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FRAMINGHAM

Rail Trail Effort Takes Step in Right Direction

By Jenn Abelson, *Globe Staff Correspondent*, 4/18/2003

Efforts to turn an abandoned railway into a green lane for hikers, bikers, and the like are finally making headway as Framingham officials finalize an agreement with the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority that would grant an easement to the town and break a three-year standstill on the proposed Cochituate Rail Trail.

Town officials said they expect to secure approval within a month from Framingham's Board of Selectmen and the authority. This would allow work to begin on a portion of the bike path owned by the turnpike as early as the summer.

Calling the accord the most significant progress since the idea was conceived years ago, Bryan Taberner, a senior planner for the town, said, "It's been a long time coming."

The proposed rail trail would run along 4.6 miles of abandoned railway from Sudbury to Framingham, but the easement being granted affects only four-tenths of a mile running from the Home Depot on the Framingham-Natick line to the turnpike.

Although trail proponents are pleased to see progress, many are disappointed that the entire 65- to 80-foot right of way is not being preserved for the path.

Despite efforts to persuade the authority to grant the full right of way, the agreement under final review leaves only 24 feet for most of the path and 32 feet along a stretch that runs behind the service station.

Rail trail advocates, along with political allies including state Senators David Magnani and Cheryl Jacques, have contended that this raises safety concerns and provides too little room for trees and bushes to hide neighboring businesses.

Still, the easement being considered is larger than the 18-foot-wide greenway the authority was initially willing to grant.

"The ideal situation would be to preserve the full corridor for the public, but it's better than the original proposal," said Mara Yale, chairwoman of the Framingham Cochituate Rail Trail Committee, a group appointed by the Board of Selectmen. "This is quite a bit of progress."

After the easement is granted, the authority is planning to auction off the rest of the land to recoup the \$100,000 it paid for the railway nearly a decade ago. Framingham has already expressed that it cannot afford to purchase the land, leaving abutting businesses, including TJX Co. and Rosenfeld Concrete Co., as the likely bidders. Although vertical buildings will not be permitted on this right of way, at this time, there are no provisions to prevent businesses from expanding their parking lots up to the trail.

"Everybody is quite familiar with the financial pinch. It seems like good fiscal stewardship to try and recover money, and at same time, come up with an

easement that allows the trail to go through there," said Bob Bliss, a spokesman for the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority.

Auctioning off the land is estimated to bring in between \$200,000 and \$500,000. Bliss said he expects the authority to sign off on the easement within a month.

"I think it's very exciting. The end is in sight now," said Jacques, who added that she will continue lobbying the authority to reconsider auctioning off the land.

In addition to political pressure, grassroots efforts are underway to preserve the full right of way for the bike path. A. Richard Miller, chairman of the Natick Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committee, said he is considering raising funds locally to outbid businesses.

Rail trail advocates are hoping that the authority's approval of the easement - whatever its width - facilitates negotiations with the MBTA, which owns land adjacent to the proposed Cochituate Rail Trail.

In the meantime, Framingham has already secured a \$100,000 grant from the authority to develop the bike path, along with a volunteer architect. This summer, Yale is hoping to start surfacing the trail and installing signs.

"This is going to be a nice resource for the town when it's done," Taberner said. "Accepting this easement is the right thing to do."

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