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Land Sale Plan Angers Trail Advocates

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Supporters of a wider rail trail through Natick and Framingham yesterday expressed dismay that the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority's development staff wants the authority to sell open space to compensate for delayed toll revenues.

"They're talking about blowing a project that will provide a linear park for a century for a trivial amount of money," said trail advocate A. Richard Miller. In question is a 65- to 80-foot-wide right of way from Home Depot in Natick on Route 30 to the north side of the turnpike.

The half-mile stretch is part of a proposed Cochituate Rail Trail, which would convert four miles of freight railway into a recreational park.

The authority however, wants to sell most of the half-mile stretch under its control to abutters, since it paid \$100,000 for the right of way about a decade ago, and give an 18-foot easement for the rail trail - a decision that has angered some suburban legislators and trail advocates who believe that land held by a state authority should be preserved for public use.

Stephen Hines, the Turnpike Authority's chief development officer, recommended to the authority's board of directors on Tuesday that it vote to sell most of the right of way. At the same meeting, the board of directors postponed until July toll increases on the turnpike extension and the Boston Harbor Tunnel.

A group of suburban legislators has written to the authority criticizing any move to sell the land. The group includes Senators Cheryl Jacques of Needham David Magnani of Framingham, and Pamela Resor of Acton, and Representative David Linksy of Natick, all Democrats.

"Some of these same legislators were arguing that the turnpike should keep tolls down," Hines said. "One way the turnpike can keep tolls down is by selling surplus property."

But Magnani said the two issues should not be linked.

"It's just not relevant in this particular case because the numbers are so vastly different," he said. "We're talking about a \$60 million problem on one hand with the tolls and a piece of property assessed at less than \$100,000 on the other hand. I don't see how in the real world you can relate those two problems."

Negotiations between Framingham, the authority, abutters, and state agencies should produce a better solution than an 18-foot easement for the trail, he added.

Meanwhile, even as Hines was making his recommendation to the authority's highest decision-making body, the advisory board has yet to take a stand after a contentious public hearing on the issue last month.

The advisory board, chaired by Mel Willens, a former Natick selectman, will meet Wednesday in Charlton to hear from the authority's professional staff and issue a final recommendation to the board of directors.

“We can say whatever we want to say,” Willens said, explaining that the advisory board was not bound to concur with the authority's professional staff.

Hines said an 18-foot easement through the right of way provides plenty of room for a recreational trail while at the same time generating profits from abutting businesses like TJX Co., which are eager to buy or lease the land.

But to Miller, tolls and open space should remain completely separate issues, and he expressed hope that the authority's professional staff wasn't trying to make an end run around the public hearing process.

“They'll leave an alleyway instead of a greenway for the trail,” Miller said. “Holding on to the public's open space is critical. There's still time to find out how to round up \$100,000 instead of auctioning off the property.”

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