

Building rail trails, local cyclists have work cut out

On the
Topsfield rail
trail during
a family
reunion on
Christmas
Day are Alex,
left, and
David Geller.

Courtesy photo



By ALAN BURKE
STAFF WRITER

At last, Santa has given you what you always wanted, with all the bells and whistles and horns. Your dream bicycle.

So where are you going to ride it?

Until recently, options have been limited to busy streets. But a small army of enthusiasts is agitating for change. Town by town and city by city, they seek to create a web of bicycle paths capable of taking riders all over the North Shore and beyond.

"It's a way to be green," says Dan Shuman, who owns Salem

Cycle and heads the Salem Bike Path Committee. "A way to keep fit."

Establishing a bike path is not easy, however. Advocates face obstacles, including a lack of money and opposition from abutters. Finding trails, on the other hand, is not so difficult.

"We're talking about standing trails," says Joe Geller, who heads up Topsfield's Rail Trail Committee. "It's the abandoned right of way for the railroads. People are already walking them, and riding bikes."

Unfortunately, railroad ties

Please see **PATHS**, Page 15

PATHS: Cycling enthusiasts plan trails

■ Continued from Page 1

make for a bumpy ride. Cyclists hope to remove unused tracks and pave or smooth the paths. Marblehead's railroad right of way has yielded four miles of biking and hiking trails cut right through town, from Swampscott to Salem.

"It's not paved," Town Planner Becky Curran said. "It's stone dust."

Bikers grumble but use it. Moreover, she says, they can pass through the town while crossing a mere handful of streets.

Yet, while Marblehead's path reaches Swampscott and Salem, neither community is reaching back. It's not for lack of trying.

"We've been looking at it for a number of years," Swampscott Selectman Adam Forman said.

National Grid owns the right of way required, he said, and talks "have been making progress."

Bikers, meanwhile, must finance any project with grants and donations.

"As long as we aren't spending town money," Forman said.

Biking to school

Dan Shuman's bike path plan for Salem is grander: "a city-wide bike path." That includes a link to Peabody, though Shuman's priority is connecting city schools. "All our kids could ride to school safely. The new road to the Beverly-Salem bridge, for example, includes a bike path to Carlton School.

Peabody has planned a bike path for years. Only now, said Community Development's Jean Delios, a six-mile stretch from the Northshore Mall

to Middleton is at last under construction.

"The first coat of asphalt has been laid for most of the path," she said. Negotiations are continuing for railroad property into the downtown.

But once the work is done, don't expect to ride into Middleton. "To me, it would be great if Middleton could start a rails-to-trails project," Conservation Director Derek Fullerton said. "It's a way to increase physical activity and get acquainted with nature."

Efforts to create trails are ongoing, but Middleton has only crude trails in the woods and, so far, no money to do more.

Nor are there sanctioned paths in Danvers, although the volunteer Danvers Biped is anxious to develop an unused railroad right of way that sweeps through the town from Wenham to Peabody, member Ingrid Barry said.

The town has won control of the right-of-way. If built, it will connect to paths going all the way to New Hampshire.

"But until we get the town dealing with it, we're stuck," Barry sighs. "Someday, if I live long enough, the bike path would go to Boston."

Beverly is likewise bereft of city-sanctioned bike paths. "There's been an on-again/off-again effort," Bruce Doig of the Recreation Department said.

While some wooded paths are used for mountain biking, "There's nothing we have marked out or laid out," he said.

For his part, Geller of Topsfield rides 3,000 miles per year and owns six bikes. He dismisses fearful abutters — some fear traffic, noise or the possibility that burglars could use bike paths for getaways — noting overwhelming support in the town.

A four-mile stretch is already underway in Topsfield.

"It goes right through the center of town," Geller said.

More primitive trails link the town to Boxford, Ipswich and Wenham and send riders as far as Manchester and Gloucester.

"I know people who have told me they want to use a trail to get to work," Geller said.

He expects Washington to play Santa in this instance, with stimulus money for projects precisely like this. It's the chrome lining to the dark, economic cloud.

"It's going to be an exciting time for bike trails," he said.

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