

# Boston Globe West

## Rail-Trail Plans Get a Boost

### MBTA policy change may clear obstacles

By Thanassis Cambanis, Globe Staff Correspondent, 12/24/2000

Crawling traffic. Snarling diesel engines. Potholes. Construction crews.

Advocates of bicycle paths and walking trails for years have proposed an alternative to this ugly face of transportation, but until this month have faced an unlikely adversary: The MBTA.

More than a dozen rails-to-trails projects in Greater Boston have faltered over negotiations to acquire abandoned railroad rights of way from the MBTA - but with an official policy change this month, the authority will allow towns to use surplus tracks free of charge rather than charging public money for land already in the public domain.

An early beneficiary could be Framingham, which is poised to open a 1.6-mile portion of the Cochituate Rail Trail on the ashes of the defunct Saxonville Branch railroad.

"All of a sudden, it's coming together very quickly," said A. Richard Miller, chairman of the Cochituate State Park Advisory Committee. "It's a tremendous Christmas present."

After years of waiting, the trail organizers in Framingham and Natick hope to get approval from the MBTA to use the abandoned track, applying a \$20,000 grant already in hand to convert it to a public trail.

Local officials are jumping at the chance to gobble up unused track - as soon as it is declared surplus.

The ambitious Wayside Rail Trail, which passes over much of the 20-mile MBTA-owned Mass Central Line, would connect Waltham to the Assabet River Rail Trail, passing through Weston, Wayland, Sudbury, and Hudson. Eventually, it will form a seamless path from the Riverside Trail in Boston, through Watertown, all the way west to Berlin.

Bob Waddick, Waltham's deputy mayor, has met with T real estate officials to negotiate over 4.2 miles of MBTA rail running through the city.

"Certainly if the MBTA is cooperative and the state is forthcoming with funding, there's a reasonable likelihood that Waltham will be able to design and build its 4-mile portion within the next few years," he said.

Winning public support for the project was hard - Weston still hasn't signed on - but the Wayside trail will move ahead much more quickly if towns and cities don't have to pay for MBTA rail.

"It makes it a hell of a lot easier to go ahead with something like this if you're not talking about land-acquisition costs," Waddick said. "The MBTA is doing the right thing. The rail trail serves a great public purpose. As a quasi-public agency, [the T] shouldn't look to profit from this."

A combination of municipal clamoring and political pressure from the governor and transportation secretary pushed the MBTA to change its policy on surplus railways. In the past, the agency held onto the right-of-way for future use. Some feared the agency eventually would sell its property to private developers.

However, transportation planners and state agencies like the Highway Department complained that federal grant money for rail trails was being wasted to purchase public land from the MBTA. Most rail-trail projects link several pieces of railroad, some of which are owned by private companies. Grant money would be better spent on rights of way from private railroad companies, they argued.

State Senator Cheryl Jacques, a Needham Democrat who heads the Senate Post Audit Committee, launched an investigation of the MBTA's land-use policies at about the same time that Kevin Sullivan, secretary of transportation, directed the agency to do more to encourage trails.

As a result, the T's board of directors quietly voted in June to allow municipal use of unused railways free of charge, and gave away two segments, to Plymouth and Peabody, last week.

"We worked for almost half a year," Jacques said. "We're thrilled that they're going to transfer these lands rather than selling them, so that communities have the tools they need."

Jacques and eight other officials dispatched a request to the MBTA's real estate director last week for the speedy release of the Saxonville Branch, and hope to see results in the next few months.

"Rail trails are a unique use, and they're hard to create," Jacques said. "One of the huge obstacles a community considers is the cost. The state should facilitate the giveaway of these properties to communities that are interested."

The MBTA isn't giving up the store, of course. Under the new policy, the T will retain valuable rights, for example to lay fiber-optic cable along the right of way, and ultimately, the power to reinstate rail service in the future.

The new policy "was born strictly out of a quality-of-life issue and a desire to work with local municipalities and create open space," said Mike Mulhern, the T's deputy general manager.

Officially, the T still wants towns to apply for federal grant money for right-of-way deals. "We will encourage the towns to apply for federal funding to help the MBTA," authority spokeswoman Lydia Rivera said. "The money will benefit the MBTA."

The agency is going through trying times. The state auditor is investigating the authority's dealings with the company that handles its real estate holdings, blasting it last week for spending more than \$2 million designing projects that he says the T never intended to build.

T officials are anxious to reap any sympathy they can through a pro-rail-trail policy.

Craig Della Penna, the New England representative to the Washington-based National Rails to Trails Organization, said the MBTA's policy had contributed to

Massachusetts's dismal record in building rail trails - the state ranks among the lowest in the nation in trail mileage.

"The MBTA saw a good pot of money and tried to sell rights of way to communities," Della Penna said. "Maybe they weren't thinking it through. The rights of way are already publicly owned. Why do we need to buy them twice?"

Barbara Lucas, a senior official at the Metropolitan Area Planning Council - the planning body responsible for coordinating alternative transportation projects like rail trails - said the T's attempt to charge for rights of way had delayed trail projects for many years.

"It would be great if the MBTA would take a look at this right of way in light of this new policy," Lucas said.

The change doesn't mean that rail trails will spring up all over the Boston area, though. Many planned trail networks cross property owned by private companies or other state agencies. And abandoned MBTA track must pass through a complex process before being declared surplus and opened up to local trail use.

Still, other rail-trail projects west of Boston might benefit from the MBTA's policy change. The proposed Watertown Branch Rail Trail, is one example since it passes over MBTA property.

Meanwhile, planners who have spent years envisioning a network of natural trails connecting to the Bay Circuit Trail and eventually linking Boston to Worcester are optimistic now that at least one major hurdle is out of the way.

Framingham sees the Saxonville Branch as the first gem in a beautiful crown. "There's going to be a quiet green path where people will be able to take walks during their lunch break from work. Eventually, we hope to have benches," said Bryan Taberner, a senior planner in Framingham. "It's not just a little neighborhood trail. It's going to be a regional system."

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