

REENGAGE

**A GUIDE FOR SHORT LINE &
REGIONAL RAILROADS
LACKING ACTIVE
LOCAL TIES**



**CREATING REAL VALUE
THROUGH RELATIONSHIPS
WITH YOUR RAIL COMMUNITIES**

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A NOTE FROM OUR CEO

Conflict between community and rail isn't inevitable. We're here to prove it.



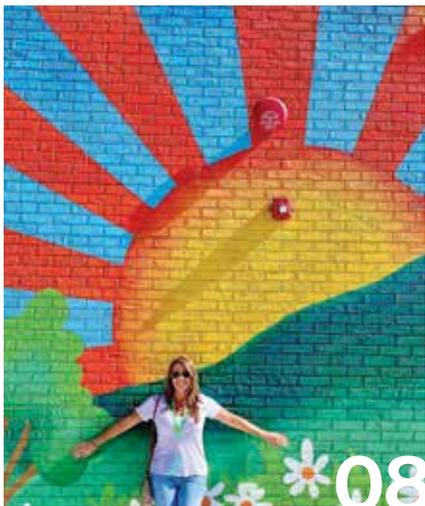
WHY IT MATTERS

The Business Case for Community Engagement



TRADITIONAL STRATEGIES

When In Doubt, Play The Hits



ADVANCED ENGAGEMENT

Tangibly Improve Safety, Accessibility, Quality of Life, and Profitability for All.



INTERNAL SYSTEMS THAT BUILD EXTERNAL TRUST

Turning Openness & Accessibility into a Repeatable Process



LET'S DO THIS

Simple, Affordable Steps You Can Take To Get Started Today

This guide is designed for railroads — especially short lines and regionals — working in low-conflict communities. We're offering it digitally at no cost, but we also seek to produce a printed version and expand the series to cover additional rail/community conditions and audiences, including adversarial relationships and acquisitions that require their own strategies.

To do that, we're seeking advertisers and mission-aligned sponsors. If your company supports better rail-community outcomes and wants to see more of them, this is a chance to be part of the movement that makes it happen.

Learn more at railtowns.org or email connect@railtowns.org.

A NOTE FROM OUR CEO

*Conflict between railroads and communities isn't inevitable.
We're here to help fix the system that keeps producing it.*



Most people only notice the railroad when it's between them and where they need to be. Rail makes them late - it's in the way.

That's not a failure of the railroad - it's a flaw in how our communities have been built. When towns under-invest in grade separation, treat crossings as someone else's problem, or delay infrastructure decisions, the result is predictable: blocked traffic, rising tension, and public pressure on railroads to "fix" what isn't theirs to control.

Add in obscure topics like federal preemption and fiduciary responsibility and these conversations can become adversarial even for the biggest railroads.

But - by design - not for us. At Railtowns.org, we work across the entire rail ecosystem - with railroads, community leaders, infrastructure companies, and funders - to bridge the gaps. We help local leaders see rail not as an adversary or an annoyance, but as an asset. And we help railroads take practical, low-cost steps to shift perception - to be aligned and essential partners in a rail ecosystem that helps communities thrive.

This isn't about optics. It's about helping communities understand that they're participants in a system that only works when every part plays its role. That includes taking responsibility for infrastructure decisions, safety, land use, and the local conditions that either enable or undermine rail's ability to serve.

We founded Railtowns.org because we believe this work matters - and because we've seen firsthand what changes when we stop working at cross purposes. We're already helping towns understand what they can do, and we're helping railroads be seen for what they really are: essential, strategic, safe, and environmentally beneficial. But we can't do it alone.

If this guide resonates with you - if you see potential in a stronger, more collaborative rail ecosystem - we'd welcome your support. Whether that's a conversation, a partnership, or operational funding for our all-volunteer organization, we're here.

And ready when you are.

Tate Linden
Chairman & CEO

THE BUSINESS CASE FOR ENGAGEMENT

Short lines and regionals already operate with lean crews, tight margins, and little room for error. Adding “community relations” to that list might sound like a luxury - or worse, a distraction.

But when things go wrong, visibility in the community becomes your insurance policy. And when things go right, it becomes your advantage.

If the first time a mayor or public works official hears from your railroad is during a blocked crossing complaint, a derailment, or a land use dispute, you’ve already lost ground. It doesn’t matter whether the railroad was legally in the right. It matters whether anyone knew how to reach you - and whether they wanted to.

What looks like resistance is often just relationship debt. No known contact. No presence at public meetings. No way for officials or residents to ask a simple question. That absence creates a vacuum - and in the absence of connection, people assume the worst.

This isn’t about branding or being liked. It’s about removing drag from your operations and protecting the conditions that allow your business to function smoothly. Strong community relationships don’t just reduce risk - they enable flow.

When engagement is proactive and structured:

- Emergency crews have access protocols.
- City engineers plan around crossings, not through them.
- Local leaders call you before they call the press.

This guide is built for railroads operating in low-conflict environments - towns where there’s no active dispute, but plenty of room for improvement. It outlines low-cost steps to show up before there’s a problem, respond before issues fester, and build the kind of familiarity that pays off - operationally, politically, and commercially.

Because when your railroad is part of the town’s working fabric, problems are less likely to escalate - and opportunities less likely to get missed.



MEDIA COVERAGE OFTEN INCREASES THE NEED FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT:

While these delays can be an annoyance, tragically, they can also be a matter of life or death. One of my constituents was experiencing a medical emergency and a halted train blocking both entrances meant that first responders could not reach her. Ninety terrifying minutes went by and despite calling the customer service line, the train did not move. My constituent, her family, and friends waited in agony for the train to move so she could get the medical attention she desperately needed. It is critical that a reasonable solution is developed to ensure that these residents have access to medical care without delay.

I hope [redacted] will consider limiting the amount of time that trains spend blocking both access points to the neighborhood. If the trains must be stopped for a longer period, all efforts should be made to keep one of the access points open. I hope your team will work diligently to foster a



Lawsuit alleges first deaths from disastrous train derailment in Ohio

By Associated Press
 @ 4:00 PM - Published 02/02/2023, Last February 2, 2023



The photo taken with a drone shows portions of a Norfolk Southern freight train that derailed on Friday night, February 2, 2023, in East Palestine, Ohio and still sits at the site Monday, February 4, 2023. (AP Photo/Dave J. Phillip) (AP Photo)



Engagement isn't about being liked. It's about reducing friction, sparking growth, and creating bottom-line impact.

A strong local presence creates real operational and strategic advantage:

- When problems arise, leaders call you before they call the press
- Local emergency crews know how to keep themselves and community safe
- Increased likelihood of receiving grant funding to improve or separate grade crossings
- Greater tolerance for service changes, new construction, or occasional inconvenience
- Increased community interest in working with you to maintain or beautify your public-facing property
- A better chance that your infrastructure is protected or improved - not ignored - in regional planning processes

IF THEY CAN'T REACH THE RAILROAD?
 FIRST THEY CALL THE CITY.
THEN THEY CALL FOR REGULATION.

When towns don't trust or understand the railroad, they don't call to coordinate, they call to complain. Or worse, they stop including rail at all. That leads to design conflicts, political interference, and growing pressure to make rail pay for a fix, whether or not it's right or required.

Engagement also isn't PR. It combines risk management and business development. It reduces the odds that frustration turns into friction, regulatory pressure, or blown opportunity.

Railroads that stay known and stay present aren't just managing goodwill. They're building operating room and the conditions they need to be profitable and grow their business.

It's not about opening the wallet. It's about consistently showing up and taking an interest in the community.

TRADITIONAL ENGAGEMENT



BE PRESENT IN THE COMMUNITY

Don't be an "invisible railroad." Show up where community gathers: attend town hall meetings or city council sessions periodically (even if just to listen and briefly introduce the railroad), set up a booth or display at local fairs, and participate in annual community events. The goal is for residents and officials to start recognizing and feeling comfortable approaching rail representatives. Even small appearances can signal that the railroad is accessible and part of the community, not just tracks running through it. (Many businesses initially think of engagement in terms of formal town halls, but even informal interactions or an active online presence can open doors.)



HOST COMMUNITY EVENTS

Create opportunities for positive, face-to-face interactions with events like "Railroad Day" at your rail yard or cooperating client facility once a year. Offer guided tours of locomotives or maintenance shops, explain what the railroad ships, and showcase safety measures. This demystifies your operations and lets people meet railroad employees. One new short line in Utah held a public open house to share plans and gather local input on new rail crossings, which helped residents feel heard and informed. Even if your railroad isn't building something new, a community day where families and community leaders can climb on a locomotive (safely parked) can create lasting support and grow your business.



EMBRACE LOCAL CAUSES

Engagement doesn't have to come from rail-specific events. Sponsor a little league team, contribute to a local charity 5K run, or join town clean-up days. These are inexpensive ways to signal that the railroad's people are part of the community fabric. Strasburg Railroad (a tourist-oriented line) has hosted fundraising train rides and donated a day's ticket sales to local nonprofits - a clear message that it cares about local causes. While a short line freight railroad may not be able to sell passenger tickets, it could donate branded safety gear or private lot tours for charity auctions or allow a local charity to use their available clean and safe property for a special fundraising event.

Start by being visible and approachable in community life. Over time, this creates a reputation of accessibility, caring, and local involvement. Remember, engagement is a two-way street: as you increase your public presence, also listen to community input (feedback, concerns, ideas) and show you're responsive to it.

SUPPORT SAFETY PROGRAMS

Consider engaging with programs like Operation Lifesaver to provide free rail safety presentations at local schools, driver's education classes, or community centers. This not only serves a vital public safety role but also puts a human face on the railroad. Many railroads encourage employees to volunteer for such outreach. Genesee & Wyoming, for example, notes that its short line employees often volunteer in Operation Lifesaver outreach as part of being good corporate citizens in their towns. With rail participation, these safety talks can reduce risk and open a dialogue with parents, teachers, and students, showing that the railroad is proactive and cares about residents' well-being.



PUT A FACE TO THE NAME

When people say "we don't know who to talk to," (and they often do,) it means the railroad needs a known and accessible point of contact. Designate a community liaison (even if - to start - it's just one of the leaders willing to wear an extra hat) and let the public know who that is. This person's name and contact info should be easy to find on the railroad's website, social media page, or through city hall. Make a habit of sending the rep to community functions and leading company 'delegations' to support the locals. Be the same consistent presence when the community is in need - or just gathering celebrate.



HELP 1ST RESPONDERS HELP

Offering training sessions or facility tours for firefighters and police (so they know how to access the property in an emergency) doubles as community engagement. Class-I railroads routinely train first responders and work with local officials on safety; a short line can do the same on a smaller scale, which earns respect and trust from the community's public safety personnel and reduces risk and liability for your railroad. For railroads transporting HAZMAT or operating in challenging conditions, TRANSCAER.ORG offers free guidance in developing, delivering and evaluating exercises tailored to the real-world risks you face. ASLRRRA may be able to identify additional emergency training, as well.



ADVANCED ENGAGEMENT - TO HELP YOU AND YOUR TOWNS GROW



END THE IMPATIENCE

Blocked crossings are never good, and the problem is made worse by uncertainty. When crossings stay down indefinitely, frustration spikes and risky behavior increases. Once it's common, drivers may find themselves choosing between dodging the gates or losing their job. Traditionally, the only solution was a major infrastructure project, but that's changing. One current service can confirm when gates are up or down in real time - and route drivers (and first responders) to clear crossings via common smartphone maps. A single crossing can cost less than \$100K, and may be eligible for grant funding. If blockages are unavoidable, it's an option that most don't know exists.

LEVEL-UP YOUR CROSSINGS

At-grade crossings are a common source of challenges for communities and railroads. In addition to the hazards associated with trains and cars negotiating the same physical space, they're prone to high wear-and-tear. Loose chunks of asphalt and unstable surfaces aren't uncommon, and the railroad may be liable for damage to property or people from the issue. If a host community is frustrated with the issue, consider asking if they'd like to cover the difference in cost between the current pavement and a more durable solution like a modular or rubberized surface that may be easier and less expensive to maintain and replace in the future.



GO FROM BLIGHT TO BEAUTY

Railyards and rail property in general aren't often known for their aesthetic appeal. They're regularly used to store heavy industrial goods and equipment, and when they're hidden behind walls, become targets for graffiti and illegal dumping. Many communities expect the railroads to maintain their property, keeping it free of litter and tagging, which can be costly and time consuming. Heavy industry companies have had significant success engaging the local schools and artistic communities through contests or community projects - where the end result is a canvas that feels part of the community, not just a wall. Taggers are less likely to hit community artwork, saving you time and money..

If you're looking for bigger impact than what a common strategy can deliver, stepping up to more significant engagement can reap huge results across safety, accessibility, quality of life, and profitability - for everyone involved.

LET THEM CUT CORNERS

Many railroads struggle with a unique problem: You're responsible for a vast amounts of property that can extend for hundreds or thousands of miles of trackage. For many it's difficult to keep up with necessary pruning and mowing challenges associated with visibility at crossings. Numerous communities have reached out to ask if they can coordinate with the railroad to take over maintenance - sometimes for a fee, others as part of a community project. If safety challenges can be managed, it can be a way for the community to begin to see the railroad as a community asset, and might drastically lower maintenance costs.



SHOW THEM THE MONEY

But put away your checkbook. Instead, help the community find funding that will make life in the railtown safer, more accessible, or prosperous. There are numerous federal and state grants available, and organizations like ASLRRA and GoRail may be able to help you identify grants suiting a community's needs. Being proactive in identifying solutions before the town asks you to help can go a long way to establishing a strong and lasting relationship that eases tension and improves potential outcomes for everyone involved. If the community asks you for money, help them find grants. Better yet, participate in grant writing process to ensure that your operations are considered in the outcome.

GET THE FACTORIES HUMMING

Communities are converting old manufacturing facilities into upscale housing - sometimes without ever asking whether the site could still serve industry. And while some of these buildings aren't practical for retooling, many are - especially if they still have rail access. If you have active or dormant spurs that serve one, treat it as a live opportunity. Engage with the community early. Keep tabs on site control. Know what kinds of upgrades or tenants might bring it back online. National policy is increasingly favoring domestic manufacturing and on-shoring by foreign firms. That means rail-connected real estate is more valuable than it looks - to both you and the community - if the right people know about it in time.



INTERNAL SYSTEMS = EXTERNAL TRUST

*Community blow-back isn't always about what a railroad does.
It's often about what it doesn't.*



Much public frustration stems from preventable silence - unanswered questions, missing contact info, unclear responsibilities. These aren't PR problems. They're operational issues with financial consequences.

When towns don't know who to call, they escalate. That means delays, permit holds, legal pressure, or public resistance to otherwise routine activity. It also means slower site development, harder approvals, and fewer allies when things go wrong.

Internally, this is fixable - and cheap.

Start by assigning a public point of contact. Publish a monitored email and phone number. Make sure someone checks it daily, even if it's a shared responsibility.

Create a short protocol for responding to non-emergency inquiries:

- Acknowledge the message quickly (ideally within 48 hours).
- Route it to the right person.
- Track the resolution so nothing falls through.

Keep a basic log of what comes in. You'll spot patterns - repeated questions, crossing concerns, right-of-way issues - that you can address systemically rather than case-by-case.

Then, add structure. A quarterly message to key town staff goes further than you think. A calendar of outreach

touchpoints - even two or three a year - signals consistency and makes coordination easier later.

These aren't soft efforts. They reduce cost. They prevent loss. They build the conditions for profit.

Because the more a town trusts you to be responsive, the less likely they are to oppose your plans, question your access, or default to "no."

The return is tangible:

- Fewer legal consultations.
- Faster resolution of property and access disputes
- Reduced risk of project delays tied to communication breakdowns.
- Greater support when applying for funding or marketing track-side sites.

Building a responsive community interface doesn't require a department - but it does require structure.

From asking ASLRRRA to researching off-the-shelf tools, there are proven systems and templates available. The key is to pick one, assign ownership, and commit to using it consistently. Simple customer management (CMS) and ticketing systems are low cost, easy to operate, and go a long way toward avoiding dropped balls that hit your bottom line.



LET'S DO THIS

Community engagement isn't about being liked. It's about protecting your bottom line. Railroads that show up early, stay reachable, and handle issues with structure don't just avoid friction - they cut costs, reduce delays, and position themselves to win.

This isn't about image. It's about the viability of your business.

Bottom-Line Payoffs

- Fewer permitting delays and regulatory headaches
- Lower legal exposure tied to crossings, infrastructure, and complaints
- Less political interference when operations are disrupted
- More favorable zoning and land use outcomes
- Increased community tolerance for routine changes and disruptions
- Better positioning for federal grant funding
- Greater opportunity to attract shippers and redevelopment near your line

So, how do you start?

Simply. Slowly. Systemically. At a level you can sustain

Track your results. If you find your bottom line improving, *then* consider more significant investment.

There is no cookie-cutter approach that will work for every railroad or community, but if you're starting from zero, consider something like this:

1. **Assign a point of contact:** Publish it. Share it with City Hall. Monitor it. Respond within 48 hours.
2. **Fix your communications gaps:** Can a mayor or emergency responder reach you without fail? If not, solve that today.
3. **Track what comes in:** Keep a simple log of public contacts and issues. Start with a pad of paper if necessary. Review it monthly.
4. **Fix a visible issue:** It can be almost anything. Use one of the strategies in this guide, or come up with your own. Graffiti, litter, overgrowth - pick one, fix it, and make it known.
5. **Send your first update:** Three months from now, send your first quarterly update: A short message to key local officials or folks that have gotten in touch with you can work wonders.

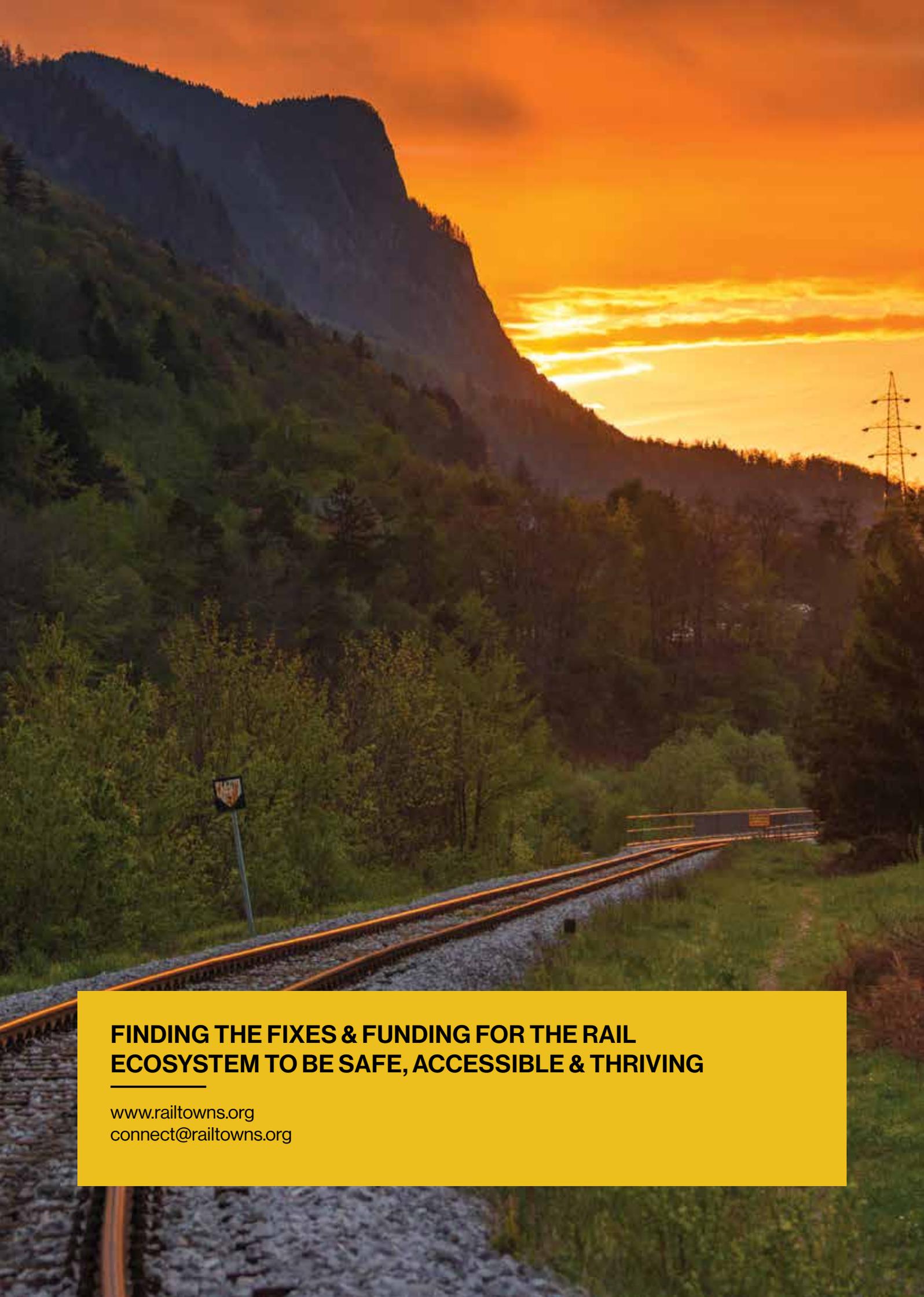
Whatever you do? If you don't have a relationship, or it's not very strong. Start engaging - today. When you do, you get all of the benefits described in this guide - and likely many more.

That's the return.

And it starts with a phone number, a calendar, and a bit of follow-through.

We're here to help when you need us.

connect@railtowns.org



FINDING THE FIXES & FUNDING FOR THE RAIL ECOSYSTEM TO BE SAFE, ACCESSIBLE & THRIVING

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