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Behind North Shore's Bike Trails

March 23, 2011 by [Northshore](#) · [Leave a Comment](#)

After years of disappointing delays, progress is finally on the horizon for the North Shore's languishing bike trails. Now, meet the major players who are behind it all. *By Jeanne O'Brien Coffey*

Back in 1995, Ingrid Barry chose a lot in Danvers for her new home because it abutted an old rail bed slated to become a trail.

An avid cyclist and walker, Barry looked forward to a retirement filled with strolls or bike rides just steps from her door. For years, she gazed out at the overgrown tracks, imagining the future trail. Frustrated by the lack of progress, Barry formed Danvers Bi-Peds in 2003 to advocate for safer walking and biking in town.

"I spent the next seven years talking to people and handing out leaflets," Barry says, though there was still nothing to show for it, she recalls. Even in 2009, when Barry led the Bi-Peds to acquire a lease with the MBTA to use the land, she wasn't too confident about a usable track taking shape any time soon. "I figured it would be years," she says. But just a few months later, Barry read about the Iron Horse Preservation Society, an organization promising to convert overgrown, unused railroad tracks to a graded crushed-stone pathway—for free.

"Everybody had the same thought: 'How is this possible?'" Barry recalls.

But it is. Iron Horse has been converting old rail beds to rail trails in the western United States for five years, but never east of the Mississippi. That has changed quickly: In the short time since Barry invited them to Massachusetts, the organization has contracted with a dozen communities in Massachusetts—mostly on the North Shore, says its president, Joe Hatstrup. Iron Horse is working on 14 miles of rail trails now and will start eight more this spring. If it meets its goals, the number of miles of rail trails in the area will nearly triple, from a paltry 12 scattered throughout to more than 34 by the end of next summer.

Hatrup admits he didn't know what he was getting into when he signed on in Massachusetts. "We've had an



Iron Horse's Joe Hatstrup

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a lot of rail trail plans have been languishing for years. Two big ones are among those looking to Iron Horse for help: the Border to Boston project, a bit of a misnomer in that it could one day cover 28 miles from the New Hampshire border to Danvers, and Bike to the Sea, intended to connect Everett, Malden, Saugus, Revere, and Lynn, in the planning stages for some 20 years.



Bill Steelman, from Essex National Heritage Commission

"Historically, there has been one path for communities trying to develop a trail, and it's a long, winding one," says Bill Steelman, director of heritage development for the Essex National Heritage Commission, an organization that has been helping communities in Essex County find the resources and the connections to create trails.

That long and winding path has led to some successes: the 4.6-mile Independence Greenway opened in Peabody in 2009, and the Coastal Trails Coalition, which Essex National Heritage Commission was instrumental in forming, has sections of trail completed throughout Amesbury, Salisbury, Newbury, and Newburyport. In fact, it just opened the 1.1-mile Clipper City Rail Trail in Newburyport last spring, after decades of planning and building.

These projects were funded in part by the Massachusetts Department of Transportation, which requires stringent and costly planning prior to beginning construction. As a result, finished trails wind up costing about a

million dollars a mile, and many municipalities simply can't come up with their share.

For those communities lacking cash, there appeared to be little hope until Iron Horse rode into town. "What they were offering seemed too good to be true," says Joe Geller, chairman of the Topsfield Rail Trail Committee. Iron Horse promised construct a graded crushed-stone surface on the old rail bed running through Topsfield center in under eight months—something Geller had been working toward for close to two decades. Additionally, cyclists would be gaining a much longer trail because Iron Horse would be working with Danvers and Wenham as well.

"Iron Horse is a game-changer," says Steelman. "They're showing communities that there's another way to get these projects done."

Iron Horse's Hatrup doesn't understand why design and planning is so costly and time-consuming in Massachusetts. "I don't need one more meeting to see the track that hasn't moved in 170 years," he quips.

His Wild West spirit hasn't gone over so well in the Bay State, which has more committees, regulations, and stakeholders than Hatrup has seen elsewhere. From negotiating with multiple town conservation commissions to discovering—a day after he started work—that Malden didn't have a lease with the MBTA to start on their trail, red tape has thwarted his efforts to finish projects here.

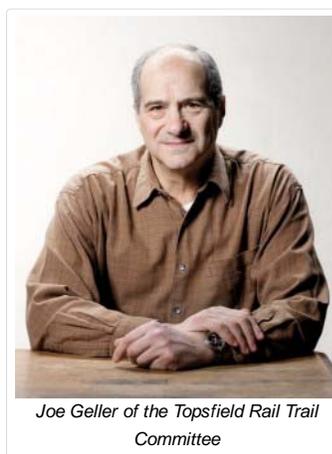
The situation has soured Barry, who was anticipating a grand opening for the Danvers Rail Trail last fall. "We thought Danvers would be a showpiece for Iron Horse," she says. "It hasn't worked out that way." While the project is well underway, some ties are still stacked in piles around town, which displeases the trail's abutters, and the path hasn't been graded. It's a similar story in Topsfield, where a section of the path was quickly finished for a wedding party last fall, but the trail is far from complete.

As Hatrup notes, he hasn't gotten a dime from any of the stakeholders, and he's a bit hurt that people have turned on him. "I'd like to think people know we're trying to do a good thing," he says. "We aren't being paid to keep to a particular schedule, so we need make sure we have the funds before we move forward on a project."

While Iron Horse sells the steel—one mile of rail buys one mile of finished trail—they pay to haul away the ties. Danvers had three miles of steel rails, but wanted four miles of trail. So, Hatrup needed to find the money from another project to finish the job in Danvers.

"What we're trying to do is just get it done," Hatrup says. "I believe the end will justify the means, no matter how rough it's been."

While Barry and Geller are disappointed that the work wasn't finished on schedule, they've already gotten more than they paid for. "I think [Iron Horse] spread themselves a little too thin," Gellar says. "But we're still ahead of



Joe Geller of the Topsfield Rail Trail Committee



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Featured



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Danvers Bi-Peds founder Ingrid Barry

and saw people gliding by on cross-country skis, and finally felt some hope for walking and biking, steps from her door.

Great Rides On The North Shore The North Shore is a popular destination for road cyclists—quiet back roads wind through forests, past charming town centers, and along spectacular coastline. Here, Gordon Harris, a ride coordinator for North Shore Cyclists, a recreational cycling club that holds free group bike rides every day during biking season, shares some of the best spots for biking in the area. Want more tips? Visit bikenewengland.com.

Rowley/Salt Marshes Loop

Starting point: Commuter Rail station in Rowley. Distance: 28 miles. What you'll see: Wide-open views of the Great Marsh, historic Colonial homes of Newburyport, Parker River National Wildlife Refuge, and the Hellcat observation tower. Where to stop: Follow your nose to Tendercrop Farms in

Newbury for fresh-baked bread, pies, and cookies. 108 High Road, Newbury, 978-462-6972, tendercropfarms.com. Map: ridewithgps.com/routes/269575.

Manchester/Cape Ann Loop

Starting point: Commuter Rail station in Manchester, Massachusetts. Distance: 30 miles. What you'll see: Some of the most spectacular ocean views in New England and charming downtown Manchester and Gloucester.

Where to stop: Try the porridge at Sugar Mags, 127 Main Street, Gloucester, 978-281-5310, sugarmags.com. Want more? Experienced cyclists continue on Roger and East Main Streets to the Eastern Point Lighthouse and Atlantic Road for ocean views. The long route continues along the coast to Rockport. Map:

ridewithgps.com/routes/269572.

Along the Merrimack River from Newburyport

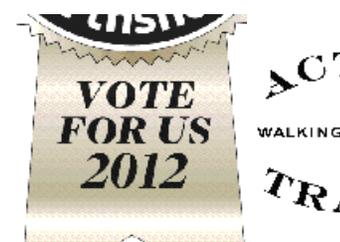
Starting point: Newburyport Commuter Rail station. Distance: 22 miles. What you'll see: The brand-new Clipper City Rail Trail, elegant Federal Period homes, rolling meadows of Maudsley State Park, and scenic Merrimack River views. Where to stop: Enjoy the retro charm of Fowles Gourmet Market for breakfast or lunch, 17 State Street, Newburyport, 978-465-9028, fowlesmarket.com. Map: ridewithgps.com/routes/269583.

The Old Stone Walls Ride from Ipswich

Starting point: Ipswich Commuter Rail station. Distance: 32 miles, or shorter if you turn back at Bradley Palmer State Park. What you'll see: Ipswich's "First Period" historic district, Crane Beach, the open fields and shady byways of Bradley Palmer State Park, and the meandering Ipswich River. Where to stop: Harris says the best coffee on the North Shore can be found at Zumi's Espresso & Ice Cream, 40 Market Street, Ipswich, 978-356-1988, zumis.com. Map: ridewithgps.com/routes/269578.

Minuteman Ride from North Andover

Starting point: Greater Lawrence Vocational High School, Andover. Distance: from 25 to 68 miles, depending on what loops you choose. What you'll see: Lovely New England vistas through Andover, Tewksbury, Billerica, Carlisle, and Concord, too, if you take the longest route. Where to stop: Grab a sandwich at Fern's Country Store, 8 Lowell Street, Carlisle, 978-369-0200, fernscountrystore.com. Map: nscyc.org/files/minuteman_map.pdf.



3 comments to Behind North Shore's Bike Trails



Mary Ellen Palermo

March 30, 2011 at 10:25 am

Malden to Everett to Lynn is also in the works! Hopefully soon the whole North Shore will be connected with bike trails.

North Shore bike trails « Blogging Ipswich

April 23, 2011 at 1:06 pm

[...] April 23, 2011 by bikenewengland Behind North Shore's Bike Trails [...]



Kimberly

March 25, 2012 at 3:45 pm

We just rode on the Danvers to Topsfield section a few weeks ago and are thrilled that so much progress is happening! We have already told many friends to check it out. This is such a great thing for the North Shore!