

Natick taking steps on rail trail

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By Jennifer Fenn Lefferts, 9/7/2006
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

A. Dick Miller envisions a 4-mile path of green space running from downtown Natick through Cochituate State Park, past the Natick Mall, and across the northern part of Framingham to its Saxonville village.

The trail would travel along a trout stream, past former mills and historic Indian landmarks, forming "a linear park that's stretched long instead of wide," Miller said.

The proposed Cochituate Rail Trail would provide recreational activities for people while also giving commuters another transportation option, said Miller, chairman of the Natick Bicycle and Pedestrian Committee.

A dream of Miller's for more than a decade, the Natick portion - about 2 miles - of the project is slowly starting to move out of the station.

The owner of the former railroad track right-of-way in Natick, the CSX Corp., is taking steps to officially abandon the line, said Patrick Reffett, the town's community development director.

The Board of Selectmen was expected to establish a task force on Tuesday to study the issue and formulate a plan to buy the land. The town has 180 days from Aug. 16 to forge an agreement with CSX or the easements for the rail line will revert to the original property owners, Reffett said.

The task force would arrange an environmental evaluation of the site, get an appraisal, and come up with a basic design for the trail, as well as look into funding sources for the project, Reffett said. The town has written to state Transportation Secretary John Cogliano to see if there are state funds the town could pursue.

"We look forward to a project that has great benefit to the general public and not just our community," Reffett said. The task force would include a selectman and one member each from the Planning Board, Open Space Committee, Conservation Commission, Bike and Pedestrian Advisory Committee, and Recreation and Parks Commission.

Selectman Joshua Ostroff said the task force is necessary because it's a large project that will require Natick's boards and departments to work with each other as well as with their counterparts in Framingham and state and federal officials.

He said the town also must be cognizant of the residents who live alongside the proposed bike trail and listen to their concerns.

"The trail holds great promise because it goes through some of the most beautiful parts of Natick that you don't get to see unless you're on a rail car or trespassing," Ostroff said. "But if a rail trail is to become a reality, it will require some coordination, education, and outside assistance."

Organizers in the neighboring town hope to open a section of the trail next year, said Mark Lamkin, chairman of the Framingham Cochituate Rail Trail Committee. The Framingham portion of the railbed was abandoned some time ago, giving the town a head start on plans for the trail, Lamkin said.

The Massachusetts Turnpike Authority, which owns a section of the trail in Framingham, is expected to review design plans next month for a three-quarter-mile stretch between Old Connecticut Path and Route 30, Lamkin said. The town is still working on a lease agreement for the other section in Framingham, which is owned by the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority.

Residents can learn more about the project at two events in the next several days, Miller said. His group will be setting up a booth with maps and brochures detailing the proposal on Saturday as part of Natick Days festivities on the town common, and the Morse Institute Library on East Central Street is hosting a program on rail trails at 7 p.m. Monday.

"In Natick, I think we have a lot of people who know about it and more who don't know about it," Miller said. "We want to get more people involved."

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