

# MetroWest Daily News

## Cochituate Rail Trail Chugs Along

### Framingham section could open next spring

By **Charlie Breitrose**, Staff Writer

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A group of volunteers recently cleared trees and brush from Framingham's section of the Cochituate Rail Trail, but walkers, runners and bicyclists still have to wait a while before the path is usable.

The 4-mile trail, running from Natick Center to Saxonville, will provide a natural setting for people to exercise, stroll and even commute to work.

Before the trail opens, the town has to receive access from the current owners of the former railroad line - the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority and the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA).

Many people, including Mara Yale, can't wait until next spring, when, officials hope, the matter is settled, and the trail can open to the public.

When the weather is nice, Yale, enjoys riding her bicycle from her Saxonville home to her workplace, The MathWorks in Natick. Currently she must navigate through the slew of cars on her way the software company's Rte. 9 offices.

"I ride on Rte. 27 now, which is kind of scary," she said.

But once the rail trail is complete, she plans to ride through the forested area, and avoid cars flying by, making the commute safer and enjoyable.

Yale, the chairman of Framingham's Cochituate Rail Trail Committee, said the path will be a boon for many others living and working nearby. The Framingham part of the trail ends near the intersection of Rte. 30 and Speen Street.

"There are a lot of businesses on Speen that could use it for commuters or for exercise during lunchtime walks," Yale said.

On Oct. 20 trail enthusiasts had a major breakthrough, said A. Richard Miller, chairman of the Natick Bicycle and Pedestrian Committee and rail trail advocate.

"We had a milestone," he explained. "We broke through to Rte. 30 cutting through 10 years of overgrowth."

While the natural obstacles are cleared, the political ones continue to halt progress. They stand in the way of opening the trail from the Mass Pike, south to the Framingham/Natick border.

The Turnpike Authority bought two-fifths of a mile of the former rail line from the MBTA in 1991. Pike officials granted the town an 18-foot-wide easement, but some trail proponents want use of the whole width, which ranges from 65- to 80-feet wide.

"We want to create a greenway instead of an alley," Miller said.

Miller worries that the rest of the easement will be sold to abutting companies, and developed.

If the town gets use of the whole width, Miller said, it could also remove a wall of concrete blocks stacked on part of the Pike's land by New England Sand and Gravel Co.

Bryan Taberner, Framingham's senior planner, said the 18-foot easement, which widens to 24 feet near the border of the two towns, still works.

"The 18- to 24-foot easement is sufficient to design a safe multi-use trail," Taberner said. "The path passes by a few parking lots, which is normal for an urban area like we live in."

Some concern about the stretch has been voiced by TJX Cos. Inc., which has its headquarters at the intersection of Speen Street and the Pike.

"The existing plans call for the path to cross a couple driveways at TJX," Taberner said. "There is heavy traffic there, but there are ways to design it to have bicycle and pedestrian stop signs at the driveways."

Instead of cars yielding to pedestrians, the traffic signs would flip things around to give cars the right of way, Taberner said.

TJX has suggested alternative routes for the path so that it does not cross the driveways. One plan would put the path behind the company's property, Taberner said.

"As far as going around the back side of TJX, we will sit down and talk with them," Taberner said.

A few other safety concerns on the Saxonville portion of the trail have to be taken care of before it can open, Taberner said.

"It crosses School Street and Old Connecticut Path, a very busy road," Taberner said. "We're looking at putting in pedestrian crossing signals."

Also, two bridges over Cochituate Creek must be repaired before the path can opened. Yale said parts of the old rail bridges have rotted through.

Two months ago, the Turnpike Authority gave Framingham a \$100,000 grant to reconstruct the railroad bridges, clear brush and lay down a stone-dust trail, install signs, improve access and make other improvements.

Using the path now would be considered trespassing, although some people do it, Miller said.

"Kids have been biking out there for years and I know people who commute on it everyday, but it's illegal," Miller said.

So far, the MBTA and the Pike Authority have only given limited access to the trail, Taberner said, but he hopes to open it soon.

"We've been given temporary access to build the trail," Taberner said. "By spring we will give the public access to the trail."

While plans are set to open the Framingham section soon, the Natick portion may not be available for a long time because CSX still runs its trains on the tracks.

Freight trains use the Natick tracks three times a week to service Metro Freezer and Storage on Chrysler Road.

Miller said his dream of a path through the beautiful woods of the MetroWest from Natick to Framingham will be partially fulfilled soon. The other part will have to wait for some time.

"In Framingham we're going to have it and have it soon," Miller said. "In Natick we're going to have it (but) later."