

Boston Globe West

Shades of Green: Open Land or Money

Rail trail offers turnpike board difficult choice

By Thanassis Cambanis, Globe Staff Correspondent, 10/9/2001

The Cochituate Rail Trail is supposed to cut a clean, green slice through a sea of office buildings and congested roadways, and A. Richard Miller doesn't want to see the ambitious blueprint tossed aside in favor of broader parking lots.

In a heated hearing before the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority advisory board last week, business owners clashed with trail activists and their political allies over a valuable four-tenths of a mile stretch of land running from The Home Depot on the Framingham-Natick line to the turnpike.

When the Turnpike Advisory Board takes up the matter again at its November meeting, it will have to weigh the arguments of the swelling coalition of trail advocates against those of four businesses that want to buy most of the 65- to 80-foot-wide right of way and leave an 18-foot easement for the Cochituate Rail Trail.

"We have to be very careful to represent the public interest in this," said Miller, vice chairman of the Cochituate State Park advisory committee. "The question is whether that stretch will be a narrow alley between extended parking lots or a beautiful greenway with screening."

Four businesses have been leasing land that lies on the planned Cochituate Rail Trail.

"We paid dearly for that site," said Stan Oldfield, a vice president of TJX Co., referring to the corporate headquarters on Speen Street next to the proposed bike trail. "A bicycle path coming across our entrance and exit is going to create chaos. Somebody's going to get killed."

Oldfield said TJX would support a bike path routed behind the company's property.

While Miller said trail activists would consider a proposal to put "two giant loops in what's supposed to be a straight line," any rerouting of the Cochituate Rail Trail "would be a major disservice to the public interest."

"Its value as a future transportation corridor depends on it being a straight shot," Miller said.

Susan Luchetti and Ron Bello, who own abutting property, also spoke against using the entire right of way for a bike path and taking it away from businesses now using parts of it for parking.

Trail advocates who are determined to use the entire width would not only choke commerce, Bello argued, but are being just plain unrealistic about the land quality of the four-tenths of a mile stretch in question.

"This is a weedway, not a greenway," said Bello, owner of an office building located at 160 Speen St. "It's an ugly piece of property. It will cost lots of money to flatten it out."

Undeterred by those arguments, fans of the trail - including state senators, state representatives, selectmen, and planning board members from Wayland, Natick, and Framingham - spoke of the longterm importance of preserving for the public the right of way purchased for \$100,000 a decade ago. "This land originally went to the Turnpike Authority because it was purchased with public funds," Natick Selectman Jay Ball said. "Returning the land to the citizens who paid for it is an idea that sits well with me and the Board of Selectmen."

Several governmental boards and elected officials submitted letters to the Turnpike Authority asking that the entire right of way be given to the bike path, including the Framingham Board of Selectmen, the Natick Board of Selectmen and Planning Board, and state Senators Cheryl Jacques, a Needham Democrat, David Magnani, a Framingham Democrat, and Pamela Resor, an Acton Democrat.

The Turnpike Authority, already under attack for anticipated toll increases, is now facing strong political pressure from the same Beacon Hill coalition that last year successfully pressured the MBTA to change its policy and offer surplus rail beds to local communities before selling them on the open market.

"You're going to get a lot of knocks when the tolls go up," Sierra Club member Gilbert K. Woolley said. "The Massachusetts Turnpike Authority doesn't have a very good image. Maybe by making this land available you can generate some good will."

With open space at a premium in increasingly congested suburbs, more and more towns are looking for ways to create more recreational areas.

"If we give up this green space, I'm afraid it will be gone forever," Wayland Selectman Linda L. Segal said.

When the Turnpike Advisory Board votes next month, it will weigh the concerns of the trail advocates against the commercial interests of the four property owners, who would pay the Turnpike Authority to buy the land surrounding the planned trail.

"They want to give it away for nothing and they've got people willing to pay good money," said Alvin Nathanson, an attorney for Luchetti. "Does that make any sense in this day and age?"

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