Rails with trails
a long way
down the tracks

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MERIDIAN — City officials here are chugging along with a plan to build a bicycle- and pedestrian-friendly pathway north of the rail corridor in Meridian.

But the larger project, a 35-mile pathway along the railroad that would connect Boise and Nampa, code-named “rail with trails,” likely is a long way down the tracks.

Matt Stoll, executive director of the Community Planning Association of Southwest Idaho (COMPASS), says there are two reasons little progress has been made on projects along the rail corridor — another idea is to run a public commuter train along the tracks.

One roadblock is securing funding. The other: purchasing easements along the rail corridor. The property is owned by the Union Pacific Corp., which is not interested in selling, Stoll said.

That’s not stopping COMPASS — whose role is to strategically plan for growth in Canyon and Ada counties as well as seeking federal grants for projects — from planning for rails with trails.

“We’re studying it, much to the chagrin of Union Pacific,” Stoll said. “They’ve come into my office, called special meetings, to say ‘We want you to stop studying us because we’re not going to sell.’ They don’t want us to study it because they have no intention of having a ‘rails with trails’ or having a commuter rail on that (property).”

For the railroad company, it’s a safety issue. Kristen South, a spokeswoman for Union Pacific, told the Meridian Press last fall that cyclists and pedestrians often have earbuds in and might not hear a train. “Trains are not nearly as loud as you think they are,” she said.

Without a Union Pacific partnership, the 35-mile path isn’t possible, but COMPASS will be prepared in case the railroad company changes its stance.

“We want to be prepared for that day if it ever happens,” Stoll said. “It may not happen under my tenure, but I want my successors to make sure that they have that information available so that the elected officials of the valley know how much it would cost, know what could be done and what the benefit would be if that rail corridor becomes available.”

In the meantime, the city of Meridian is purchasing easements from property owners north of the rail corridor — which effectively takes the railroad company out of the equation, according to Meridian Parks Superintendent Mike Barton.

“The goal is to build a 1-mile pathway — 10 feet wide with gravel shoulders on either side — just north of the rail corridor, connecting Meridian and Linder roads. “We see it as a corridor that could move people on foot or on bikes, that they wouldn’t have to use a roadway to get downtown,” Barton said.

The Meridian corridor could eventually be connected to the wide rails with trails project, but the city is working on one section at a time.

Meridian has also run into some roadblocks in purchasing easements. For instance, one piece of property along the proposed pathway is owned by a homeowners association that is now defunct.

“We would have to help them organize a homeowner’s association and a board in order to vote to grant us an easement,” Barton said.

The city does not have a cost estimate for the pathway or a timeline for completion.

“All I can say is that we’re working hard. It’s our goal to secure these easements as quickly as possible,” Barton said. “And until we get all the permission slips, we’re not going to waste any money on a set of plans. When we have all the permission to go through there, then we’ll start to develop that set of plans. And along with it comes requests for funding and cost estimates and a timeline for construction.”