

# MetroWest Daily News

## Rail Trails Must Get Rolling

By John Greiner-Ferris, Guest Columnist

July 30, 2000

While Rome wasn't built in a day, it probably was built faster than your average bike path in Massachusetts. According to an expert in converting abandoned railroads into bike paths, in the past six years or so, nearly 400 paths have been built across the U.S. using money the federal government gives states for just such projects. In the same period, Massachusetts built exactly one path using federal funds.

Now this doesn't mean bike paths aren't being built. It just means the high-end kind-better known as multi-use paths because they can be utilized by cyclists, walkers, in-line skaters, or even equestrians are not being built quickly by the Massachusetts Highway Department, the governing arm for bike paths here in the Commonwealth. MassHighway is focused on the Commonwealth's highways and bridges, as it should be. While Doug Cope, MassHighway's public affairs director, could list about five projects, all mostly in the early stages of development, the simple truth appears to be that if you're focused on motorized transportation, cyclists and in-line skaters are going to be at the bottom of your priority list. The focus should be on mass transportation, and not just highways. And it doesn't matter how many times you reiterate that MassHighway, Commissioner Matthew Amarillo, and just about everybody else including the guys who drive the dump trucks, are committed to bike trails -- if the projects aren't getting completed, something's wrong.

You have to wonder if these projects wouldn't be better proposed and managed by an office on economic development or tourism rather than transportation, because economic development is exactly what bike paths would bring to the towns out here in MetroWest.

Craig Della Penna, the New England representative for Rails-to-Trails Conservancy and the managing director of the largest railroad and transloading facility in Massachusetts, obviously should know a bit about railways. He says if a railroad can't be profitable, the only alternative is to turn it into a rail trail. "A small town doesn't profit from a railroad unless the train stops," says Della Penna. "But a trail is marketed to tourists."

It took 17 years to build the Minuteman Trail, a popular trail that winds 11 miles through towns just northwest of Boston. According to a Rails-to-Trails Conservancy fact sheet, Steve's Ice Cream Shop in Arlington serves about 200 more customers a week because of the trail. And a Gap clothing store claims a 30 percent increase in business since the trail opened.

Examples like these abound from across the country. Dunedin, Florida was experiencing a 35 percent storefront vacancy until an abandoned rail line was turned into a bike trail. Storefront occupancy rose to 100 percent. Trail users tend to combine trail experience with revenue-generating activity. They buy food, special clothing and equipment for running, biking, skating, and horseback riding, in addition to souvenir-type goods. And, even without economic windfalls, trails still enhance the quality of life in a community and provide a safe place for recreation.

Ed Payne, 50, a recreational cyclist in Holliston, said, "I ride to Milford a lot on Rte. 16, and those mirrors come awfully close." A proposed bike trail, the Upper Charles River Trail, would in part connect Holliston and Milford, providing a safe route between the two towns.

Right now, these economic gold mines and safe thoroughfares are in the hands of well-intentioned citizens on the local level. Multi-use trails are proposed locally. Everyday citizens see an abandoned right-of-way, envision it developed, and start a committee. Abutting towns work together to link segments of trails.

Committee members are a tenacious bunch, not flinching at the thought that what they are undertaking could last 15 or 20 years to complete -- a veritable prison sentence. They are tortoises in a world of hares. And mostly they are also sorely lacking in the political savvy and clout that is needed to maneuver through the labyrinth of state offices on Beacon Hill. It seems to take them about three or four years just to learn the intricacies of what they are trying to accomplish. Roger Wood, the chairperson for the Holliston Trails Committee, said, "Part of the reason these things take so long is because our committee is just learning about this ."

And these projects are intricate and the process Byzantine. They start with designs. Then the designs have to be approved. Corridors purchased. Money, usually in the form of grants, needs to be procured, but local funds usually have to be raised, too, and Town Meeting comes but once a year. Details like encroachments have to be worked out. Over the proposed 17-mile Upper Charles River Trail, there are three separate owners of the 6.71 miles in Holliston. Then abutters unintentionally build garages, sheds, and driveways on the property that have to be rectified.

Despite the complexities of the projects, there's something amiss when it takes people an entire generation to complete a project that usually does not have major opposition. But it's hard to point exactly where the problem lies.

Certainly the glacier-like speed that our state government works is part of the problem. The Assabet River Rail Trail is waiting for notice to proceed with funds already earmarked from fiscal year '98. Bureaucracy is a problem; there is no one single entity on Beacon Hill with whom trail committees work. Land acquisition is another major obstacle, and state Sen. Cheryl Jacques' office is looking into how the MBTA, one of the largest owners of abandoned rail corridors, is ensuring that the corridors are not sold off. Sen. Jacques might be wise to extend her investigation to all owners of abandoned railways, not just the MBTA.

This isn't to say that the future is dark for trails. There are over 60 rail trail projects in the works across the state. According to Della Penna, since April a dozen or so projects suddenly moved forward. While not offering proof, he attributed this progress to the ouster of Jim Kerasiotes as head of the Big Dig.

And there are some creative minds at work. Wood and his committee are considering going the non-profit route and approaching corporations in MetroWest for tax deductible donations.

Abandoned railways are vestiges from the 19th century that have new applications in the 21st. In so many ways our state government is like an

abandoned railway. It's a process that hasn't been cleared for 21st century applications.

*You can write to John Greiner-Ferris at [jgf@compuserve.com](mailto:jgf@compuserve.com).*

© Copyright 1995-2000 - Town Online - All Rights Reserved