

State eyes extensive bike trail expansion Parks agency plans an \$82m network

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As officials cut a ribbon tomorrow to launch construction of a 6-mile bicycle "rail trail" from the Lowell-Chelmsford line to Westford, top state parks planners say it could be the first in a latticework of more than 100 miles of bike trails they are planning statewide.

The state's parks agency, the Department of Conservation and Recreation, has mapped out a dream plan of \$82 million in trails that it says would one day allow riders to bike 120 miles from Lowell to Westfield, or up the Ware River Valley almost to New Hampshire, or along the Mystic River to the beaches of Lynn.

The plan, DCR officials say, is a blueprint that could take years, if not decades, to make a reality; rail trails - bike paths built on abandoned rail beds - are notoriously difficult projects to complete, with delays often caused by opposition from abutters, squabbles over funding, and plodding bureaucracies.

But state officials and trail enthusiasts are feeling more optimistic than they have in years about the prospects for making the state a national showpiece for off-road biking, hiking, and rollerblading trails.

"Bike trails involve modest investments of public resources but pay enormous dividends in public health and well being," said state Energy and Environmental Affairs Secretary Ian A. Bowles, who oversees DCR. "A small program of investment, over time and with mostly federal dollars, can result in an extensive network of trails where citizens can walk, ride bikes, and enjoy the great outdoors."

Advocates see a host of factors falling into place: Existing trails such as the Cape Cod Rail Trail and the Minuteman Bikeway through Lexington and Arlington have proven to be immensely popular; Governor Deval Patrick has begun working to maximize state access to federal rail-trail funds; public concern about global climate change and childhood obesity has increased interest in more and better bike trails; and the growing market of nature- and trail-loving "eco-tourists."

"There's potentially a big logjam that's about to break," said Steve Winslow, president and founder of Bike to the Sea, a group campaigning for a "Northern Strand Community Trail" along an old railroad from Everett to Lynn whose supporters earlier this year laid down 40 tons of stone dust for a 500-foot Everett stretch. "The Commonwealth is getting a little more involved, which is great, because they're realizing that someone needs to marshal the communities and get them to work together."

Even as the Patrick administration faces a \$19 billion backlog of transportation maintenance, Bowles said he is confident bike-trail spending is affordable and a good investment.

Dan Driscoll, the DCR's senior "bikeways and green infrastructure" director who earlier in his career helped spearhead development of miles of new trails along the Charles River, recently completed the agency's statewide bike trail plan.

The plan includes existing trails and potential new ones being pursued by state and local government and private groups. Driscoll said the state could construct crucial trail segments, including connections from the Minuteman Trail to both Charles and Mystic River trails, for \$82 million - a small fraction of \$19 billion in transportation spending Patrick identifies as needed.

Several new trail segments are getting underway:

DCR and the MBTA are negotiating terms of a 99-year lease by the parks agency of an old rail corridor the T controls between Waltham and the Central Massachusetts town of Berlin. Nonprofit local land groups, including Wachusett Greenways and the East Quabbin Land Trust, have begun working on upgrading the rail line for cyclists and strollers west of Berlin to connect to the existing Norwottuck Trail from Belchertown to Northampton.

The Massachusetts Highway Department is scheduled later this year to award an estimated \$550,000 contract for a 1-mile stretch of new rail trail in Mattapoisett that would link to an existing Fairhaven rail trail and serve as a key link in a future route extending through Marion and Wareham to the Cape Cod Canal.

Meanwhile, officials on several fronts are working to reduce common objections to rail trails. For example, in response to concerns from residents in some rural areas about the urban look of paved trails, DCR is considering the use of organic soil additives to create firm, smooth surfaces in the Ware River Valley and the Southern New England Trunkline corridor along the Rhode Island border.

State Senator Pamela P. Resor, an Acton Democrat who leads a caucus of legislative bike-path supporters, said pending legislation to make sure land owners face no legal liability from accidents on paths using their land or easements could remove one significant obstacle to path development.

Trails often face opposition from homeowners and business owners who fear the impact of hordes of bikers and other trail users. Plans for one trail north of Boston are being battled by a Topsfield group called the Coalition for Children's Safety and Serious Concerns Regarding the Proposed Topsfield Rail Trail Project. In Concord and Sudbury, homeowners battling planned trails say the trails are bad for the environment because they could threaten habitats for endangered species, arguments state regulators have not ruled on.

Driscoll, battling assertions by some groups that trails could bring crime to nearby residential neighborhoods, cited several national studies that conclude bike trails have no impact on crime or reduce it. "Nationwide, all the concerns over crime and vandalism - they never happen," Driscoll said. "There are not many groups they don't make happy, with the exception of abutters."

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