

Selectmen reversal clears way for path

By John Laidler

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Town residents would have a new place to walk, jog, bicycle, cross country ski, and horseback ride if officials succeed in an effort to convert part of an abandoned railroad bed that runs through town into a recreational path.

Executive secretary Roberta M. Knight said that at the request of the Board of Selectmen, she recently asked the town's lawyers to review a draft agreement under which the town would lease from the MBTA the right-of-way that runs from Main Street near the post office to the Wenham line.

"Their hope is to move forward with signing the lease and [with] the rails-to-trail program," she said.

The right-of-way in question represents the southern half of the approximately 4.5-mile Topsfield section of the abandoned Newburyport branch railroad right-of-

way, according to Recreation Committee member Joseph Geller, whose panel has proposed the trail project.

The action by selectmen represented a reversal for the board, which a month earlier had rejected the idea of developing a recreational path on the railroad bed, citing the cost, potential liability, and possible neighborhood concerns.

Selectmen chairman Boyd R. Jackson said that in the wake of that original decision in November, the board heard from many supporters of the trail in town who convinced them to support the project.

He said the supporters indicated the issues the board had raised "probably aren't as big as we thought they might be."

Geller, who has been pursuing the trail idea for several years, said he was spurred to make a new

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push for the plan when the MBTA's director of real estate, Mark Boyle, told him in July that the agency was seriously interested in leasing the trail to the town.

The MBTA and the firm that handles its real estate followed up with letters, including one in October that included a draft lease form.

MBTA spokesman Joseph Pesaturo said the transit agency is happy to talk to the town about a potential lease of the right-of-way.

"We are in active talks with some 20 cities and towns in eastern Massachusetts who are interested in doing just what Topsfield is interested in," he said.

Pesaturo said the MBTA previously declared surplus the right-of-way Topsfield is seeking to use. He said under the draft agreement it provided to the town, the agency would lease the right-of-way to the town for 85 years. No fee would be charged provided the right-of-way was used for recreational pur-

poses only.

The right-of-way runs adjacent to an old railroad freight barn near the center of town. According to Geller, the Main Street Committee, a group that works on town beautification projects, is pursuing the idea of the town acquiring or leasing that site either to use the barn for town offices, or to raze it to make way for a park. He said two abutters have also expressed interest in the site.

Geller said residents have already offered to volunteer their labor to help clear the right-of-way of vegetation, including along one half-mile stretch that has become heavily overgrown. He said the primary cost of the project would be the estimated \$200,000 needed to purchase the stone dust that is proposed for the trail surface. He said the town will try to cover that through either grants or possibly donations.

The stone dust, which could be placed over the tracks, would be hard enough to allow

even road bicycles and wheelchairs to be used on the path, Geller said.

Geller said the path, which he often refers to as "Topsfield Linear Common," would be a valuable asset for the town.

"We don't have that kind of recreational facility in town; we don't have so many trails in the woods like Boxford has," he said, noting that the trail abuts the Salem Beverly Waterway canal, a picturesque spot that runners frequent. He said the trail also could provide a path for children to walk to school.

Town officials also have expressed interest in developing a trail along the right of way that runs through the northern part of town to the Newbury border. But that section is owned by Massachusetts Electric, and Geller said the company a year ago said in a letter to the town that it was not interested in permitting a trail to be built along it.