312783

ENTERED
Office of Chief Counsel
November 2, 2026
Part of
Public Record

BEFORE THE
SURFACE TRANSPORTATION BOARD

—----------

Docket No. AB 290 (Sub-No. 425X)

—----------

NORFOLK SOUTHERN RAILWAY COMPANY—ABANDONMENT EXEMPTION—IN ROCKINGHAM, SHENANDOAH, AND WARREN COUNTIES, VA.

—----------

FRIENDS OF THE SHENANDOAH TRAIL REPLY IN OPPOSITION TO ABEYANCE

—----------

Friends of the Shenandoah Trail ("FST") submits this reply in opposition to the Motion to Hold in Abeyance filed on October 14, 2026, by the Shenandoah Valley Battlefields Foundation and its wholly owned subsidiary, Manassas Gap Railroad LLC (together, "SVBF"). SVBF asked the Board to suspend this abandonment proceeding until the Board decides SVBF's still-unfiled responsive application in the Union Pacific–Norfolk Southern merger proceeding, Docket No. FD 36873. FST requests that the Board deny the motion, lift the housekeeping stay entered on October 22, 2026, and allow this proceeding to move forward under the Board's regulations.

FST is a Virginia nonprofit, tax-exempt organization formed in 2019 to support the Shenandoah Rail Trail Exploratory Partnership (the Partnership), a coalition of the towns, counties, planning district commissions, and community organizations along the rail line that is the subject of this proceeding (the "Line"). The goal of the FST and the Partnership is to convert the dormant 48.5-mile corridor between Front Royal and Broadway into a continuous shared-use trail. FST supports Norfolk Southern Railway Company's ("NSR") abandonment of the Line, the Commonwealth of Virginia's pending acquisition of the corridor, and the Commonwealth's request for trail use and railbanking for future rail use should it become economically viable.

FST and the communities it serves would be directly harmed by an open-ended suspension of this proceeding. The Commonwealth of Virginia has filed a Trail Use Request for the Line and stated its intent to negotiate to acquire the corridor as a single public asset using appropriated funds.[1] An indefinite suspension would leave that acquisition, the public funds committed to it, and its Trail Use Request in limbo for the length of the merger proceeding despite NSR's stated willingness to engage in negotiations toward possible trail use. In the meantime, the Line's weakened rails, ties, and 19 bridges would continue to deteriorate with no party positioned to invest in their maintenance or reuse. The corridor communities, whose elected bodies have repeatedly endorsed the trail, would see the economic, recreational, and transportation benefits of the project deferred by a year or more.

[1] Va. Dep't of Transp., *Shenandoah Valley Rail-with-Trail Assessment,* https://www.vdot.virginia.gov/projects/staunton-district/rockingham-shenandoah-and-warren-counties---shenandoah-valley-rail-with-trail-assessment/ (last updated Oct. 6, 2026)

In addition, an abeyance is unwarranted absent concrete evidence that restoring rail service is a financially viable prospect. A study completed earlier this year by the Virginia Department of Transportation estimated that restoring the 48.5-mile corridor to meet federal standards for 25-mph freight or excursion rail operations would cost approximately $315 million in 2025 dollars.[2] These findings do not foreclose the possibility of future rail use, but they demonstrate that preserving that possibility through actual restoration would entail a substantial public or private investment, not merely retaining the corridor on paper. In the absence of a well-documented funding plan, a committed rail operator, or a credible proposal to finance and implement rehabilitation, the prospect of future rail service does not, by itself, provide a sound basis for indefinitely suspending this proceeding.

For these reasons, FST respectfully requests that the Board deny SVBF's Motion to Hold in Abeyance and allow the applicable statutory and regulatory processes to proceed, lift the housekeeping stay entered on October 22, 2026, and promptly restore the deadlines in this proceeding, including publication of notice of NSR's exemption in the Federal Register and any associated OFA, trail use, and public use deadlines.

Respectfully Submitted,

/s/ Donald Hindman

Donald Hindman
Board Chairman
Friends of the Shenandoah Trail
P.O. Box 816
Woodstock, VA 22664
Email: project_director@shenandoahrailtrail.org

Date: November 2, 2026

CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE

I hereby certify that on November 2, 2026, I caused a copy of the foregoing FST Reply in Opposition to Abeyance to be served by email on all of the parties of record in Docket No. AB 290 (Sub-No. 425X).

/s/ Donald Hindman

Donald Hindman
Board Chairman
Friends of the Shenandoah Trail

[2] Ibid.