a world-class trail network ready to be built and we're sitting pretty for a significant boost to our tourism economy. Based solely on the visitation and economic impact of the Katy Trail, we know this



REBECCA SLEZAK Star file photo

Missouri's bicycle economy already ranks 13th nationwide, and the state's trails contribute \$507 million to the economy every year.

will be a tourism draw for the entire world.

A study of outdoor recreation nationwide found that bicycling participants spend \$83 billion on “trip-related” sales (bicycle tourism) and generate \$97 billion in retail spending each year in the United States. In Missouri, our bicycle economy already ranks 13th nationwide — we're a top state for bicycle tourism and the jobs it supports. Outdoor recreation already contributes 80,000 jobs across the state. Missouri's trails alone contribute \$507 million in economic activity to the state annually, which could grow to \$1.05 billion each year as trail connectivity improves.

Considering the totality of economic opportunity that bicycling, trails and outdoor recreation represent for the state, it's hard to understand any opposition to this investment. The annual return on investment far exceeds this single infusion of cash.

While the \$70 million is not enough to build the entire 144-mile rail-trail, it provides needed funding to complete the hardest and most expensive portions, including three major tunnels and two major bridges.

This investment is a smart move for the state. The Rock Island Trail State Park would raise the profile of Missouri around the globe. It will be key to bolstering our economic future. We're counting on Senate Appropriations Committee Chairman Dan Hegeman, Vice Chairman Lincoln Hough and Ranking Member Lauren Arthur to make the strategic move for our state and vote in favor of HB 3020.

It's clearly a win-win.

Nate Williams is the director of parks, recreation and community center in the city of Excelsior Springs. He co-authored this with Andy Clements, director of public works and transportation for the city of St. Joseph.



HB 3006-3015-3020: Rock Island Trail ARPA Funding – A Major Rural Economic Development Initiative

- Gov. Parson proposed \$69 million in ARPA funding to develop the **most difficult/expensive sections of Rock Island Trail State Park in central Missouri** as a major rural economic development project. 3 tunnels, 2 major bridges.
- **Remaining sections of the 144-mile rail-trail corridor would be built quickly by local, private, and other funds**
- With the Katy Trail, this creates a 400+ mile cross state trail loop system unlike any in the world – an **internationally significant tourism destination**.
- **Katy Trail brings 500K visits & \$18 million annually** – Rock Island would equal that



- **2000s:** Communities along the corridor organize & begin working together to develop the corridor as a trail. Work continues today in a remarkably unified way.
- **August 2014:** 12,000 signatures delivered to Ameren, Inc., calling on the company to preserve the 144-mile corridor through railbanking and create a regional rail-trail.
- **Summer 2017:** 8,685 comments submitted during Missouri State Parks public comment period, with more than 98 percent on record as comments in favor of the trail.
- **Fall 2018:** Hundreds attend three State Parks public meetings in Rock Island communities about future of corridor, vast majority express support for the trail; 1875 public comments submitted – 95% support; 1% oppose; 4% neutral or just a question.
- **2018:** General Assembly requires State Parks to build/maintain Rock Island corridor fencing if corridor accepted as State Park (SB 782; 253.175 RSMo).
- **2019:** General Assembly endorses creation of Rock Island Trail State Park and creation of a special Endowment Fund to collect private donations for corridor (SB 473; 253.177 RSMo).
- **Dec 2021:** DNR signs agreements and accepts the 144 mile Rock Island RR corridor as part of the Missouri State Parks system.