

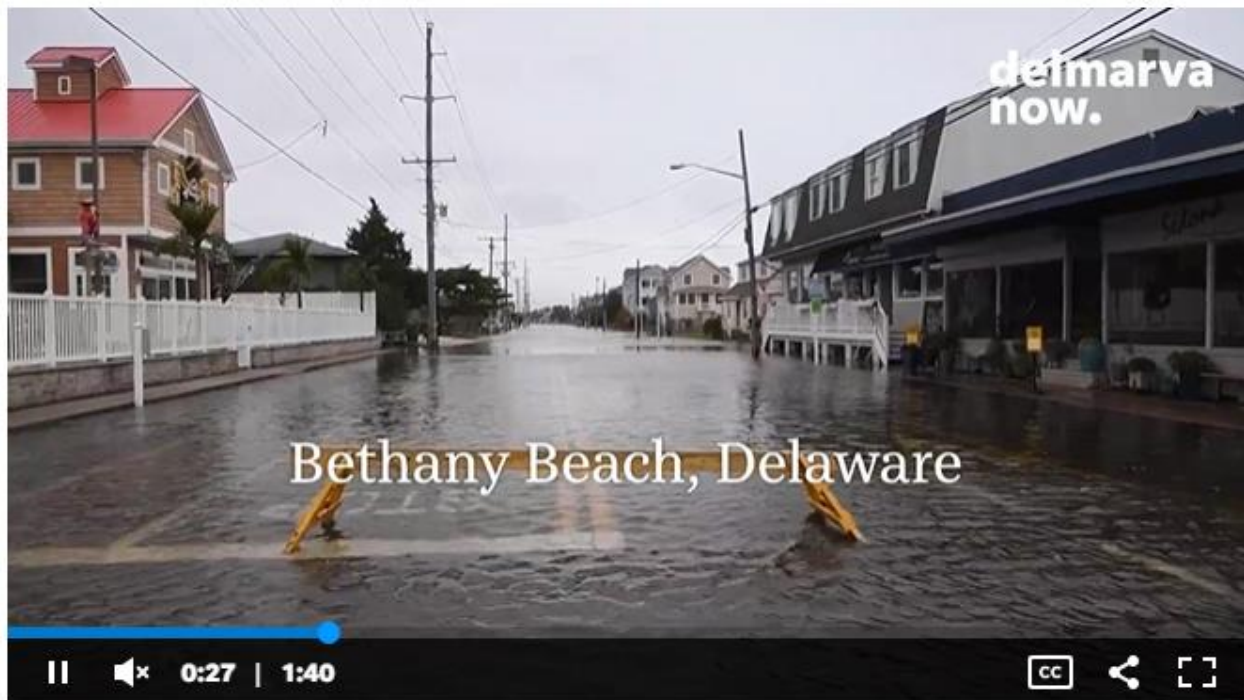
[VIRGINIA](#)

## Virginia Shore railroad tracks are disappearing. Is removal the right track?

[Railroad tracks removed on Eastern Shore of Virginia. Some hold hope \(delmarvanow.com\)](#)

By [Maddie Aiken](#)

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Railroad tracks on Virginia's Eastern Shore that span from Hallwood to Cape Charles are currently being removed — but advocates are still pushing for railroad revival.

The railroad, which hasn't been in operation since 2018, has been the subject of community debate for years.

Railroad revivalists claim the railroad could have future economic and ecological benefits, while those who think the railroad's operating days are over believe the railroad has proven it is no longer an asset for the Eastern Shore.

On Oct. 5, the Accomack-Northampton Transportation District Commission voted to begin removing the railroad's tracks. The same month, the Rail Enterprise Group, a corporate entity that operates four short lines, released a proposal to revitalize the rail corridor.

New York, Philadelphia and Norfolk Railroad, a charitable organization that supports the railroad's revitalization, called on the transportation commission to delay removal of tracks upon the release of the proposal. The group was named after a former rail line by the same name.

However, the railroad's owner, Canonie Atlantic Co., says it contractually cannot cease the removal.

As tracks continue to be removed, some believe the future of this railroad is still up in the air — and hope for federal involvement.

### **On the right track? Pros and cons of the railroad**

Over a century old, these railroad tracks were used by several different operators until [the most recent operator, Bay Coast Railroad, ended operations](#) in 2018.

The Virginia Eastern Shore's economy once thrived due to the roughly 50-mile rail corridor. By the 21st century, however, the railroad's promise of success seemed to be in the rearview.

However, advocates say the railroad could still be revitalized if it was in the right hands.

Jim Ritch, a volunteer with NYP&N, said the railroad could potentially bring manufacturing jobs to the area. He said the Eastern Shore shouldn't let the railroad slip out of its fingers until "absolutely necessary."

"It may be necessary to abandon the railroad, but it is an economic artery you don't want to sever unless you have to, unless there's no life in it at all," Ritch said.

### **PHOTOS:**[Storm brings flooding to Salisbury, Ocean City, Rehoboth, Virginia Shore](#)

John Paffrath, another volunteer with NYP&N, pointed to the environmental and historical benefits of the railroad. Railroads are better for the environment than trucks, and Paffrath described these tracks as a "historical landmark."

"There's a lot of potential here," Paffrath said. "It's a shame the commissioners can't see the potential, or maybe don't want to see the potential."

In response, the commissioners say they have evaluated the situation for what it is, and point to the "economic reality" of the rail corridor.

Donald Hart, Accomack-Northampton Transportation District Commission chairman, and Spencer Murray, Canonie Atlantic Co. director, outlined their position.

In the statement, Hart and Murray say NYP&N "does not comprehend the financial realities associated with profitable rail operations on the Shore."

Other operating railroads have assessed the rail corridor from Hallwood to Cape Charles, according to the statement. These assessments found the rail corridor would need a minimum of \$5 million to \$6 million in investments to bring the track to "minimum standards."

Even with investments, the railroads said sufficient carloads are not available to "recover this investment and fund ongoing operations."

"The ANTDC and CAC are fully aware of the history of rail on the Shore and no one desires to see even a portion cease operations," Hart and Murray's statement reads. "Unfortunately, economic reality demands this temporary measure by the ANTDC and CAC."

### **The hope for revitalization**

In October, Rail Enterprise Group President Eyal Shapira penned a proposal that offers his services to Accomack and Northampton counties to "help preserve the rail corridor and develop a new rail entity."

The proposal outlines the group's history of reviving railroads and its hopes for this rail corridor.

In the proposal, Shapira envisions that the rail corridor could be used for freight and passenger services, recreational paths, and new or improved utility lines.

Additionally, the proposal says the group would aim to:

- Develop warehouse, distribution and cross dock services in the area.
- Identify structures along the railroad to "help jump-start rail-centric interest" and use these structures to draw in more industries.
- Develop and market loading areas for products currently moving into the area by truck.
- Offer connectivity to the group's rail logistics centers in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania; Edison, New Jersey; Milan, Tennessee; and Middletown, Iowa.

"This type of valuable infrastructure is becoming increasingly rare and its preservation as a rail transportation connection to the nation is vital to economic growth, workforce retention and commercial expansion in the region," Shapira wrote in the proposal.

In response, Hart and Murray said Rail Enterprise Group has not made a financial commitment to help the rail corridor. Canolie Atlantic reached out to Shapira regarding financial commitments, but Shapira had not yet responded, according to the Oct. 29 statement.

"Should a financially viable proposal be presented that develops the rail corridor for safe, efficient rail traffic, the ANTDC and CAC will evaluate the merits with the best interest of Shore residents and businesses in mind," Hart and Murray said in the statement.

Shapira did not respond to several requests for comment for this article.

### **The rail corridor's future**

Though NYP&N has asked the commission and Canolie Atlantic to delay removal of the tracks, both say they cannot.

Murray said the company has signed a contract to remove the rails, ties and signals, as well as smooth the ballast and pave the crossings. The removal of tracks started in the north.

"The sale of the tracks to be repurposed more than covers the cost of the operations and gives additional funding for next steps on the trail such as final design," Murray wrote in an email. "Because the tracks have been committed in the sale, a 'pause' is neither needed or possible."

Looking to the future, the corridor could gain handlebars and hiking boots.

**MARYLAND:** [84% of chicken growers failed water control inspections, but few paid fines](#)

In December 2020, the Virginia Department of Transportation [conducted a study](#) on converting the corridor into a hiking and bicycling trail. The study says Canonie Atlantic has recognized the proposal as an "attractive idea."

NYP&N is not opposed to the potential trail. In fact, Ritch advocates for both railroad revitalization and the trail.

"We're not asking people to choose ... we're hoping to have both the railroad — and its economic stimulus — and the bike path — and its quality of life and economic contributions," Ritch said.

Though some may believe the railroad's future is bleak, NYP&N isn't backing down.

Paffrath hinted there could be future federal involvement. Delmarva Now obtained an Oct. 27 letter sent by the NYP&N group's secretary, Roger Malik, to U.S. Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg.

The letter requests the Department of Transportation order a 90-day halt to rail scrapping.

"Local citizens, the commonwealth of Virginia and the United States will suffer several great losses should this questionable and reckless conduct be permitted to destroy this historic and essential railway," Malik's letter reads.

In response to the letter, Murray said there were "numerous errors."

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