

A bumpy road for recreational trail

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Natick stretch stalls as Framingham picks up speed

By Michele Morgan Bolton
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For years, supporters of a proposed 4-mile recreational trail from Saxonville in Framingham to Natick Center have pushed to acquire the abandoned railroad beds that form its route, linking scenic vistas with practical destinations like an MBTA commuter station, area employers, and even neighborhoods split by highways. Framingham officials are close to securing access to their town's section of the trail, but progress has been stymied by stalled negotiations to acquire the stretch through Natick.

Plans for the Cochituate Rail Trail envision it cutting alongside heavily trafficked areas in both towns, meandering past streams and wetlands, and along the shores of Lake Cochituate.

The trail could offer area residents easy access to walking, biking, and cross-country skiing, with all their restorative and recreational benefits, supporters say. They say the trail also could encourage commuters to leave their cars behind, in part because of its connection to the T's Natick Center commuter rail station. Add up the workers at the Natick Collection, the Army's Natick Labs, Boston Scientific, and two locations of the TJX Co., and the number of people who could use the bike trail to get to work grows considerably, advocates stress.

Framingham is moving on its 1.5-mile leg of the project after "treading water" for a few years, said Mark Lamkin, chairman of the town committee overseeing the effort. Agreement is close on a 99-year lease for access to land owned by the MBTA, and an easement is in place for land owned by the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority, Lamkin said. "And it hasn't cost us a cent," he added. "Now, we can start making really great plans to march forward."

A \$100,000 state tourism grant will pay for Framingham's trail design, Lamkin said.

A small section of the larger trail, between Old Connecticut Path and Route 30, should open by year's end, he said, assisted partly by proceeds from sales of John Harvard's Brew House's trademark "Rail Trail Ale." "That has been a really popular item," Lamkin said.

Framingham Town Manager Julian Suso lauded his town's committee for doing "a terrific job" of moving trail plans forward, especially since it will offer access to alternative modes of transportation.

"It's extraordinary," Suso said. "We'll offer as many alternatives as we can, that are safe and reasonable, to residents and nonresidents."

There has been less progress in Natick, where the \$14 million-plus asking price by railroad giant CSX Corp., which owns the trail's 2.5-mile stretch in Natick, has prompted sticker shock. After a March vote approving a \$3.9 million Proposition 2 1/2 override, town officials are seeking their own estimate of the land's value before reentering talks with CSX.

Natick has issued a request for appraisals, with the bids due within a few weeks, Selectman Josh Ostroff stated in an e-mail. "After which we will award a contract and have a report in 90 days that estimates the value of the property. From there, we begin to negotiate with CSX," he wrote.

Natick's 15-member Cochituate Rail Trail Task Force was formed in 2006, after CSX dropped its freight service along the stretch of track. Town Meeting approved funding for environmental testing, surveying, and title research. A survey revealed broad support among some residents, and concerns about privacy and safety

among others.

CSX spokesman Bob Sullivan said the company is waiting for Natick's counter-appraisal. "We're certainly willing to work with them," he said.

The trail would run from near Framingham High School southeast along Cochituate Brook, cross Old Connecticut Path at a pedestrian-operated traffic signal, pass the Cochituate Brook Reservation, run under the Massachusetts Turnpike and its Exit 13 ramp, and hit the town's border at Route 30, near Home Depot and Cochituate State Park, where the Natick leg would begin.

It would then go southeast along the shore of Lake Cochituate, across a lake embankment, over Route 9 on the existing rail bridge, and through several residential neighborhoods to the commuter station in Natick Center; a side trail would skirt Speen Street businesses and branch over to the Natick Collection mall.

Natick task force member A. Richard Miller and others are frustrated at the slow pace of the project. A bicycling and outdoors enthusiast, Miller said town officials are too caught up in the process, thus impeding forward motion. "We've done everything but get down to brass tacks," he said.

"This is surplus property," Miller said. "A word from the governor's office would totally change the schedule on this. That's what the discussion should be, not whether the trail is paved or not. We're stuck in policy-making mode and pushing people away."

The chairwoman of the Natick task force, Karla Sangrey, did not return a call for comment.

Natick's dilemma isn't unique. When the Marlborough-Hudson section of the 12.5-mile Assabet River Rail Trail was completed last year, it came in at three times its estimated cost of \$2.8 million.

The Cochituate trail is one of a number of similar projects across the state. Recently, the state Department of Conservation and Recreation, which oversees 145 miles of bike and recreation trails, approved a 99-year lease with the MBTA for 26 miles of abandoned railway between Waltham and Berlin. Plans call for it to become a portion of the 104-mile Massachusetts Central Rail Trail, running from Waltham to Northampton.

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