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Keith Laughlin, President  
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Dear Keith,

It hardly seems like two years already since I met you and the RTC staff at the grand opening of your new Washington DC office. It was a memorable three days.

I'm writing today about a situation that RTC *may* not have encountered yet: restoring a rail trail to active rail service. As I understand it the National Railbanking Act requires a rail trail owner to "give back" the trail if the previously abandoned right-of-way is to be restored as an active rail line. That very situation is on the horizon in the northern Philadelphia suburbs where I live. Here briefly is the background.

The Philadelphia region has an excellent commuter rail network, one of the most extensive in the nation. It is owned and operated by the South Eastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA), an entity obtusely defined in PA as a Public Service Corporation. Some 20 years ago SEPTA abandoned its branch line to Newtown, PA, a distant suburb. Some believe that SEPTA fabricated a justification for killing the R8, as it is known. SEPTA still owns the right of way, but two years ago they leased a 2-mile stretch to Montgomery County, for all of \$1. The county took up the rails and ties and made a trail, which is locally popular.

However, in 20 years the R8 corridor to and including Newtown has experienced explosive development and population growth. As a result, many commuters are forced to drive to rail stations on other "R" lines to catch a train to Philadelphia, thereby denying adequate parking to the local "home station" people. Other outlying areas have seen comparable growth; but SEPTA has ignored it or dealt with it poorly, and parking and levels of service are notably inadequate in many areas. SEPTA's remedial plan, based on a 10-year old, badly flawed user survey, is to build a massive 700-car garage in the middle of a suburban residential area close to the city. This plan openly encourages more people to drive further to get a train - exactly the opposite of national, state and regional transportation and environmental policy.

Consequently many people in two densely populated suburban counties want the R8 line back. It is a win-win regional transportation solution that would benefit everyone. However, SEPTA so far refuses to even talk about the possibility. They are fixated on spending \$30 million of mostly federal tax money to build this huge, intrusive, unjustified garage.

So where does RTC come into this picture? I believe that RTC's credibility and influence as a national promoter of balanced, multi-mode transportation would be even greater if it were to endorse a rail trail "give back". You would be seen as fair and even handed, ready to give up a trail *if* and when its restoration to rail service would increase the use of public transportation and, concurrently, decrease automobile-driven congestion, pollution, and greenhouse gasses.

Endorsement of the return of the 2-mile R8 trail by an organization of RTC's stature would help local organizations push SEPTA to seriously study the restoration and develop a plan for it. SEPTA is beholden only to the politicians who authorize its funding, so a lot of our effort goes into informing and influencing the people who, at various levels of government, work the purse strings. Being able to show them that RTC supports giving up the R8 trail in favor of a more balanced, enhanced regional transportation system would give us a little more ammunition.

Let me make one thing clear: I'm not suggesting that RTC should in any way promote give backs as a policy. I'm saying that when a specific case arises, such as the R8, and if the public benefit of restoring rail service can be shown to surpass the right-of-way's value as a trail, RTC ought to support the give back.

I don't see RTC taking an active role in this matter. A few supporting letters would be quite adequate, and I would be more than willing to help draft them. I won't burden this letter with a lot of detail, but you can learn a lot more by visiting [www.CheltenhamChamberofCitizens.com](http://www.CheltenhamChamberofCitizens.com). The CCC, of which I am a director, is one of the local organizations trying to get SEPTA to act responsibly and put our tax money to better use for the region.

Last week I had the pleasure of meeting Charlie Marshall, RTC's new chairman. His railroading background should be a valuable asset in promoting and implementing RTC's goals. The subject of this letter was one of many trail-related topics we discussed.

Keep up the good work. Biking is an important part of my life, and I will continue to support the RTC's efforts to make the entire nation a more bikeable place.

Cordially,

Cc: Charles N. Marshall