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## Trail forum spotlights issues not personalities

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TOPSFIELD - Who will clean up the horse droppings? Do property values rise or fall with the addition of a rail trail near a residential neighborhood? Why must the trail be constructed in pieces?

Those were some of the questions discussed and left unanswered or unclear after a forum regarding the proposed rail trail took place Monday in the Proctor School library. Roughly 60 residents packed the library to watch a debate between rail trail proponents and opponents.

Since July, selectmen meetings have been the forum for debate over the issue of a path that would be constructed over an abandoned rail bed, and possibly join a 26-mile path from Danvers to Salisbury.

While some were calling the event an "information session," a debate format was clearly present in structure of the discussion under the control of Town Moderator John Kinhan, with opening statements, questions, answers, and rebuttals and then closing statements.

The Coalition for Neighborhood Information, insisting its status as a "concerned" group and not an opposition group, once again bombarded Rail Trail Committee members with criticisms about their work planning a 4-mile stone dust path to run through the town.

The Rail Trail Committee, formed in 2005 to oversee the planning of the proposed bike and horse path, continued to defend its claim that the trail won't use any town funds for its planning, construction, and ongoing maintenance.

"It just won't happen," Rail Trail Chairman Joe Geller said about any project need not paid for by one of the "three Gs," gifts, grants, or generosity. While coalition member maintain that other trails in the state use public funds, the Rail Trail Committee say they will not use public funds in Topsfield.

However, two spokesmen for the coalition, Cathy Morgan and Eric Gutowski, continued to show skepticism that trail maintenance and security would be handled without using town funds, noting other trails that have shown as many as 11 bike police officers handling trail security.

"Who will clean up [after] the horses and dogs," Gutowski asked about droppings from both animals that may frequent the trail if built.

Geller did address the issue of maintaining the stone dust, which public works employee Phil Knowles told him was fairly inexpensive and is only needed once every decade.

While the issue was mentioned once again, coalition members still pushed that designs for the entire four-mile path be completed before construction begins on the entire trail.

"We want to see the whole blueprint," Gutowski said.

However, Rail Trail members spoke about designing and constructing phase 1A, a 0.3-mile strip from Washington Street to Main Street, first, garnering little back-and-forth discussion around the topic.

Morgan used the forum to once again bring up crime issues surrounding rail trails, citing information from a guidebook from a rail trail association.

"Build a trail and the vandals will come," Morgan said about one piece of advice from the rail trail guidebook.

Both sides relied on drawing conclusions about property values, crime, trash and pollution from reports on specific bike paths across the state, seldom finding a truly universal source about one issue in particular.

"Certainly there are issues to be resolved," Demers said.

Some specifics were cleared up, such as the destruction of the parking lot across from St. Rose's Church, which Geller said would not happen when the rail trail is constructed.

One purpose for the debate was to provide additional information about both sides of the topic before residents at Town Meeting vote on whether to halt construction on the trail before designs for the entire trail have been completed and acquired the necessary approval.

The funding for the 25 percent design and the feasibility study for the trail has already been approved by the federal government as a high priority project, and 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.

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It has to be for Horses or People! Can Not Be For Both ! Why can they not tell people what it will be used for ? Vote NO !!!

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