

Aaron Schock

FOR U.S. CONGRESS

Aaron Schock Position on the Kellar Branch Rail to Trail

Because of the combination of overwhelming public support and common sense economics, I support conversion of the Kellar Branch rail line to a recreational trail without further delay.

The City of Peoria and built a western rail access to Pioneer Park with federal grant monies and a local share of funding as well, to accommodate businesses in Pioneer Park who want rail access.

The amount of money to keep the Kellar Branch rail up to safety standards and the annual rent due Peoria Heights and the City of Peoria is vastly more costly than the savings one company obtains by using the Kellar Branch rail spur instead of the western rail access or by truck. Therefore, preventing the completion of a 70 mile recreational trail and positive redevelopment along the trail cannot be justified economically.

As a Congressman I will work to enforce current federal law to have the rail companies pay fair market rent to Peoria and Peoria Heights. The Surface Transportation Board has ruled in previous cases that a proper lease rate is 10-12% per year of the value of the land. Continuation of operating the Kellar Branch rail spur defies basic economics if the rail companies are held to their obligation to fulfill proper lease payments and make adequate safety upgrades.

The Kellar Branch rail spur has been little used in the past ten years and is in disrepair and there has been precious little commercial demand for its operation. On the other hand thousands of area residents are clamoring for the closing of the gap in the 70 mile recreational trail.

Local governments and their citizens must be accurately represented in Congress. Therefore as a Congressman, I will lobby the STB and the FRA relentlessly to facilitate a transformation of the rail to a trail. Additionally, I will work assiduously explore the possibility of working with our two U.S. Senators to enact a federal earmark to supersede federal rules and regulations so the Kellar Branch can be expeditiously converted into a recreational trail.

Until trail proponents obtain a green light to proceed with a conversion to a trail, local governments and our federal Representative and Senators need to hold the rail companies feet to the fire to live up to their obligations regarding safety and operating agreements, with lease payments in the court-sanctioned 10-12% range of the value of the land per year. If rail companies want to point to current law as to their rights to continue to operate, they simply must live up to every obligation that comes with it. If they are held to account for those obligations, I believe they will quickly come to the conclusion that is not economically feasible for them to operate on the Kellar Branch rail spur.

If the rail companies refuse or cannot comply with the reasonable requests to fund safety and operating agreements with lease payments to Peoria Heights and Peoria, then it will be proven that the highest and best use of the land is the recreational trail. A company just cannot continue to claim rights to land it does not own if they have not been paying rent and refuse to pay market value rent in the future.

As a Congressman, it is my intention to work hard to cut to the chase and tie up loose ends with the federal agencies having authority over the Kellar Branch rail line as it currently exists. There has been far too much spinning of wheels in the process so far and final resolution needs to be concluded as soon as possible.

I have no doubt that years from now, when the trail is built, people will look back and be grateful to those advocates who have worked relentlessly to complete this much needed trail.

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