

March 23, 2007

On the trail: A mile at a time, North of Boston communities are converting old rail beds for recreational use

By Emily Young , Staff Writer
Salem News—

Swampscott resident Richard Frenkel and his two tiny children became regular fixtures on the Marblehead Rail-Trail when they first moved into town. Upon discovering that the abandoned rail bed continued into Swampscott, he thought extending the trail a little more than a mile to the neighboring town would be a great benefit not only to his family, but the entire town.

"Everybody loves the Marblehead Rail-Trail and I thought it was a no-brainer," Frenkel said.

That was 1991 and Frenkel's children are now 16 and 19. But despite his efforts, Swampscott still doesn't have a rail trail.

"There were times when it looked like the project would fold," Frenkel said. "To be honest about it, we didn't know it was usually a long and arduous process. ... We were exposed to town politics and found that something was amiss - that the political structure was clubby and anything but progressive. Everything involved a fight with the crowd that didn't want change - it took a Herculean effort to get a new high school after literally 100 years."

The movement to convert abandoned rail beds into gravel or paved paths started back in the mid-1960s and has grown more and more popular across the country over the past 40 years. The uses vary from trail to trail, but include walking, biking, in-line skating, horseback riding and cross-country skiing.

Frenkel isn't the only local struggling to build a rail trail. Swampscott resident Roger Talkov joined Frenkel's fight roughly six years ago. Danvers resident Matthew Duggan has been crusading for a rail trail in his town for five years. And Topsfield resident Joseph Geller started his local rail trail efforts 10 years ago.

"People don't volunteer for the money," Talkov said. "It's because they believe in (their project) and believe that it can make their community a better place to live."

Massachusetts has been slower to implement rail trail projects than most states, including its New England neighbors. Traditionally, it takes upward of a decade to complete a trail in the Bay State. Additionally, should Massachusetts advocates turn to the government for funding, they're told the going rate is \$1 million to \$1.4 million per mile to pave a 10- to 12-foot-wide trail, according to Dan Driscoll of the state Department of Conservation and Recreation.

"My impression is that in this state, if you go through MassHighway (for funding), not only does the process take far longer, it will be far more expensive. It can be double," said Betsy Goodrich, a Lowell-based representative for the national nonprofit Rails-to-Trails Conservancy. "The state needs to look at why it's so much more expensive than other states, what the actual costs really are, and what costs or requirements are unnecessary."

But these days, certain pieces of the process are far easier to navigate than even five years ago. For example, the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority, which owns many abandoned rail beds across the state, wasn't favorably disposed to writing long-term leases for recreational use of the land until 2004. And neighboring towns are now banding together to garner more attention - and therefore more aid - at the state level, noted Bill Steelman of the Essex National Heritage Commission in Salem, Mass. Steelman is working to implement the 27.8-mile Border to Boston Rail Trail that runs through Salisbury, Newburyport, Newbury, Georgetown, Boxford, Topsfield, Wenham and Danvers.

In New Hampshire, there also is interest in completing a Salem to Manchester Rail Trail, with a southern branch running through the towns of Salem, Windham, Derry, Londonderry, Manchester and Goffstown, said Jerry Moore of the New Hampshire Department of Transportation.

"Good things are going on up here and attracting attention," Steelman said. "In 10 years, portions of the (Border to Boston) trail will still need to be built, but there will be three or more sections on ground to enjoy."

Common stumbling blocks

There are any number of reasons why it can take years - sometimes decades - to build a rail trail.

Some towns struggle to get funding. Others face design challenges or environmental issues. Windham, N.H., resident Mark Samsel literally lobbied to pass new state legislation to restrict the use of motorized vehicles on the rail bed during nonwinter months before moving forward with constructing the town's rail trail. Topsfield struggled to obtain an acceptable lease from the MBTA for years but signed on the dotted line last summer, said proponent Joseph Geller.

"The progress we've made since last summer is more than we did in the last nine, 10 years," Geller said. "The most difficult thing was dealing with the MBTA lease. However, the northern half of the rail is owned by (utility company) National Grid and we don't have permission to use it. The towns of Boxford and Georgetown are taking the lead role of getting an easement from them, and we'll learn from them."

And many towns struggle with persuading all of the people who live near the proposed site that building a trail in their backyards is a great idea. For example, Swampscott resident Richard Klayman, whose house is 10 feet from the rail bed, is dead set against it.

"I'm so close that if I were in my kitchen, I could sell drinks to people going by," said Klayman. "We're talking about what is, in effect, a thread that needles through the town. ... The problem is this is a very narrow rail bed surrounded by 200 abutters, of whom more than 90 percent are against it."

Klayman and roughly 50 other abutters have sought legal representation because ownership of part of the abandoned rail bed is in question and rail trail advocates are contemplating eminent domain to gain control of it.

There are also organized opponents living adjacent to the rail bed in Danvers, where portions are raised as much as 15 feet above neighboring yards. John Toomey, a leader of the opposing 40-member Neighborhood Information Council, has collected several newspaper articles on incidents of violence and vandalism occurring on rail trails around the state over the last 10 years. But his concerns don't end there: He's worried that the trail will hurt property values and draw so many people that it will create a parking crisis in downtown Danvers.

Toomey remembers waving to train engineers from his window when the occasional train would rattle by his home of 38 years when the tracks, roughly 200 feet from the house, were still active.

"I'd rather have an occasional train than thousands of bikers back there," he said. "If you have open space, the drunks will gather out back. Several years ago, I discovered that dropping seedlings for thorn bushes grow well. They don't - they can't - gather out there."

Why rail trails?

There are obvious fitness, recreation, town unity and economic reasons. But why are all these folks so determined to create a path, sometimes as short as a mile, despite the difficult hurdles?

"It is a great idea and great ideas will happen," said Dick Paganelli, who's been on the Georgetown Recreational Path Committee since 2003. "I get lots of encouragement from many young parents who ask me when will it be done and they are looking forward to it. When I get discouraged, I walk sections of the proposed rail trail and immediately get a fix from the serene, beautiful views."

Salisbury Selectman Jerry Klima used to live in Lexington, just a block away from the popular Minuteman Bikeway that connects Bedford, Lexington, Arlington and Cambridge. He loved using the path, and his wife regularly biked to her Cambridge office on it for five years.

"We saw what happened in Lexington with those who were concerned and opposed it," Klima said. "Many people who lived along the path put up fences in their backyards because they were afraid of trespassing. But from using it over the years, very quickly residents put gates in their fences, so they would have direct access themselves to the path. The second thing we could see was when houses went up for sale, they would put real estate signs on the trail. It became a selling point."

When Klima and his wife retired to Salisbury, they became passionate about creating a rail trail in their new hometown. The town purchased about a mile of rail bed in 1987 for \$32,000 from the Boston and Maine Railroad. Town coalitions and volunteers then labored to obtain ownership of more railway through land purchases, leases and easements. Five years ago, the effort to establish the trail was reinvigorated. And now Klima can enjoy the tremendous beauty that surrounds the .8-mile trail, roughly 90 percent of which cost just \$10,000 to build.

"The going rate for trails done with MassHighway funding and asphalt is a million a mile. That made us very proud to accomplish so much with very little money," Klima said. "It's a long-term project that will take years, so you need persistence and you need to have people who can offer some sort of expertise. We're lucky in that I'm a retired lawyer, so I can contribute to all the legal aspects. There's another fellow who has financial skills, another who is really good at event organizing and another who is great on the computer."

The upward battle is too much for some advocates: North Andover had a rail trail committee in years past that dissolved over time. But recent success in other towns has inspired North Andover's town planner, Lincoln Daley, who hopes to revisit the topic this summer.

Recent success came in Salem, Mass., after seven years of work. The city was awarded the deed to the abandoned Boston and Maine Railroad right-of-way in 1996. Roughly 10 months later, the city approved converting it into a multi-use trail and bike path. Planning, design, and engineering of the first half-mile of the Salem Bike Path commenced in 1999 and construction was completed around the summer of 2003, according to Frank Taormina, city planner and harbor coordinator.

Samsel saw 3.4 miles of the Windham Rail Trail come to fruition in roughly five years, and hopes the rest of the 4.1-mile trail will be completed this fall. To fund the \$500,000 project, the Windham Rail Trail Alliance relied primarily on fundraising from locals, as well as additional support from businesses.

"You have to be 110 percent committed. You can't get disappointed. Stay focused, and keep an even attitude. And have patience," Samsel said. "I think that's our nature, to see it through. We would have stuck with taking on this responsibility for many more years. The way I see it, this is a forever thing to maintain and to manage the trail."

That commitment from truly passionate people is the one common thread for all active rail-trail committees.

"I am now making the turn towards 70 years old and don't know how much longer I can sustain the energy needed as the chairman," said Paganelli of the Georgetown group. "The secret to maintaining a strong committee or any organization is bringing in younger, talented, energetic people; which has occurred, and they are great contributors. It is not untypical for one to get burned out on a project of this complexity, but as progress is made, more volunteers come forth to pitch in."

Local rail trails up and running

Amesbury Riverwalk

* A 1-mile trail from the Upper Millyard in downtown Amesbury to the Carriagetown Marketplace along Route 110.

* Paved asphalt with gravel shoulders on either side and wooden guardrails.

* The Salisbury branch of the Eastern Railroad that passed through Amesbury was built in 1848. Boston and Maine Railroad took over the line in 1884. Passenger service stopped in 1936, and the last freight train passed Amesbury in 1950.

* Permitted activities include walking, biking, cross-country skiing, in-line skating, and the trail is wheelchair accessible.

* The scenic trail winds along the Powow River and is lined with lady slipper, blue-flag iris, marsh marigold, cattails, bebb willow and red maple trees. Patrons might spot animals like blueback herrings, mink, snapping turtles, killdeer, phoebes, and red-tailed hawks along their way.

* Parking is available at the Water Street Town Parking Garage and the Carriagetown Marketplace. For more, go to www.amesburymass.com.

Marblehead Rail-Trail

* A 5-mile trail with two connected spurs: one from Lafayette Street in Salem to Bessom Street in Marblehead, and the other from Bessom Street to Seaview Avenue in Swampscott. Though you have to cross Lafayette Street, the trail does connect with the new, half-mile **Salem Bike Path**, which is paved to Canal Street.

* The approximately 9-foot-wide trail is made of stone dust, with grass shoulders on either side. The shorter Salem Bike Path is paved with asphalt.

* Permitted activities include walking, cross-country skiing, mountain biking.

* Parking available at Bessom Street in Marblehead and along Lafayette Street in Salem.

* The Swampscott branch of the mid-1800s Eastern Railroad was purchased by the Boston and Maine Railroad. When the company abandoned it in the 1960s, the Marblehead Light Department and the Marblehead Water and Sewer Department decided to buy the rail bed as a utility right-of-way. The Marblehead Rail-Trail has been used by bikers for decades; however, the Salem Bike Path was completed in 2003.

Salisbury Point Ghost Trail

* Roughly eight-tenths of a mile, the trail starts at Cushing Street and extends almost to Rabbit Road in Salisbury.

* The crushed-stone trail is roughly 10- to 12-foot wide and was built over time by volunteers, who also constructed a bridge, wooden fences and trail signs.

* Permitted activities include walking, biking, cross-country skiing, mountain biking. The trail is particularly beautiful in the spring, and patrons will frequently see deer and wild turkeys.

* Salisbury shares Amesbury's railroad history. Freight trains on the Salisbury Railroad line would transport carriages and auto bodies covered with white shrouds, looking like ghosts, on their way to Boston, Detroit, and New York. Passenger service on the Boston and Maine line was discontinued in 1936 because of the increasing use of cars.

* Parking available on Bartlett Street. For more, go to www.salisburyma.gov.

Windham Rail Trail

* A 3.4-mile trail from North Lowell Road to Roulston Road in Windham, N.H.

* The trail is 10 feet wide and paved with a stone-dust shoulder.

* Railroad workers built the Manchester and Lawrence branch from 1847 to 1849. The first train rolled through in November 1849 and the last train came to a halt in the early 1970s. The abandoned rails were removed in the early 1980s.

* Permitted activities include walking, horseback riding, snowmobiling, cross-country skiing, mountain biking, in-line skating. The predominately wooded trail winds by a farm pasture, apple orchard, two ponds and marshes. Trail visitors might see deer, birds, owls, turtles and other wildlife.

* Parking is available at the Windham Depot and Roulston Road. For more, go to www.windhamrailtrail.org.

Other communities with rail trails in the works

- * Boxford
- * Danvers
- * Derry, N.H.
- * Georgetown
- * Londonderry, N.H.
- * Newbury
- * Newburyport
- * Peabody
- * Salem, N.H.
- * Swampscott
- * Topsfield
- * Wenham

State rail trails and trail mileage counts

State Open trails Open miles Projected trails Projected miles

Massachusetts 28 trails 155 miles 63 trails 397 miles

New Hampshire 54 trails 306 miles 18 trails 296 miles

Source: www.railtrails.org

National rail trails and trail mileage counts

Open trails Open miles Projected trails Projected miles

1,409 trails 13,505 miles 1,206 trails 14,178 miles

Source: www.railtrails.org

Copyright © 1999-2006 cnhi, inc.