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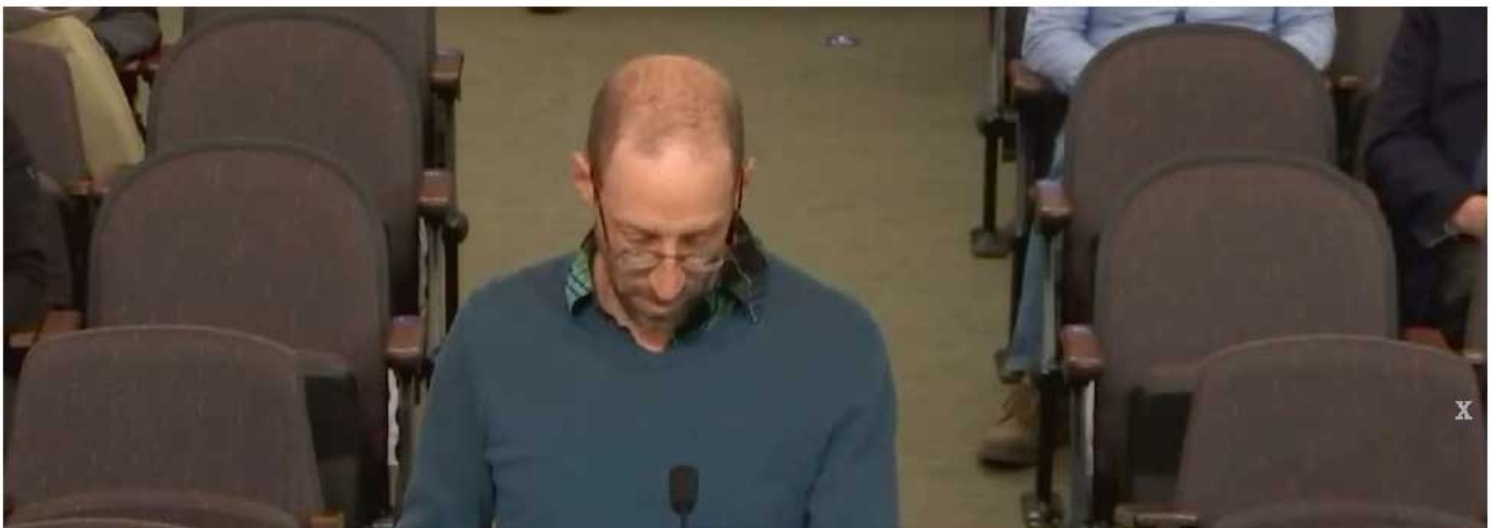
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LOCAL

Tacoma to sell 'unprofitable' rail line. What's that mean for a trail to Mount Rainier?

BY LIZ MOOMEY

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Public Comment

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The Tacoma City Council approved an agreement at [its Feb. 28 council meeting](#) to sell a portion of its Tacoma Rail line, leaving the future of a Tacoma to Mount Rainier trail outside of city control.

The Mountain Division line is operated by Tacoma Rail, a public utility that is owned by the City of Tacoma. Tacoma Rail has 65 customers on 136 miles of track in three operating divisions, one being the Mountain Division.

Rainier Rail, a short-line railroad operating in southwestern Washington, purchased the Mountain Division line for \$2.21 million.

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Rails-to-trails advocates were dismayed by the City Council's agreement to sell. The [Mountain Division](#) extends from Tacoma through Frederickson, where it splits with

one line from Eatonville to Morton, and another to McKenna. The Mountain Division contains a part of the Pierce County planned trail system from Tacoma to Mount Rainier.

According to the resolution, the city previously pursued tourism opportunities and planned to build a “Train to the Mountain” program. The city attempted to partner with a passenger-excursion operation, but ridership was deemed unsustainable.

The city received 54.5 miles of railroad track from Weyerhaeuser Company as a donation in 1990 and purchased another 77 miles of track from Weyerhaeuser in 1995 for \$3.15 million. Rainier Rail acquired a 34-mile line of Mountain Division in 2016.

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Currently, the Mountain Division serves 14 customers, mostly in the Frederickson area. Its largest customer is Hardie Building Products, a fiber cement siding and backer-board manufacturer.

The line generates gross revenue of about \$1.2 million annually. The revenues do not cover the rail line’s expenses, leaving the city’s general fund to subsidize the \$400,000 difference.

“Cost containment has been a central focus for many budget cycles and has been achieved in part by deferring capital investment into the rail line, track and bridge structure,” Alan Matheson, assistant superintendent of Tacoma Rail, told the City Council. “While this approach does not sacrifice safety, it is not sustainable.”

The Mountain Division line is estimated to need a \$40 million investment over the next 10 years to ensure safe and reliable service, he said. The rail line includes 11 bridges, 34 track switches and 76 crossings.

He added a railroad cannot refuse to provide service because it would be “inconvenient or unprofitable,” according to the common carrier obligations of the [Surface Transportation Board](#), a federal agency.

“As it stands today, we must provide service. It doesn’t matter what the cost is,” Kurtis Kingsolver, interim deputy city manager, said.

During the [2022 budgeting process](#), TPU and the city’s Public Works department concluded it would be in the city’s best interest to divest the rail line to another common carrier, Matheson said.

Rainier Rail controls the southern side of the line, he said.

Representatives from Rainier Rail were not at the Feb. 28 council meeting.

Rail-to-trail advocates pushed the council to vote no on the resolution.

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41-MILE TRAIL SITS ON A HISTORIC RAILROAD BED AND IS USED BY BICYCLISTS AND HIKERS. IT starts in Puyallup, goes through the Puyallup Valley to Orting and continues to South Prairie and Buckley. Plans for the trail would connect it with Tacoma and Sumner.

“We should not let valuable railroad corridors like this one fall out of public ownership, especially when it would negatively impact the adopted regional trail plan,” she said. “Respectfully we ask the Tacoma City Council to vote no on this resolution today and partner with the trails community to consider an alternative proposal.”

Larry Leveen, [ForeverGreen Trails](#) director, asked the council to consider only selling the section of the rail line with customers and retain the rest of the Mountain Division.

“Please consider what constitutes not just sound financial practices but how best to support Tacoma’s adopted policies on climate, environment, health, mobility, economic development and regional coordination,” Leveen said. “As the asset holder, the city does not have a problem, it has an incredible opportunity to forge trail legacy for the region.”

Laura Svancarek, CTR and advocacy manager for [Downtown On the Go](#), wrote the transportation [advocacy group was disappointed to see the sale](#) of the railway without attention to alternatives that would benefit Eastside and South End communities.

“Once this property is sold, it would be significantly more expensive to re-obtain,” she wrote. “This could have been an opportunity to bank land for future trail

development in parts of Tacoma identified in the Equity Index as having low or very low livability and environmental health, improving access to recreation and green space.”

Council member Joe Bushnell, District 5, said though he wants to find a way to add trails, the city should not spend \$40 million in required upgrades to maintain a rail line that has never been profitable.

Kingsolver said there is a provision in the contract with Rainier Rail for trails if the rail lines were to be abandoned. The Surface Transportation Board also mandates rails that are abandoned will go through a process that includes rails-to-trails, he said.

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A rail line is considered abandoned if it is not used for two years, Kingsolver said. Tacoma Rail runs twice a week service to Frederickson and has for 20 years. Rainier Rail plans to utilize the rail. The line in the city limits has been unused for almost two years.

Deputy Mayor Kristina Walker said the city will apply for abandonment for the Tacoma portion and use the money from the sale to go back into the community for trail use and mobility.

The council unanimously approved Resolution 41130, which authorized the sale. The Surface Transportation Board will also need to approve the transfer.

Editor's note: The story has been updated to correct the status of the Frederickson line.

This story was originally published March 7, 2023, 5:00 AM.

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