

State OK's rail trail plan

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Representing a significant milestone for a proposed 28-mile bike trail set to run through Topsfield and Boxford, MassHighway accepted the Border to Boston Trail as an official project, agreeing to perform design work as well as a feasibility study.

The approval by the state's Project Review Committee shifts the MassHighway's involvement slightly, as their consultants will now be going before town regulatory boards to handle issues such as wetland concerns and major route intersections, such as the cross over Route 1 in Topsfield.

However, the project's approval by MassHighway is not a commitment of funds for construction of the project, which the state estimates at \$26.3 million. Also, each town is still individually responsible for public outreach, which includes knowing the physical attributes of the trail in town and addressing abutter concerns.

The Border to Boston proposal boasts a 27.8-mile trail to run on top of the historic and abandoned Maine to Boston railway, running from Salisbury to the Danvers/Peabody border. The proposed trail is set to run through Boxford, Danvers, Georgetown, Newbury, Newburyport, Salisbury, Topsfield, and Wenham.

While the approval is good news for Rail Trail Committees in the Tri-Town, Chairman of the Box-

ford Rail Trail Committee, Steve Davis, said it was somewhat expected.

"They've been encouraging [the project] right along," Davis said about MassHighway's involvement with a regional task force. Davis feels that the approval represents MassHighway's recognition of the preliminary work each town has done by themselves.

"It's what we've been working for, so its great news for us," Joe Geller, Chairman of the Topsfield Rail Trail Committee said about the approval.

According to Geller, the 25 percent design and the feasibility study, which will be funded though the federal government as a high priority project, will be used to inform bidders about project specifications.

With MassHighway not yet committing to funding the project, it is expected that federal funds will pay for the construction.

During the Boxford selectmen's meeting Monday night, the board discussed the town chipping in with Georgetown and Topsfield on attorney fees to answer certain specific questions regarding right-of-way along the historic rail bed.

Geller said that he would most likely not even ask the selectmen for the money, which would be roughly \$1000, as he originally proposed the idea to the Topsfield licensing board as a project that would not require town funds.

A neighborhood group called

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the Coalition for Neighborhood Information has been opposing the rail trail in Topsfield, and has spoken at many selectmen's meetings regarding their concerns about the trail. A debate is currently being scheduled for March and will be aired on Topsfield local access cable. Geller, who likes the idea, is expected to argue, along with other committee members, on the pro side, while the spokesman for the coalition, Charles "Bob"

Morgan, is expected to speak on the con side.

"We're looking forward to it in a big way," Geller said about the event that he sees as a way to promote the benefits of a bike trail.

Davis said that the Boxford Rail Trail Committee has already established the residential properties in town that exist in areas needed to be altered for the trail. A following step for the committee will be speaking with abutters about their land.