

Boston Globe West

Turning Railways into Bike Trails

A good idea whose time may never come, say some

By *Thanassis Cambanis, Globe Staff Correspondent, 6/21/2001*

The Holy Grail for rail-trail enthusiasts is a looping network of linear parks with bike paths converted from former railroad routes connecting the sea to the sprawling suburbs, linking communities divided by highways and byways and providing an alternative to congested sidewalks and jam-packed roads.

But the dream of an "emerald necklace" adorning Greater Boston, filled in by spokes of greenways and riverwalks, has stalled against the reality of a tortuously slow bureaucracy and a state government that ranks at the bottom nationally for tapping into federal trail funds.

Efforts to reach across municipal lines show how difficult it is to push projects through the authority vacuum created by overlapping state and local jurisdictions. But the rail-trails tale also provides some grounds for optimism for suburban and city advocates still struggling to give wing to their hopes.

"The state is firing blanks right now," said Senator Cheryl Jacques, a Needham Democrat. She issued a report from the Senate Post Audit and Oversight Committee last month calling on the MBTA, the state Highway Department, and the governor's office to tap into \$75 million in federal money available for alternative transportation projects.

"The interest is there on a local level," said Jacques, who is running for lieutenant governor. "Communities are incredibly frustrated by the state's unwillingness to work with them, and the state throwing up roadblocks."

The report blames the T and Mass Highway for not working flexibly and aggressively with communities to move trail projects forward and the state administration for not making alternative transportation projects a priority.

According to the report, 100 projects across the state await funding and review by Mass Highway. But the agency insists it supports rails-to-trails initiatives.

"Mass Highway has more than 90 bicycle facility projects in either development, design, or construction worth more than \$60 million all across the state," agency spokesman Doug Cope said. "Bike paths are a priority for Mass Highway Commissioner Matthew Amorello. He feels they're a very important means of improving our quality of life across Massachusetts and providing for an alternative means of transportation."

Mass Highway has spent about \$12.5 million on bikeways since 1991.

Still, what the report points to as sluggish support from the state has led some bike-trail advocates to fear that a unique chance might be lost to transform abandoned rail tracks and state-owned rights-of-way into serene havens.

"It's a one-shot deal. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to create a linear park, and it's a shame if we lose it because the green space was sold off for parking lots," said John Brennan, a Brighton resident who became a hard-core

advocate for the Cochituate Rail Trail when he discovered the potential to open up hitherto hidden natural routes through the area.

Examples abound of ambitious multicomunity projects that are languishing in the planning stages for want of quicker action by state agencies.

One is the Cochituate Rail Trail, a proposed 4-mile path that would link downtown Natick to Saxonville in Framingham, passing unobtrusively through some of the most developed shopping and office park developments of the Golden Triangle.

Another long-standing source of frustration is the Wayside Rail Trail, which would convert the old Central Massachusetts rail line into a path from the Waltham-Belmont line all the way to Berlin, running 23 miles and passing through Weston, Wayland, Sudbury, and Hudson. Weston has pulled out of the project, leaving a gap, and at several spots municipalities are waiting for the MBTA to turn over unused rights of way.

"We need a governor and a lieutenant governor to recognize this is an opportunity that is lost forever once you have rail trail interrupted," Jacques said. "If a parcel is sold off, it is forever ruined. It puts up a permanent obstacle for communities."

The Upper Charles Trail is a 24-mile loop that will begin at the Framingham Commuter Rail Station and pass through Sherborn, Holliston, Milford, Hopkinton, and Ashland. The Metropolitan Area Planning Council has conducted a feasibility study for this trail. Already, though, parts of the plan have fallen apart, including a stretch through Framingham on formerly abandoned tracks now being used by a car auction house.

Holliston has carefully planned its 6.7-mile section, and has waited at every stage for Mass Highway's approval.

"What's been dragging on is just the design decisions and that kind of thing," said Robert Weidknecht, chairman of the Holliston Trail Committee.

But Mass Highway, he said, is growing increasingly responsive to trail planners. "I don't know if they're feeling the heat from some political pressure, but it seems they're trying to be more accommodating," Weidknecht said.

Holliston wants to link to the Bay Circuit Trail - the so-called "Outer Emerald Necklace" running in an arc between Route 128 and Interstate 495 - and to planned bike trails in Millis and Medway.

Depending on how long Mass Highway takes to approve plans submitted this week, Holliston could break ground on its stretch in the spring.

It's that sort of uncertainty and slow planning that trail advocates say has produced Massachusetts' abysmal record in trail development.

"There's no big vision project in Massachusetts," said Craig Della Penna, New England representative for the Rails to Trails Conservancy. "There is no downside to these projects. They're a great tourist draw. They rejuvenate communities."

Mass Highway, Della Penna said, "likes to build roads." But the agency should look at neighboring states like Rhode Island and Connecticut, and create a bureaucratic structure that promotes rail trails.

Instead of a smattering of 2-mile tidbits, Della Penna said, the state needs to make good on ambitious plans like the Bay Circuit Trail, the Wayside, and the Assabet River Rail Trail.

Now, the grass-roots coalition battling for more trails has set other agencies and Beacon Hill in its sights. Mass Highway's standards, trail advocates say, are too inflexible and rigorous, requiring engineering reviews that might be appropriate for a highway but not for a bike or walking trail. The agency insists on paving paths, they say, when it would be cheaper and equally acceptable under the Americans with Disabilities Act to use crushed stone powder.

"Bike paths are not highways," Jacques said. "They don't have to have the same standards."

Last month's report underscores the opportunities for the state - without draining its own budget - to promote foot- and bike-paths through some of the most congested communities in Greater Boston. The 26-mile Cape Cod Rail Trail, built in the 1970s, shows the potential, advocates say, and should serve as inspiration to state transportation planners.

Della Penna said the state bureaucracy has improved, but not enough yet to repair Massachusetts' reputation among rail-trail advocates.

"Virtually every project has been held up," Della Penna said. "Everyone will tell you they've run into bureaucratic or other roadblocks at Mass Highway for their projects. Some people say it's the Big Dig, but I think it's just the culture, that these projects are not important to them. They only respond to major political pressure."

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