

The joy of rail trails

July 22, 2007

BUILT ON a former railroad bed between Bedford and Cambridge, the Minuteman Bikeway is prime evidence that so-called rail trails make communities more active. While these trails attract hardcore bicyclists from far and wide, they also give nearby residents an incentive to dust off the bikes they might otherwise use infrequently.

But with only 155 miles of total available rail trails in the state, Massachusetts is sorely lacking in these beneficial and often beautiful recreational venues. That scarcity of trails per capita means existing ones, such as the Minuteman Bikeway, may end up being too crowded for their own good. Completing the 63 projects currently in the works would add 396 additional miles to the network. This should be a priority for the state and for local communities alike.

It won't be easy. Money is always hard to come by. And proposals for new trails in Massachusetts consistently face local opposition based on fears of crime, noise, and diminished land values.

At a July 9 meeting to discuss a proposed 4.5-mile bike path in Topsfield, part of what will eventually become the 30-mile Border-to-Boston trail, town officials heard testimony from residents who cited reports of disruptions and occasional criminal behavior along the Minuteman Bikeway.

But the facts don't support many of these fears. Reports of crime are relatively rare, in light of how popular the trail is. Meanwhile, trail advocate and real estate agent Craig Della Penna found that homes adjacent to the Minuteman Bikeway and Nashua River Rail Trail sold at a greater percentage of the list price and sold almost twice as quickly after going on the market as other homes in the towns. As the Globe recently reported, homeowners along the Minuteman Bikeway were strongly emphasizing their proximity to the trail in an attempt to attract potential buyers in an otherwise slow Boston housing market.

It only takes opponents in one town to bring the development of much needed rail trails to a halt. In 1997, the Wayside Rail Trail, a project on the Mass Central Rail Trail corridor, was nixed in Weston when residents voted not to further participate in its development. While trail advocates are optimistic that such projects will one day come to fruition, the best they can do for now is move on to the next area and hope that the "not in my backyard" instinct isn't as strong there.

The crowding on the Minuteman Bikeway is an argument for adding trails, not stopping them. These paths have enormous environmental, transportation, and public-health benefits. As residents and officials in Topsfield and elsewhere consider proposals for new trails, they should not let ungrounded fears jam a stick in the spokes. ■