

Natick Bulletin & Tab

Bakery Closing Puts Rail Trail on Front Burner

By Alison O'Leary Murray, Correspondent

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Rail trail enthusiasts, who envision an unobstructed 3-mile walking and biking route from downtown Natick to Route 30 at Speen Street, see the closing of the continental Baking plant as a potential golden opportunity.

After crossing Route 30 near the TJX headquarters, cyclists could continue under the Mass Pike as far as Saxonville, mostly off-road. Called the Cochituate Rail Trail, the plan has been in the works for about a year, when rumors began that the Wonder Bread bakery next to the Natick Mall would be consolidated into other corporate holdings. The trail is proposed on the rail line currently used by Continental Baking two days a week.

The official word coincided with a previously scheduled meeting of trail supporters that featured Craig Della Penna, a representative of the Rails to Trails Conservancy, at the Morse Library Tuesday night. The event's host, George Eckert, chairman of Natick's Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committee, was buoyed by the event's large turnout yet cautiously optimistic about prospects for a trail.

"This opens the way for trail advocates to begin to exert their influence on the government to begin the planning and political process," said Eckert. "There's still a lot of work to do."

Some of the work has begun. Sen. Cheryl Jacques sent a representative who said she is very interested and will observe the process. And Kathy Buckley Lewis of the Central Transportation Planning Staff (a regional transportation planning agency) has been charged by both Framingham and Natick boards of Selectmen to begin a feasibility study.

Dick Miller, a Natick resident, trail advocate, and member of the Cochituate State Park Advisory Committee, sees many reasons to believe the trail is feasible. "The top person in DEM says this is the one they want bad. This would make Cochituate State Park more than a spot. It would stretch it out."

Miller cites the state park's physical location near the center of the proposed trail as key both for maintenance and patrolling. Maintenance vehicles are already on site, he says, and park employees currently drive to Callahan State Park in Framingham to do bike patrols. Once the trail is in place, Callahan is not far from the northern terminus, he points out.

Della Penna had words of advice for Eckert and Miller on the political process involved, having worked to promote a highly divisive rail trail in Belchertown that was defeated by just 45 out of 5,000 votes cast.

"Belchertown lost because they didn't set up a Friends of the Rail Trail Committee in advance," said Della Penna. "They played by the rules. The town appointed a committee that was politically stacked against the trail, and now the opponents are so mad they've gone out to other towns to teach lessons on how to do this [defeat trails]."

"There are 1,000 trails now open and not one has been regretted by a community after the fact," he said.

The town of Weston also defeated a rail trail proposal recently. "It's a double-edged sword," Della Penna said. "Some people say 'look how popular this is, let's build more,' while others say 'look how popular it is. Stop building these. We don't want these people here.' "

Della Penna put Weston trail opponents in the latter category.

The slide presentation highlighted many rail trails around the country, including some that have pedestrian traffic side-by-side with railroad cars. Although a portion of a trail in Belmont currently includes such shared space, railroads balk at such an arrangement, which was suggested for the proposed Cochituate Rail Trail a year ago.

"They're waiting for guidance from Washington," said Della Penna, who expects the Rails to Trails Conservancy to be the clearinghouse for such communication between government and the railroad industry.

Brian Johnson is one Natick Resident who would like to see the rail line turned into a trail so he could easily bike or rollerblade from his Natick Labs-area neighborhood to other parts of town. He has traveled to Lexington to use the Minuteman bikeway, also built on an unused rail line, but says it's too far to go.

Carla Schwartz, from Framingham, rides her bike along Route 9 in her daily two-wheeled commute to work.

"I'm definitely interested in seeing this happen," she said. "One good reason to be a proponent is this is one of the most unsafe areas for biking. There are also lots of people living in apartments in that area [Route 9/Speen street] who can't get anywhere without a car."

Eckert described Natick as a town divided east and west by Lake Cochituate and north and south by big roads like Route 9 and the Mass Pike.

"This rail line surmounts a lot of those barriers," he said. But there are even more hurdles for the trail advocates to clear. "I'm hoping a lot of town officials will be able to attend," Miller said. "We need to get them behind this if we expect it to happen."

Natick Selectman Jay Ball pushed for the letter to be sent to the state and pledged to do what he could to help.

"I think it's a hell of a good idea," he said. "I think it's pretty neat. There are a lot of spots that roadbed overlooks that you would never imagine were around here. It's really quite beautiful."

Hanson noted the Cochituate Trail could even become part of a larger rail trail network. Only two miles from its end in Framingham lies the rail bed for the proposed Wayside rail trail. The Wayside trail would run all the way into Boston and awaits only the approval of Weston to move forward.

"I think it's quite possible we could link the two and then we'd really have something," Hanson said.