ConCord



ALBANY-HUDSON ELECTRIC TRAIL

CASE STUDY

Pacific Northwest NATIONAL LABORATORY

U.S. DEPARTMENT of ENERGY

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Albany-Hudson Electric Trail

Connecting a Historic Corridor with Modern Infrastructure, Recreation, and Transportation

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Summary

In New York's Hudson Valley, a long strip of land once closed to the public has been given new life. The Albany-Hudson Electric Trail (AHET) runs for 36 miles, connecting the City of Rensselaer near Albany to the Town of Greenport just outside Hudson (Greenman-Pedersen, Inc. 2011).

What was once a utility corridor lined only with poles and wires is now also a paved path where people walk, bike, and run through fourteen towns and villages. The trail is part of the Empire State Trail, a 750-mile network launched by the state in 2017 to link communities from Buffalo to New York City and from the Canadian border down to the Hudson Valley (State of New York 2017). AHET closes one of the most significant gaps in that system, providing a safe, continuous route through two counties where no off-road option existed before.

The corridor still does its original job: carrying electricity. National Grid owns and operates the transmission lines above the path, and agreements ensure the utility can reach its equipment whenever needed (New York State Hudson River Valley Greenway 2019). This kind of shared use shows how existing corridors can serve more than one purpose: keeping essential infrastructure in place while opening the ground below to the public. When the trail officially opened in December 2020, it gave residents and visitors a new way to move between communities, and it showed how infrastructure that once seemed off-limits could be reimagined as public space (Hudson River Valley Greenway 2021).

The AHET case study was developed by compiling and analyzing publicly available records and validated through semi-structured interviews with key informants affiliated with the trail and familiar with its development. Two such individuals, both public-sector employees, were interviewed for this effort. These interviews added valuable interpretation, expertise, and nuance to the public documents analysis, ultimately providing deeper insights than secondary research alone can provide.

Acronyms and Abbreviations

AHET – Albany-Hudson Electric Trail
ConCord – Connecting Transmission Corridors initiative
FEIS – Final Environmental Impact Statement
HRVG – Hudson River Valley Greenway
NEPA – National Environmental Protection Act
NERC – North American Electric Reliability Corporation
NYSDOT – New York State Department of Transportation
O&M – Operations & Maintenance
ROW – Right(s) of Way
SEQRA – State Environmental Quality Review Act

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1.0 Connecting Transmission Corridors Initiative

The Connecting Transmission Corridors (ConCord) Initiative seeks to characterize the benefits of multi-functional transmission corridors, with a specific focus on recreation, conservation and restoration, and wildfire mitigation. This initiative outlines options and identifies best practices for providing public benefits in transmission corridors while also identifying models, tools, and resources for evaluating benefits in existing and future transmission infrastructure and transmission planning paradigms.

Case studies serve as informative examples of multifunctional transmission corridors and provide valuable lessons learned on recreation and land management. The Albany-Hudson Electric Trail (AHET) case study is one of several completed within the ConCord Initiative to highlight and characterize existing efforts within transmission corridors. This case study focuses on recreation-oriented public access and trail development, including agreements, utility coordination, permitting, and operation practices that enable multi-use trails within transmission corridors. Each case study was developed through a combination of desk-based research and interviews with key informants affiliated with the project. In the following sections, background information on the AHET is presented, as well as details on project development and key takeaways. There are also three appendices that detail the measures implemented, the spatial scale, and timeline for the project.

2.0 Albany-Hudson Electric Trail

2.1 Background and Context

The corridor that now carries the AHET has served different purposes over the past century. From 1900 to 1929 it operated as the Albany-Hudson Electric Railway, one of the region's early interurban trolleys. After the line closed, the land was retained for transmission lines, first by Niagara Mohawk and later by National Grid. For decades, it remained off-limits to the public, visible in nearly every community it crossed, but accessible only to utility crews. As one interviewee explained, "from 1900 to 1929, it was an old trolley line. Shortly after that, I think it might have been in the 40s or 50s, Niagara Mohawk had taken control of the corridor and now it's a shared use path and a transmission corridor" (interview, September 29, 2025).



Figure 1. Historic Albany–Hudson Electric Railway trolley, which operated from 1900 until 1929. The modern trail follows much of the former trolley corridor.

The idea of reusing the corridor for a trail emerged as part of a broader movement. Since the 1980s, thousands of miles of former railroads have been adapted into shared-use paths across the United States. In New York, canal towpaths and abandoned industrial alignments provided precedents for this kind of adaptation (Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor 2019). But the Albany–Hudson corridor was different: it was not abandoned, but an active utility right-of-way (ROW). Bringing it to public use would require new forms of cooperation.

Local interest first surfaced in the late 2000s. In 2010, the Hudson River Valley Greenway (HRVG) provided several small grants to localities to conduct simple feasibility studies. The studies showed a trail was technically possible, but no progress was made for years. As one interviewee recalled, "around 2010 the Greenway gave several small grants to localities along the trail to do very simple feasibility studies. Nothing happened for seven years" (interview, September 29, 2025).

The main obstacle was cost. A shared-use path built to public standards in New York requires full design, grading, drainage, and accessibility compliance. As one interviewee put it, "these trails are expensive. A true shared use path in New York costs one to two million dollars a mile. They are public works projects, too complex for local governments to build themselves" (interview, September 29, 2025).

The stalemate shifted in 2017, when New York State launched the Empire State Trail. Announced by Governor Andrew Cuomo, the initiative allocated $200 million in state funding to close gaps and create a continuous 750-mile route (New York State Department of State 2021). The Albany-Hudson corridor was identified as one of those missing links. By reframing it as part of a statewide system, the project gained both political backing and the resources needed to move forward. What had been a shelved local aspiration became a priority within the largest multi-use trail initiative in the nation.

The AHET was developed within a privately owned utility corridor rather than public land. National Grid, which holds the right-of-way for electric transmission, retained full ownership and authority for its operations while allowing a public trail to be constructed in the same space. Interviews noted that this arrangement was unusual, since most rail-trail projects occur on publicly controlled corridors (interview, September 29, 2025).

2.2 Objectives and Scope

The AHET was designed to reconnect communities along a corridor that had been closed for nearly a century. Its central purpose was not only to provide recreation but to create a continuous and safe north–south route that linked towns, schools, parks, and business districts. One interviewee summarized the intent: “the aim wasn’t just recreation; it was giving people a way to move between towns again along a corridor that once carried passengers”, referencing the purpose of the original trolley line (interview, September 29, 2025). Key scale metrics for the corridor, including total length, paved footprint estimates, and affected infrastructure, are summarized in Appendix B.

The project stretches 36 miles from the City of Rensselaer to the Town of Greenport, passing through fourteen municipalities in Rensselaer and Columbia Counties (New York State Department of State 2021). Roughly ninety percent of the alignment runs off-road within National Grid’s transmission corridor, while about ten percent diverts to local streets and sidewalks where the historic ROW was no longer available (interview, September 29, 2025).

Six bridges were constructed as part of the development, and dozens of road crossings required coordination with state and local transportation officials (interview, September 29, 2025). The design reflects its dual role as public trail and active utility corridor. A paved path ten feet wide, with turf shoulders on either side, accommodates walkers, cyclists, and people using mobility devices while also providing clearance for maintenance vehicles (New York State Hudson River Valley Greenway 2019); (interview, September 29, 2025).

In places, utility poles or guy wires had to be relocated by National Grid contractors to meet safety standards, with about $5 million of state funding allocated to those adjustments (interview, September 29, 2025). The trail also runs beneath 34.5 kV sub-transmission lines mounted on single wooden poles, connecting to substations along the route (interview, September 29, 2025).

Cost defined another boundary of scope. The trail’s construction budget was approximately $46 million, averaging about $1.25 million per mile. Interviews noted that this figure placed the project squarely within the $1-2 million per mile range typical for large-scale shared-use paths built as prevailing wage public works in New York (interview, September 29, 2025).These boundaries define the scope of the AHET: a 36-mile continuous corridor, largely off-road, built within an active transmission ROW, and integrated into the larger 750-mile Empire State Trail network (New York State Department of State 2021).

2.3 Governance and Setting

To enable the trail, National Grid and the HRVG entered into a license agreement in 2017 (Hudson River Valley Greenway 2021). The agreement, issued at no cost, granted Greenway rights to design, build, and operate the trail through 2075. A conservation easement had initially been considered, but survey and title complications on the ninety-year-old corridor made that option impractical (interview, September 29, 2025). The license established clear terms of

responsibility: Greenway indemnifies the utility for public use, carries $5 million in liability insurance, and is responsible for closing segments if conditions are unsafe, while National Grid remains liable for its own negligence and retains full access rights for transmission work (New York State Hudson River Valley Greenway 2019); (interview, September 29, 2025).

The utility's oversight extended throughout design and construction. National Grid required detailed review of nearly 900 pages of engineering plans and insisted on independent third-party electrical safety inspections in addition to standard construction monitoring (interview, September 29, 2025). These requirements added time to the process but ensured that trail development did not interfere with transmission safety.

Maintenance responsibilities are shared. Greenway manages seasonal safety inspections, major repairs, and coordination, while municipalities and nonprofit groups perform day-to-day tasks such as mowing, trimming, and debris removal (interview, September 29, 2025). This layered approach allows the corridor to function as both a utility asset and a public amenity.

The trail was subject to New York's State Environmental Quality Review Act (SEQRA), which required a Final Environmental Impact Statement released in 2018 to assess potential impacts on wetlands, cultural resources, safety, and land use (New York State Department of Environmental Conservation n.d.). Although the project did not trigger a federal NEPA review because it was funded entirely by the state through the Empire State Trail initiative, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers issued permits for six stream and wetland crossings. Cumulative impacts across the 36-mile corridor exceeded the one-acre federal threshold, even though total affected wetland area remained under two acres (interview, September 29, 2025).

Additional oversight included vegetation clearance standards governed by the North American Electric Reliability Corporation (NERC) and enforced by the New York Public Service Commission, road crossings managed by the state Department of Transportation, and local planning and zoning approvals for trailheads, parking, and signage. In practice, these arrangements allowed a private transmission corridor to function as both power infrastructure and public recreation infrastructure at the same time.

2.4 Project Development

Efforts to develop the AHET moved forward quickly in 2017 with the launch of the Empire State Trail initiative. The state committed $200 million to create a 750-mile connected trail system, which eventually leveraged about $300 million in total public funds (New York State n.d.). For the Albany-Hudson corridor, this was the turning point: “the Empire State Trail initiative shifted AHET from idea to implementation” (interview, September 29, 2025). According to the same interview, outreach from the governor’s office to National Grid leadership also played a role in securing the utility’s engagement. A snapshot of key planning, agreement, permitting, construction, and operations milestones is provided in Appendix C.

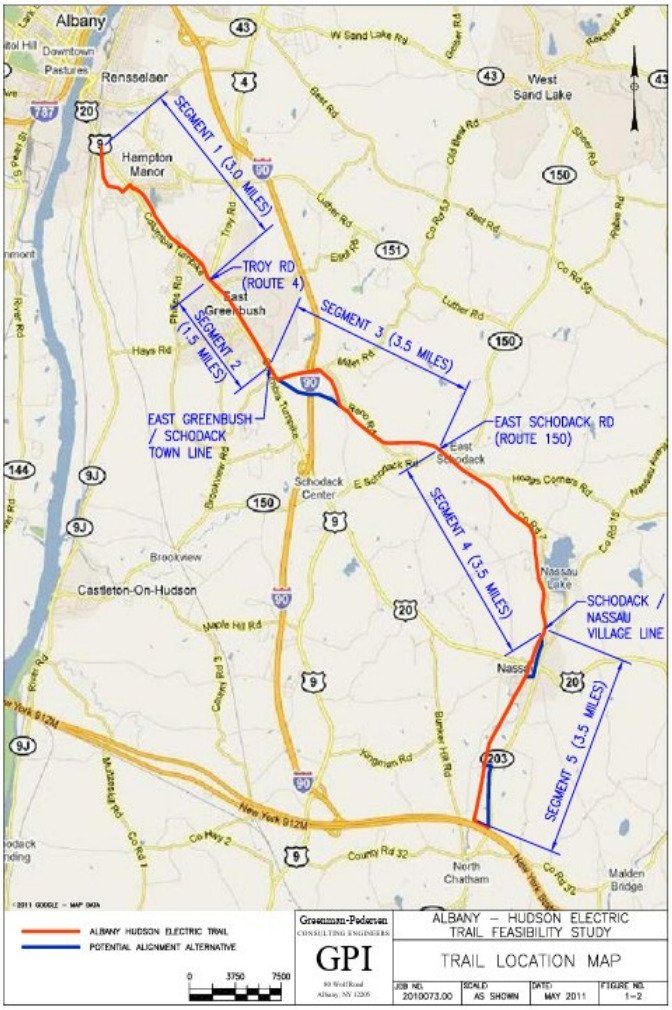


Figure 2. Early feasibility study map showing proposed Albany–Hudson Electric Trail segments and mileage estimates (2011). This segmentation informed later planning and construction phasing.

With political backing and financing in place, formal design and permitting advanced quickly. In 2018, the project completed its SEQRA review, and a FEIS evaluated potential impacts to wetlands, cultural resources, safety, and land use (Hudson River Valley Greenway 2021). During this stage, National Grid’s internal review process added another layer of oversight. “National Grid had to review and approve all construction plans, which were hundreds of pages,” one interviewee explained (interview, September 29, 2025).

Construction began in 2019 and was divided into contracts covering different segments of the 36-mile route. These contracts addressed varied conditions: bridges, stream crossings, road interfaces, and locations where the original trolley alignment could not be used. In those places, the trail shifted briefly to local roads or sidewalks to preserve continuity (Hudson River Valley Greenway 2020). In Columbia County, roughly 9.5 miles were initially built with stone dust rather than pavement, with a 2025 follow-up project scheduled to repave those segments in asphalt to reduce erosion and improve durability (Hudson River Valley Greenway 2025b).

Managing construction across two counties and fourteen municipalities required extensive coordination. Interviews noted that while jurisdictions were supportive, each had its own planning processes for trailheads, parking, and signage, which had to be reconciled into a continuous corridor (interview, September 29, 2025).

The Albany-Hudson Electric Trail officially opened in late 2020 as part of the Empire State Trail's statewide launch (New York State n.d.). By that point, a corridor that had lingered in planning for nearly a decade had become one of the key east-west links in New York's trail network.

3.0 Barriers and Constraints

Delivering the AHET required balancing the needs of an active transmission corridor with the expectations of municipalities and adjacent landowners. Interviews consistently described utility oversight as one of the most time-consuming barriers. Every construction plan had to be reviewed and approved by National Grid, often in documents several hundred pages long, which slowed the pace of design.

Regulatory review added another layer. The 2018 FEIS identified wetlands, cultural resources, and safety issues that had to be addressed before construction could proceed (Hudson River Valley Greenway 2021). Federal agencies oversaw water crossings, the state transportation department reviewed road interfaces, and municipalities applied zoning and planning requirements for trailheads and signage. Coordinating fourteen different jurisdictions became a significant logistical challenge, according to those involved in the process.

Community concerns also shaped how the project advanced. HRVG organized 36 public meetings in local venues (Hudson River Valley Greenway 2025a), where residents raised concerns such as privacy, liability, hunting access, crime, and unauthorized motor vehicle use. Interviews noted that these concerns were managed through case-specific measures, including fencing, planting, and signage. While opposition diminished after the trail opened, the design process was heavily influenced by these early debates. As one interviewee recalled, these issues were debated at length, but once the trail opened, “opposition largely subsided; no local government passed a resolution opposing the trail” (interview, September 29, 2025). In practice, privacy concerns were handled case by case with measures such as fencing, screening plantings, and signage (interview, September 29, 2025).

Even after opening, some operational constraints remained. Vegetation clearance is governed by utility reliability standards rather than recreational needs, leading to occasional closures for maintenance. Safety at road crossings continues to be monitored, and interviews noted the need to watch for conflicts related to bicycle speeds and e-bike use during peak periods.

Together, these accounts highlight how barriers emerged from overlapping demands: protecting utility infrastructure, meeting environmental requirements, coordinating across jurisdictions, and addressing community concerns. The result is a trail that functions effectively, but within limits defined by its dual role as both power corridor and public space. Appendix A summarizes the principal measures implemented, which provide context for the outcomes and impacts described in the following section.

4.0 Outcomes and Impacts

When the AHET opened in 2020, it turned a corridor long closed to the public into a continuous 36-mile shared use path. The trail now links fourteen municipalities, providing a safe, non-motorized route where none had existed before (Hudson River Valley Greenway 2020). Use of the trail began immediately. Interviews described steady day-to-day activity, with walkers, runners, and cyclists using the corridor for both recreation and local trips (interview, September 29, 2025). A few operational issues have been noted. Roadway crossings have produced some safety incidents, though no fatalities have occurred in the first five years. Sightlines at intersections are now managed through vegetation control, and e-bike speeds during busy periods remain an area of monitoring (interview, September 29, 2025).

The trail has also become a venue for interpretation and community programming. A funded interpretive plan placed about fifteen panels along the corridor, telling the story of the old trolley line, local towns, and natural and cultural landmarks. Events have drawn attention to former depot sites, and a pollinator garden was planted as part of efforts to connect trail use with local heritage and ecology (interview, September 29, 2025).

From the perspective of the utility, initial caution has shifted into a more pragmatic stance. An interviewee described how early skepticism about public access gave way to participation in statewide trail discussions and openness to considering similar projects in the future (interview, September 29, 2025).

The impacts of the project are visible on several levels: a corridor that now provides continuous access, communities adjusting to new patterns of daily use, interpretive features that situate the trail in its historical context, and a utility finding workable ground between infrastructure needs and public recreation.

5.0 Key Takeaways

The AHET shows how long-discussed corridors can move from concept to reality when timing, structure, and governance align. For years, feasibility studies and local plans kept the idea alive but without momentum. Only when the state created the Empire State Trail initiative did those early documents find traction, demonstrating how local groundwork often depends on higher-level policy windows to move forward.

The project also highlights the importance of having a coordinating body. With fourteen municipalities along the 36-mile corridor, the risk of piecemeal development was high. Interviews described how Greenway's role provided a single point of contact, giving state officials, utility representatives, and towns a way to work toward one continuous route rather than a collection of disconnected segments.

Another lesson is how utility oversight can shape delivery. National Grid's insistence on reviewing every construction plan added time to the process, but those reviews served as a safeguard to protect the reliability of a transmission corridor that remained fully active. In this context, delays were not just bureaucratic obstacles but a necessary form of risk management.

Finally, community experience revealed how perceptions change once a project is in place. Early meetings faced sharp concerns about privacy, liability, and safety. Yet interviews recalled that after opening, opposition subsided. The corridor became part of everyday life, with privacy mitigations like fencing and planting integrated into the design. This pattern suggests that while public concerns must be taken seriously during planning, actual use can shift the debate in ways that render initial fears less central over time.

The AHET is a reminder of how infrastructure corridors can evolve. For decades, the space carried only power; today it also carries people walking, running, and biking between communities. What makes this story notable is not only the 36-mile path itself, but the way many moving parts came together: state funding, utility oversight, municipal coordination, and local voices.

The project shows that opening closed spaces requires patience and persistence. It took years of studies, negotiation, and planning before ground was broken, but once built the trail quickly became part of daily life in Hudson Valley. People use it not just for leisure but for ordinary trips, and the corridor has become a thread connecting towns that had long been divided.

If there is one impression to take away, it is that change in shared spaces happens gradually and collectively. The AHET was not the product of a single decision or breakthrough. It was the sum of steady efforts, from small feasibility studies to public meetings in local libraries to statewide policy shifts. The result is a corridor that continues to carry electricity across the region while now also carrying the imprint of community use and identity.

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Appendix A – Measures Implemented

Table 1. Measures implemented for the Albany-Hudson Electric Trail project, covering agreements, utility coordination, safety oversight, construction elements, operational protocols, and community engagement.

ID	Measure	Description
M1:	License & Liability Framework	National Grid donated a license agreement (no corridor access cost) but required plan approval and specific liability language; the Greenway indemnifies National Grid for public use of the trail, while NG remains liable for its own negligence.
M2:	Utility Structure Adjustments	National Grid's own contractors moved/changing select poles and guy wires; the project reimbursed National Grid for this work (about 45m of the $46M total)
M3:	Electrical Safety Oversight	The project retained an independent third-party electrical transmission safety inspector on site full-time, alongside the trail construction inspector.
M4:	Civil Works (Bridges & Crossings)	The development included six bridges and extensive road-crossing design; crossings not on National Grid property were still shown in the plan set for coordination. Wetlands and wet areas required permits/mitigation through the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, noted by both interview and notes.
M5:	Trail Section & On-Road Links	Implemented a 10-ft paved path with shoulders, plus on-road segments (~10%) where the historic line was interrupted.
M6:	O&M Protocols in License Practice	HRVG is responsible for ongoing maintenance and must close sections if unsafe; National Grid retains unimpeded access for patrols and emergency work and conducts 5-year vegetation cycles (limbing, herbicide).
M7:	Community Mitigations & Engagement	HRVG undertook extensive local engagement (e.g. 14 jurisdictions); goal of no resolutions opposing the project and applied site-specific mitigations (e.g., privacy fences/hedges where needed). On signage, staff noted mixed views and a preference to avoid over-signing

Appendix B – Scale Table

Table 2. This table displays the project scale expressed through corridor length, paved footprint, habitat impacts, and key infrastructure elements affected.

Item	Value
Corridor length affected	36 miles
Trail built (acres/mi)	Trail built (paved footprint) ≈ 1.21 ac/mi derived from stated 10-ft paved width with grass shoulders (10 ft × 5,280 ft = 52,800 sq ft ≈ 1.21 acres per mile)
Habitat restored	Wetland impacts averaged ~0.05 ac/mi (stated as “five-hundredths of an acre per mile”)
Key assets affected	Electric sub-transmission corridor (primarily 34.5 kV) with several substations (interview notes). Six stream bridges (Army Corps permitting) and multiple road crossings / on-road connections

Appendix C – Timeline Table

Table 3. This table provides a snapshot of the timeline of planning, agreements, permitting, construction, and current operations for the Albany-Hudson Electric Trail.

Milestone	Date	Attribution
Approval/decision	2010	Local feasibility studies funded by HRVG
	2017	Empire State Trail funding/initiative announced (enabling AHET)
	Six-month process (date not stated)	License agreement with National Grid (negotiation period)
	Dates not stated	Permitting milestones (Army Corps for 6 stream bridges; NYSDOT & towns for road crossings; SEQRA at state level)
Implementation start	Not stated during interview	
Major phase(s)		License negotiation; Design & approvals; Construction including six bridges and on-road connectors; Post-construction spot improvements (erosion/paving).
Current status		Operating; HRVG responsible for O&M and safety closures; Utility retains access for emergency/vegetation work; Monitoring focuses on public use & safety; annual detailed inspection; Community complaints center on bike speeds/e-bikes; signage used sparingly

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