

Rail Trail expands northward with phase 4

Committee gets license from National Grid

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With a signed license in hand from utility company National Grid allowing the Topsfield Rail Trail Committee to move forward with Phase IV of the Topsfield Linear Common, members wasted no time holding a public forum on Wednesday, May 15 about the upcoming changes.

Committee members, trail abutters and townspeople gathered at the Town Library to discuss initial and future plans for the trail, as well as to vocalize support, concerns and ask questions.

First, Geller told the 30 or so people at the public forum about the license.

The license allows access to the two-mile portion of trail that spans from Washington Street north to the Boxford town line. It also lets the committee make small changes, such as mowing and unblocking drainage issues. But if the committee needs to make adjustments to the grade of the trail, they first need approval from National Grid and the conservation commission.

This land connects to Topsfield's already built portion of the trail, and it will ultimately become part of the Border To Boston trail, which will connect pathways from Salisbury to Peabody.

Rail Trail Committee chair Joe Geller said that so far, some brush was removed and the grass was mowed along areas of the new portion of old utility corridor. Geller said that overall the pathway is flat and fairly smooth, but that he wants to take care of some potholes and ruts soon.

Since the area between Washington Street and

Oak Drive is not currently passable due to poor drainage, Geller suggests that walkers and bicyclists instead travel up Parsonage Lane and take the first left onto Oak Drive to cut onto the trail there. The trail then travels towards Boxford, cutting over Bare Hill Road along the way.

As one of their first orders of business, Geller explained that the committee needs to address the water issue.

"The big work is going to be to figure out how to dry out the trail so you don't have to use Parsonage Lane," said Geller. "So we'll have to investigate why the water is not draining out of that section. We'll have to put on some boots — rubber boots — to get in there because it's so wet."

In the meantime, Geller knows people have used some of the new trail already because there's a pretty "well worn tan" on it, and he added that the grass is tall in some areas and there are ticks.

Management, restroom concerns

Kim Sherwood of Perkins Row has to walk a quarter of a mile on the road to get to the trail, and she said that some days she wishes the path would run through her backyard so she could just hop right on it. And although she enjoys the trail, she spoke up at the forum, and shared some concerns with the Transcript.

"I mostly want to be sure any issues of management, legal documentation, insurance or

possible town costs have been addressed, now and for the future, especially before the next two miles are worked on," said Sherwood. She said she has heard stories about

townspeople who rally for other crazes, such as tennis courts, and then when they lost interest, it is the town that is left with the responsibilities.

"But this project sounds about as innocuous as the local sledding hill, maybe less so," she said.

Selectman Richard Gandt addressed this concern in an email to Sherwood, telling her that the trail is managed by the Rail Trail Committee and that town employees do not maintain the trail.

Sherwood is also concerned about where trail-travelers will use restrooms along the path.

Geller pointed out that a portable restroom at Proctor School is accessible. He also said The Bicycle Shop on Grove Street lets people use the restroom, and that people who stop at Main Street Market or Day Break Café to

purchase refreshments should also be able to use the restroom.

Sherwood said that it might also be nice to install more trash bins for dog waste bags along the existing portion of the trail.

"Best of Topsfield"

Melissa Ogden of Birch Lane is a direct abutter to the trail; it runs adjacent to her property, along the northeast boundary. Although she was unable to attend the public forum, she told the Transcript that she is excited to have the trail in her backyard, and she hopes it helps encourage families to get outside and enjoy the "best of what Topsfield has to offer."

"My first grader is excited to have this in his backyard as he foresees being able to ride his bike all the way to Pye Brook Park as well as to Proctor

when he gets there in a few more years," said Ogden. "Although we aren't that far away from Pye Brook now, the Rail Trail, in my opinion, will provide an easier and safer way of connecting our recreation areas."

Ogden is not concerned about some of the complaints such as crime, loitering and littering.

"This is already an area that people use; yes, teenagers hangout in the area as well as in the conservation area behind our house," said Ogden. "If anything, I think this will alleviate additional problems as the trail will be improved and maintained."

The next steps

The license allows the Rail Trail Committee to propose trail improvement plans to National Grid twice a year. Geller said the first proposal

could be to fix the wet area just north of Washington Street.

He would also like to eventually raise money for a surface for Phase IV. Since that portion will require a significant amount of money, Geller first wants to figure out what needs to be done to the trail, then raise a specific amount. The committee would then need to submit an application to National Grid and the conservation commission for approval.

So while the endpoint is not necessarily near, Geller and the rest of the Rail Trail Committee will begin to address the drainage issues as soon as possible so that people can use, and enjoy, the trail.

"We hope that the kids will use these trails to go to their games and be accompanied by their parents so parents can get some exercise as well," said Geller.

