

## Boston Globe West

### Trail Plan Gets a Boost from Turnpike Official

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To a casual observer, the weedy, dusty sliver of land that separates a concrete-mixing plant from a service station at Route 30 and Speen Street is nothing more than an unsightly gap between two businesses.

But proponents of a 4-mile recreational trail in Framingham and Natick see the slice - which extends a half-mile from the Exxon station to the Massachusetts Turnpike - as a key piece in their plan for a swath of pastoral beauty. Now the backers of the so-called Cochituate Rail Trail have apparently wrung a significant concession from the owner of the land, the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority. An official with the authority, which bought the 65- to 80-foot-wide right of way about a decade ago, said he will recommend that the agency's board of directors widen the easement that it plans to provide for the trail.

Originally, the authority had agreed to an 18-foot-wide easement for a biking and walking path. But proponents of the trail said that would have provided too little room for trees and bushes to hide neighboring businesses.

This week, Stephen Hines, the authority's chief development officer, said he plans to recommend that the board widen the easement to 24 feet for most of the path and to 32 feet along the 300-foot stretch that runs behind the service station.

The authority wants to sell the entire half-mile swath to four neighboring businesses, including TJX Co. and Rosenfeld Concrete Co. But the easement granted to the Town of Framingham would permanently reserve the 24-foot-wide path for recreation.

"If people feel strongly about having more width for the bike trail, we think we can accommodate that," Hines said. "We think there's a way to do that and still have a sufficient amount of property to interest and benefit the abutters."

The neighboring businesses hope to use unrestricted sections of the right of way for parking or as buffer zones, Hines said.

He stressed that the board of directors would need to approve the widening of the easement, but he expected to make the recommendation when the board meets within several weeks.

One of the most vocal advocates of the trail, A. Richard Miller, said the concession was a step in the right direction, but still inadequate. He said the 24-foot-wide easement would set aside enough space for walking and bicycling, but not enough for the greenway envisioned by trail proponents.

"It's plenty for the path," said Miller, chairman of the Natick Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committee. "It's not enough for the greenway." He wants the Turnpike Authority to transfer control of the entire right of way to a public agency so that people can enjoy all of it as an oasis. "We want the full width," he said.

The proposed Cochituate Rail Trail, which would convert about 4 miles of current and former freight railway into a park, is part of a growing nationwide movement of rail-to-trail conversions.

Bicyclist and pedestrian advocates have created nearly 12,000 miles of rail-trails nationwide. In New England, the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, with help from various states, has created nearly 1,000 miles of hiking trails, most rolling through rural and suburban areas, but some in urban areas as well.

Mara Yale, chairwoman of the Framingham-Cochituate Rail Trail Committee, said some 10,000 people live and work within a 10-minute walk of the proposed rail trail in Framingham, creating an enormous appetite for the park.