

Framingham rail trail plan may require review

By Dan McDonald/Daily News staff

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FRAMINGHAM — For trying to breathe life into a vacant Saxonville parcel, Tony Kwan's plans to convert an unused lumberyard into a gym, medical offices, and retail space have garnered praise.

But an environmental consulting firm specializing in rail trails is crying foul and calling for the state to review the project.

Craig Della Penna of Greenway Solutions says state law requires any project built next to or on top of former railroad corridors to go before the state's Executive Office of Transportation.

The proposed Cochituate Rail Trail is a 4-mile path leading from Saxonville to Natick Center. One of its end points is near a defunct lumberyard.

"Whenever you build something in Massachusetts next to or on top of a former railroad corridor you have to have a hearing," said Della Penna yesterday. "This is something that needs to be addressed."

Della Penna also wants the trail to directly connect with a park that is planned for the site. He is also pushing for a "proper crossing" to be installed on School Street that could accommodate the estimated 250,000 users the trail could attract when it's finished.

While the project is before at least two town boards, no state hearing has been scheduled.

Timothy Doherty, director of rail programs for the Executive Office of Transportation, confirmed yesterday he has yet to review the project and didn't express an opinion.

"I don't want to get into a project I haven't seen yet," he said.

The town's building department deferred comment to the town's lawyer. A call to that office was not returned.

The 5.7-acre piece of land at 2 School St. was a working lumberyard 13 years ago, Kwan said. Renovations could start as early as this spring.

Kwan says he will put his own money into the site for the betterment of the community, including \$250,000 for a small park to allow people to enjoy the Sudbury River that curls around the property. He also said he gave the town \$500,000 worth of land to widen Concord Street.

He designed the project, which will be dominated by a health club and medical offices, to have a minimal impact on traffic, said Kwan.

"I could have just sold the place, made money and ran," he said yesterday. "I've put my heart and soul into this project."

The property is assessed at \$1.7 million.

In the fall, Friends of Saxonville member Jim Barry called the project "the kind of development we need in Saxonville."

Mark Lamkin, chairman of the Cochituate Rail Trail Committee, had similar sentiments.

Asked if he shared Della Penna's view, Lamkin said, "That's a tough one because we love Tony's project. We think it could revitalize the area with that health club."

The committee's Web site says construction of the trail could begin in 2009.

Of Della Penna's push for state review, Kwan said, "We live in a democratic society and people can say whatever they want."

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