

# MetroWest Daily News

## Town Chugs Along with the Rail Trail

### Framingham moves ahead, but Natick is still blocked out of Cochituate line

*By John Gregg, MetroWest Daily News Staff Writer*

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FRAMINGHAM — Town officials this week said a \$100,000 grant from the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority will help Framingham open its portion of the Cochituate Rail Trail by the end of next summer.

"I was very happy when I heard about it," said Framingham senior planner Bryan Taberner, who said he believes small portions of the bike trail could open later this year.

"I think by September of 2002, the whole (Framingham section) will be open."

But the future of the Natick stretch of the rail trail remains uncertain.

The proposed 4-mile Cochituate Rail Trail would run from Natick Center to Framingham's Saxonville neighborhood, but most of the Natick portion is still an active rail line owned by CSX Corp.

Framingham officials said the Pike grant, announced Tuesday, would be used to help reconstruct two railroad bridges, clear the abandoned Framingham section of brush and lay down a stone-dust trail, install signs, improve access and make other improvements.

The \$100,000 grant ties as the largest award given this year by the Pike to 36 communities as part of an annual \$1.6 million program to boost tourism in communities near the toll road.

"It's a good proposal," said Pike spokesman Bob Bliss. "Obviously, we think this rail trail is a good idea, that's why we are insisting on carving out an easement."

About four-tenths of a mile of the Cochituate trail in Framingham will run along an 18-foot wide easement granted by the Pike, starting near the intersection of Speen Street and Rte. 30 and running under the highway.

The Pike acquired the land more than a decade ago for a proposed bus ramp that was never built.

Some rail-trail advocates have called for the Pike to give the entire right-of-way to Framingham for the bike path, saying it will otherwise detract from the proposed green "linear path" through MetroWest, screened by trees.

But the 80-foot wide Pike-owned swath is already used by several nearby businesses. A concrete plant stores cinderblocks on one portion, and TJX Cos. and other office buildings have built parking lots on some of the land. The Pike plans to sell the rest of the land.

The Metropolitan Area Planning Council this week wrote a letter to state officials calling for the transfer of the entire Pike right-of-way to the Cochituate trail, saying it would contribute to a “well-buffered scenic trail.”

“It’s an opportunity to ‘green’ a very heavily developed area,” said Joan Blaustein, the MAPC land-resources planner who specializes in bike paths.

But Bliss said the Pike was meeting the “industry standard “by granting Framingham a free, 18-foot wide easement, which would allow six feet for a lane in each direction and an additional three-foot buffer on each side. The easement would be the same width as the popular Minuteman Trail that runs from Cambridge to Bedford, Bliss said.

The Pike, which is expected to increase tolls for MetroWest commuters to help pay for the Big Dig, also wants to at least recover its \$100,000 investment in buying the right-of-way more than a decade ago.

“We are interested in non-toll revenue, as you know. We are interested in a way to recoup the investment, and at the same time do something we think is important (by granting an easement),” Bliss said.

And Taberner, the Framingham planner, said it would be impractical to force abutters off part of the Pike right-of-way they have used for years.

“We’re not losing anything by allowing people to purchase this while we have this free easement we can use,” said Taberner, who noted the land would generate tax revenue for the town once it is sold by the Pike.

The rail trail would run past some parking lots and cross a TJX back driveway — requiring stop signs on the trail — but would pass through an open stretch of wetlands before reaching the Pike, Taberner said.

“You’re not going to have cars and bikes fighting over the same square feet. It would only happen at a driveway or road crossing,” Taberner said. “Overall, I think everything is working out very nicely.”

Although Framingham is making progress on the Cochituate trail, neighboring Natick may have a wait on its hands.

Three freight trains a week use the CSX line to service Metro Freezer and Storage on Chrysler Road in Natick. And while CSX plans to abandon at least two other rail spurs in MetroWest, the railroad has made no such announcement about the Natick line.

“The Natick section is still up in the air,” Taberner said. “Unless CSX says ‘yes, you can develop a trail here’, they’re not going to be able to use it.”

Peter Lewis, the president of Metro Freezer, said the company relies heavily on the refrigerated rail cars to move its frozen seafood, fruit and vegetables.

“That’s why we went to Natick in the first place,” said Lewis. “We needed another rail facility, and that was perfect for us.”

Lewis said local companies, including The Whipple Co., maker of Grandmother's Mincemeat, and Breyers ice cream, also rely on Metro Freezer products shipped by rail.

Contrary to statements from some rail-trail backers, CSX is interested in expanding its business along the rail line, according to Lewis.

"They have no intentions of abandoning the track, and they do not think it's a safe situation to run (a bike trail) along the side," Lewis said.

Sarkis Sarkisian, Natick's community development director, said that while rail service to the Wonder Bread site off Speen Street ended when the bakery closed two years ago, the town has not asked CSX to abandon the active rail line since Metro Freezer still uses the track.

"We haven't approached CSX with a formal letter," Sarkisian said. "We've never had a formal proposal from them to abandon the line."

Despite the uncertainty about the Natick stretch, bike enthusiasts welcomed the Pike grant for the Framingham portion.

"One word — dynamite," said A. Richard Miller, the vice chairman of the Cochituate State Park Advisory Committee and a leading supporter of the bike path. "It's big, great, wonderful news."

Miller also downplayed the fact that the rail trail currently has no rights to the CSX right-of-way in Natick, saying he was confident the railroad would eventually drop the line.

"All these operations say 'no, no, no' until it's all done, then they say 'yes'," Miller said.

And Miller, who has long criticized the Pike's plan to sell its land to private landowners, again said "a wider easement would be a tremendous benefit to Framingham and everyone who benefits from the trail."