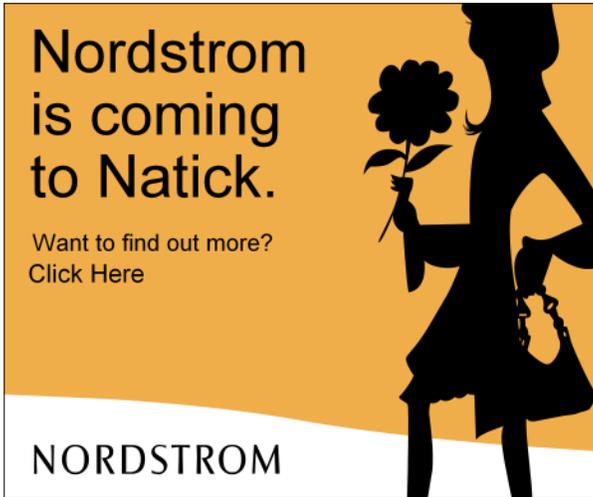


Topsfield bike path draws fire

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Topsfield -

Residents sharply criticized Topsfield town officials Monday regarding a bike path currently under construction. The strong words from members of the Coalition for Children's Safety and Serious Concerns Regarding the Proposed Topsfield Rail Trail Project came during Monday's selectmen meeting and lasted about an hour.

While claiming not to be opposed to building a 4.5-mile bike path through Topsfield, coalition members admonished town officials for not handling the project properly. The trail is being designed to run from the Wenham line to the Boxford town line near Pye Brook.

Much of the criticisms were directed toward the Rail-to-Trail Committee. Formed in 2005, the committee was created to lay the groundwork for a bike path running through Topsfield on an abandoned railroad and work with trail owners on issues such as community outreach, funding, design, building, and maintenance.

"The adverse effects of this path are being ignored," Bob Morgan, a member of the coalition, said, adding that the Rail-to-Trail Committee has not been properly handling issues such as property rights along the trail's footprint, addressing the concerns of abutters, and safe distances from wetlands.

The coalition is also concerned with the crime on the bike path, stating that there have been reported murders, rapes and child molestations on trails around the country.

The Rail-to-Trail Committee is working on the first phase of the project which includes a half-mile stretch of the path connecting Main Street with Washington Street.

As the bike path is being designed and constructed in phases, the coalition, consisting of roughly 10 members, feels this is a method used to "get away" with more and that a full design of the trail through Topsfield should be done before implementation.

Morgan, of 20 Washington St., had implied several times that the Rail-to-Trail Committee claimed to have gathered comments from abutters who later stated, to coalition members, that they knew nothing about the bike path. Morgan also spoke against the Conservation Commission which was expected to meet on the project earlier this week.

Morgan's comments drew the ire of Selectman Boyd Jackson who appeared visibly annoyed.

"I have a problem with everything that is being insinuated here," Jackson said after listening to nearly 40

minutes of Morgan speak about major problems with the project.

Morgan also had said the town should obtain the original "rail maps" to assure that all the property on the trail is only owned by either the MBTA or National Grid, the two owners of the abandoned railroad, and not residential or business property owners.

Selectmen Stephen Clark said he felt Morgan was merely speculating that abutters' land would be taken by this project, and that insisting that the town do extra research seems "a bit too problematic."

"While I disagree with some parts, there are some valid points," Selectmen Chairman John McArdle said, later implying that the "piecemeal" approach of the project may not be the best way.

Saying the coalition's presentation was not intended to be a debate, McArdle said the town would research all of the group's concerns outside of the meeting, to be brought up at a later time.

Throughout the discussion, McArdle insisted that the members of the coalition join the Rail-to-Trail Committee, but did not receive a firm response from any member.

Using the Lexington bike path as a comparison, Morgan said that if this trail was half as successful as the path that runs from Cambridge to Bedford, there would be a traveler passing by any one section every 24 seconds.