

Originally proposed tunnel placement (in purple) and the revised Shields Brook Alternative plan (highlighted with small red arrows), which rail trail advocates say resembles a mile-long string of spaghetti.
Graphic/Manchester Ink Link

DERRY, NH – Transportation officials changed the plans for a section of rail trail to be built through a new highway ramp in Derry, from a straightforward tunnel to a circuitous “spaghetti-shaped” detour, that rail trail advocates are calling unsafe and unnecessary.

Town officials say it’s the tunnel that creates a safety issue for motorists.

State rail trail advocates thought they had assurances from the Department of Transportation in 2019 that Derry’s section of the Granite State Rail Trail will be connected with a tunnel under a highway ramp leading to the [proposed Exit 4A](#) off Interstate 93.

But last October, the public learned that those plans had changed amid the aftermath of a debacle that saw an initial design-build process result in three bids way over the state’s budget. When the state bought the designs and tried to combine components from the three bidders, they adopted an alternative rail trail route originally proposed by civil engineering firm VHB known as the Shields Brook alternative.

Instead of passing straight through the highway ramp behind the current Kelsen Brewing Company location on North High Street, the north-south trail takes a hard turn westward along the roadway, makes

a small southward loop near Fernald Drive to pass under the Shields Brook bridge (which will be expanded during construction) then winds gradually back east to the northern trailhead.

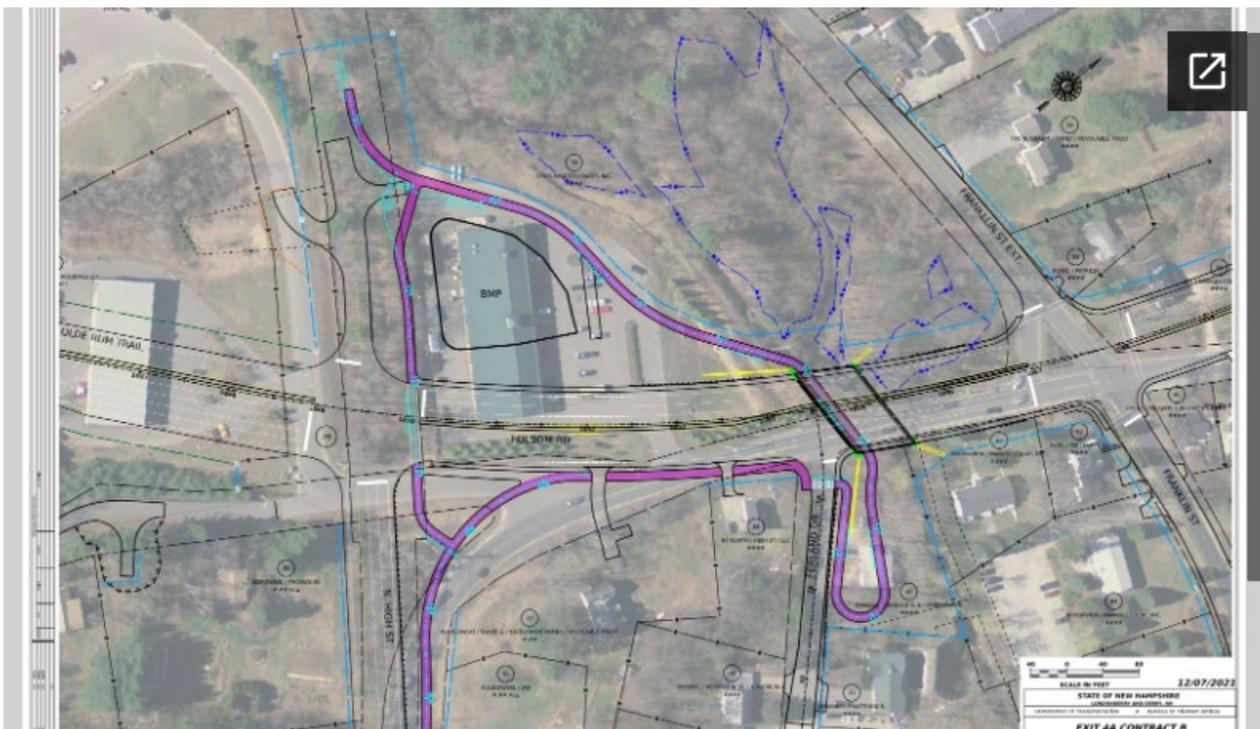
Dave Topham, the president of the New Hampshire Rail Trails Coalition, calls it the “spaghetti plan.”

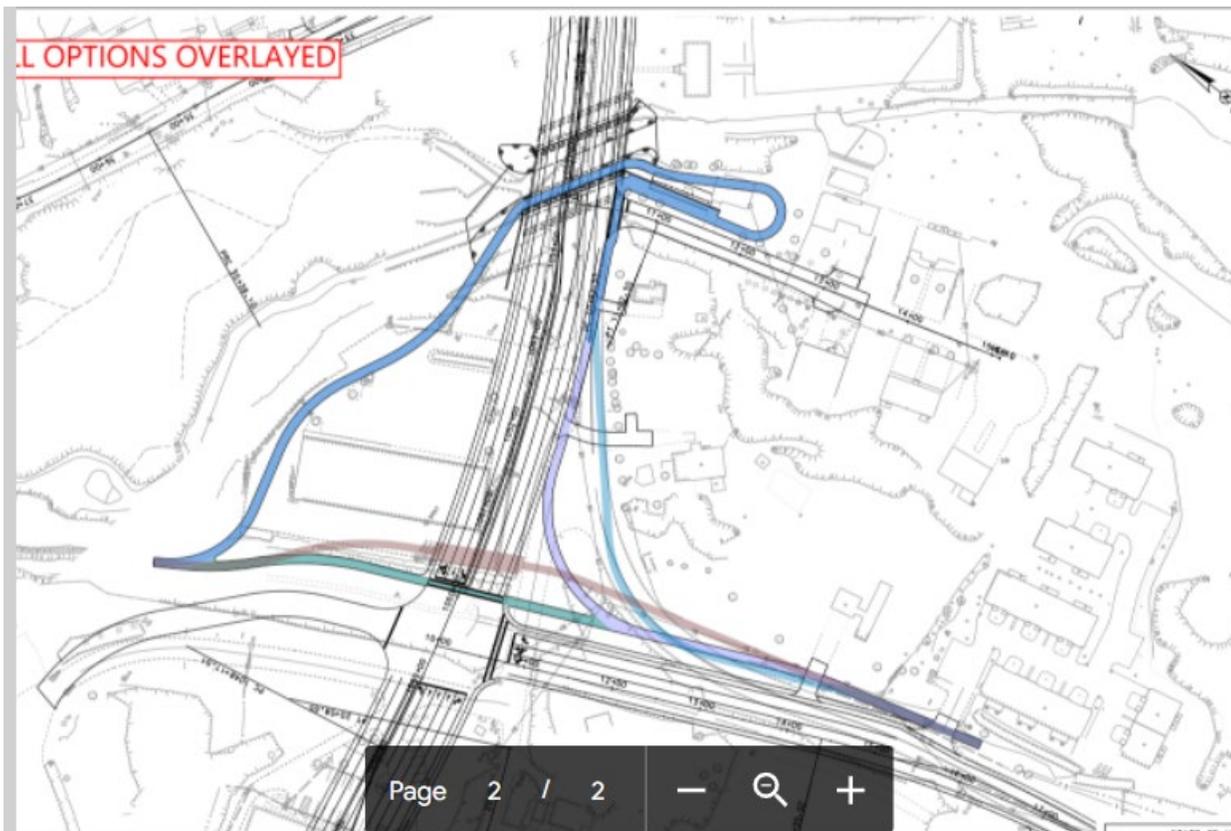
“The Shields Brook alternative is considered totally unacceptable to the bike-ped rail trail community, because it’s not safe for the users,” Topham said.

He said the twists and turns, 90-degree angles and sharp declines are too dangerous for a trail that services thousands of users per day.

As to why the changes were made, the DOT says it’s going to save about \$1 million.

State of NH renderings of proposed rail trail plan, top, and an overlay of all options below.





“NHDOT committed to providing a grade-separated crossing for the rail trail, which we are continuing to provide,” said DOT spokesperson Eileen Meaney. “The change made to the plan was to relocate the grade-separated crossing further to the east, to utilize the grade-separated Shields Brook Bridge crossing. This change eliminated the need to construct a bridge specifically for the rail trail and created a capital cost savings of \$1 million dollars for the project, as well as long-term maintenance cost savings to the Town of Derry.”

Town Administrator Dave Caron said it’s his understanding it was done for safety reasons, particularly because the tunnel under the ramp would require a higher-grade elevation and make for a dangerous driving or plowing situation in the winter.

Topham said he isn’t buying it. After listening in on public meetings of state officials, Topham said he is skeptical the alternative will save the state that much money, and said the state hasn’t produced any evidence of savings.

A couple versions of the proposed tunnel itself were projected to cost either just shy of \$1 million or just over \$1 million, Topham said. But he said the new route adds approximately $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile of new trail. Generally speaking, rail trails cost about \$1 million per mile to build.

“If they think they’re saving money, I would counter that one serious accident and a lawsuit would more than pay for the tunnel,” Topham said.

Mark Connors, the president of the Derry Rail Trail Alliance, said such safety concerns are disingenuous, since the tunnel was part of the original design which met federal highway standards.

“It’s a manufactured issue, I think, because it was already designed that way, and people bid on it,” Connors said.

Topham said the elevation problem would be solved by lowering the tunnel height from 12 feet to 10 feet.

The question of safety is apparently further complicated by historic preservation requirements.

Topham said that in the absence of a tunnel, the state Division of Historical Resources is requiring a grade-level crossing over the original rail bed location, which would be a crosswalk over a busy, five-lane intersection.

Caron said the town is against such a plan.

“We’re advocating to not have that involved,” Caron said. “We think that’s a safety hazard.”

On this, both Caron and Topham are in agreement. What they disagree on is the solution.

This part of the Exit 4A project has moved on from the planning stage to the design stage. As Caron understands it, that means it’s too late to make any changes to the trail route.

It’s Topham’s hope that he and other rail trail advocates will be able to make the case for restoring the original tunnel plan at an upcoming meeting between state officials and Federal Highway Administration project managers.

He said the meeting is supposed to happen sometime this spring.

Topham said he and other rail trail stakeholders feel left out of the decision-making process despite promises and a memorandum of understanding that they would have a seat at the table. He also feels the DOT has circumvented the public input process with this change.

Caron said they received the public input they needed when Connors wrote a letter in June 2020 saying the Derry Rail Trail Alliance had “no objections” to the alternative route.

Indeed, Connors did write a letter on behalf of the local rail trail group to VHB to aid in its bid, Connors said, but he did not intend it as an endorsement of the plan, nor was he authorized to represent other stakeholders in the state. In the same letter, Connors said he is “thrilled” to see a tunnel in the design, but said he saw the merits of the alternative and that either option would serve the ultimate goal of connectivity.

“That’s basically what the town and the DOT are hanging their hat on, unfortunately,” Connors said of his letter.

After it came to light that the state adopted the Shields Brook route as its preferred design, last October, Connors wrote another letter essentially rescinding the 2020 letter.

He said he wrote the first letter with the verbal understanding that it was only one of many alternatives, the original tunnel was still the engineers’ and advocates’ preferred option, and it was just meant to sweeten the pot for VHB’s bid, not serve as public input for the final design.

The Derry Rail Trail is part of a 125-mile statewide trail called the [Granite State Rail Trail](#), which will connect Lebanon to Salem when finished.