
Holmes: Parks for the 21st century

By Rick Holmes/Opinion editor
GHS
Sun Jul 15, 2007, 12:28 AM EDT

MILFORD -

A couple in their 20s glides by on roller blades, heading south where the trail runs beside Louisa Lake. They pass a couple in their 40s, on a leisurely stroll headed north. A family - two parents, two kids - ride by on bicycles.

This is the park for the 21st century, built on the back of 19th century railroads. If your town doesn't already have a rail trail, there's probably one in the works.

A century ago, we built parks to give hard-working people in crowded tenements a place to go where they could sit in the shade of a tree and have a picnic. We added ballfields of varied shapes to accommodate organized games, and we're still adding them as more kids get organized into more teams.

But most of us have backyards and decks for our picnics. We don't need places to sit; we need places where we can get the exercise we no longer get on the job.

Hence the rail trail, the best kind of park for a sedentary age. The linear park gives people an environment to be enjoyed while moving. It's a playing field that allows each player to participate at his or her own pace, a way for people, whether on legs or wheels, to get farther from traffic and closer to nature.

This section, which runs 3.5 miles from downtown Milford to the other side of Rte. 495, connects parks and conservation lands. It goes by Fino Field, the site of carnivals and American Legion Baseball games, and alongside the marshes of Cedar Swamp. A spur connects the trail to the Milford Senior Center, for good reason. We've got an aging population, and walking is great exercise for the elderly. The trail is wide and nicely paved - a great place for those who use wheelchairs.

On a leisurely walk on a recent weekend, I pass a pickup volleyball game. A man is fishing off a bridge near Cedar Swamp, his tiny daughter sleeping in a stroller nearby. The trail passes by a small town-run pool teeming with youngsters.

The Milford section, the first part of the Upper Charles Rail Trail to officially open, is being put to good use. Eventually, the trail will form a 20-mile loop through Holliston, Sherborn, Ashland, Hopkinton and Milford.

The Assabet Valley Rail Trail has been getting good use for more than two years. The section from downtown Marlborough through downtown Hudson features scenic riverside rides, bridges over the Assabet and a bright blue caboose. The initial six miles will eventually be extended through Stow, Maynard and Acton.

The most interesting rail trail project in the works may be the Cochituate Rail Trail, which will run from Framingham's Saxonville neighborhood to downtown Natick. Like all rail trails, it will be a great recreational amenity. But it also holds the potential to be a significant transportation asset.

The Cochituate rail connect important destinations, like Framingham High School, the Natick Mall and Cochituate State Park. It will connect to transportation hubs, including the downtown Natick commuter rail station, the Mass. Pike and Logan Express. It will pass by Natick's three largest employers: the mall, Boston Scientific and Natick Labs. It will also connect the residents of 1,000 units of new housing planned in the Speen Street area to, well, wherever they want to go.

Think of all the car trips that could be removed from the overcrowded roads of the Golden Triangle if people made their connections by the rail trail. Because of its transportation potential, Natick officials have begun exploring whether the trail could accommodate some kind of small, electric buses by people who don't want to work up a sweat on their way to the office.

The Cochituate Rail Trail is many years from completion - the process of getting a rail trail built is "tectonic," Natick selectman and trail backer Josh Ostroff says - but progress is being made. Rails and ties have already been removed on the Framingham section, and CSX, which owns the Natick section, will start removing rails and ties this month. New developments, including the Natick Collection - also known as the mall - are incorporating trail access into their plans.

The toughest part is locking up the rights-of-way. The railroads have been abandoned for decades - and no one envisions them coming back on these lines - but nobody wants to give away something for nothing. After years of negotiation, the Mass. Turnpike Authority leased trail access to its part of the Framingham section and the MBTA is moving in the same direction. CSX, which owns the Natick section, wants more than \$14 million to give it up, a figure town officials hope is just a negotiating tactic. That figure may come down, especially if the transaction can piggyback negotiations between the state and CSX over the commuter rail line to Worcester.

There are other hurdles. Building a good rail trail can cost from \$400,000 to \$1 million a mile even once the right-of-way is secured. There's often resistance from neighbors who prefer de-facto ownership of the abandoned tracks at the foot of their backyards over the prospect of hundreds of hikers and cyclists disturbing their peace.

Weston shot down a rail trail years ago amid fears that poor people from Waltham would cart off their TV sets on the back of their bikes. Some residents in Concord and Sudbury are resisting a trail that would eventually run from Lowell to Framingham, protesting that the rail bed isn't scenic enough for a good trail and that the bike-riders will disturb spotted turtles along the way.

A recent Boston Globe report on the phenomenon seemed more than a little overwrought. After all, crime is often a problem in public parks - so have the police patrol them. Incidental physical contact happens in soccer games and doubles tennis, but it's no reason to lock up the playgrounds. Users are perfectly capable of teaching and enforcing trail etiquette.

The good news is that rail trails are being used, which is more than you can say for many of our older parks, which are often deserted. Today's kids turn down their noses at the town beach if they can use a friend's pool instead. The days when children spent summer days playing pickup baseball on the town fields are long gone. Outside of Little League season, the fields mostly grow grass, not Major League dreams.

But the rail trails are hopping, providing fresh air, sociability, scenic views and a cardio workout to people of all ages. This summer, get out and give one a try.

(Rick Holmes is opinion editor for the MetroWest Daily News. He can be reached at rholmes@cnc.com.)