





## Selectmen: rail trail not our debate

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TOPSFIELD - Monday's selectmen's meeting in Topsfield featured another debate concerning a proposed bike path to run through Topsfield drawing contention and signs of exasperation from several board members.

While rail trail opponent Bob Morgan and other Coalition for Neighborhood Information members, got up to speak, Selectmen Chairman John McArdle showed little patience for the group throughout the hour-plus discussion.

McArdle continually expressed his discontent with the group for using the selectmen's time to answer questions about the proposed four-mile bike path and not the time of a committee charged with the project's planning, despite Morgan's opinion that the meeting went fairly well. At times he looked visibly upset raising his voice more than once.

"You need to begin to speak to each other," McArdle said forcefully to both Morgan and Rail Trail Committee Chairman Joe Geller who is looking to build the rail trail over an abandoned railroad bed. "Act in a somewhat adult manner."

Many coalition members sat up to speak about concerns the group has about the rail trail, including crime, trash, abutters concerns, and right-of-way, reinforcing the point that the Rail Trail is not addressing some of the more important issues surrounding the trail.

"If it's done right it could be a great benefit. If it's done wrong it could be a disaster," Morgan said, adding that one major problem is that most of the town doesn't know anything about the trail.

The coalition also wished to present a warrant article to be placed on the Annual Town Meeting warrant this spring, in order for residents to be able to vote on whether they want the trail, which is set to be one section of a 26-mile trail to run from Salisbury to Danvers.

MassHighway recently announced it will be funding the 25 percent design for the trail as well as a feasibility study, in addition to going before regulatory boards in all eight communities to handle issues such as wetlands and major route intersections the trail would create.

While Selectmen Dick Gandt answered a number of questions presented by coalition members, McArdle kept interrupting, reiterating the Board of Selectmen wasn't the appropriate government body to ask questions.

"This is not stump the board," McArdle said to Morgan and the roughly 20 coalition members that showed up to the meeting Monday night.

As the coalition was previously told that abutters to the rail trail could not be appointed to the Rail Trail Committee, Morgan said that, after discussions with a state Ethics Commission's investigator, abutters could serve on the committee, so long as they take the necessary steps to ensure that they will act in the best interests of the town.

"I don't want to, all of a sudden, be appointing people [to the Rail Trail Committee] that clearly don't want to see the trail go through," Selectmen Steve Clark, who is an attorney, said, adding that he disagrees with the legal opinion of the ethics commission.

However, Morgan said that the coalition is not an opposition group.

While the coalition had also gone to the selectmen in an attempt to censure the Rail Trail Committee for comments made in a letter to the editor in the Tri-Town Transcript, McArdle stated selectmen weren't in the business of censures and would not be issuing any kind of public apology.

Gandt did however say that he would speak to the Rail Trail Committee about sending along information to the coalition that could concern them.

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