

12/14/07

The Topsfield Rail Trail Committee Responds To the Coalition for Neighborhood Information

This letter is a response by the Topsfield Rail Trail Committee (TRTC) to an hour long Coalition for Neighborhood Information (CNI) presentation made at the Topsfield Selectmen's meeting on Oct. 29, 2007 by Bob and Cathy Morgan.

The CNI asked what would be the cost for design and maintenance of the Topsfield Linear Common (TLC) recreational path on the abandoned rail bed. Only recently (at the Oct. 9th Selectmen's meeting) was the \$40,000 Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) grant authorization signed. This grant, plus the \$2,000 Essex National Heritage Commission (ENHC) grant will be used for design, costing, and possibly construction of Phase IA (from Washington to Main Streets), and possibly, Phase IB from Main St. to Summer St.

The CNI has requested that the entire trail be designed and costs determined before any part of the TLC is built. The TRTC considers this unnecessary and delaying phased development of the trail is illogical. Constructing the trail in phases will allow citizens to use and enjoy each section of the trail as it is completed, just as motorists use sections of a new road before the design and construction of the entire road is completed. The TRTC was created by the Selectmen with the understanding that the committee would not use Town funds for trail construction. Phased development using grants, as they become available, is the logical approach in this environment. The two grants we applied for and received involve matches of 20% for the DCR grant and 100% for the ENHC grant. These matches may be in several forms including cash donations, donated materials and services, and volunteer time spent by the TRTC with other citizens in developing the trail. We have satisfied the Selectmen regarding the required grant matches achievable through the TRTC's fundraising activities. The Selectmen have approved the application for another DCR grant for Phase II (from Summer St. to Rt. 1).

At previous Selectmen's meetings the CNI estimated that there would be someone passing on the TLC every 24 seconds. This was based upon 2 million users of the Minuteman Bikeway. They assumed Topsfield would get half that number of users. Our research identified Dr. Philip Troped of Purdue University who studied three trails for his PhD dissertation; the Minuteman Bikeway, the Burlington Vermont Bikeway, and the Norwottuck Trail from Northampton to Amherst in Massachusetts. On the Minuteman Trail he estimated that there were 600,000 users annually. He went on to calculate the average number of users of those trails as 33 users per day per 1000 people living within 2 miles of the trail. Relative to Topsfield the trail should have no more than 200 users per 12 hour day. This number is certainly manageable. Given the location of the Proctor school many of the users will be students, as the TLC will be a "Safe Route" to school.

The TRTC committee members, with the assistance of volunteers, mowed the entire 4 mile length of trail from the Wenham to the Boxford town lines. The MBTA portion of the trail was mowed under the terms of the Town's lease, and the National Grid portion (Washington St. to the Boxford line) was mowed under a one-time permit from National Grid. In addition, the Topsfield Conservation Commission is allowing us to mow a 4 ft. wide path within the wetland resource area buffer zones. With this initial cutting complete, the heavy work has been accomplished and continued maintenance will require significantly less effort. We will work with National Grid to obtain permission for

continued maintenance on the northern half of the trail. Maintenance of complete the trail is well within the capabilities of volunteers at no cost to the Town.

The CNI asked how Route 1 will be safely crossed. Route 1 is within the domain of the Massachusetts Highway Department. That crossing, as well as all crossings on the Border-to-Boston trail, will be part of a 25% design study that Mass Highway is expected to fully fund. The study's recommendations for major road crossings will be subject to approval by Mass Highway.

The CNI is concerned about damage to the wetlands and wildlife on the TLC. It must be said that trains traversed these areas for more than 100 years, with the last trains going to freight barns near Main Street as late as 1980. The entire length of the trail now includes power transmission lines that National Grid regularly maintains. Some areas along the trail are now wet. We believe this is due to lack of maintenance of drainage ditches as these areas were dry for the 100+ years that the trains ran. We will work with the Conservation Commission to restore this drainage.

The CNI objects to the presence of horses on the trail and contends that the TLC will spoil the rural character of Topsfield. We disagree. What is more rural than seeing horses on a trail? The objections to horses range from sanitary reasons to safety concerns. The TLC is a former rail bed that is straight with excellent sight lines. Horses can be seen easily from long distances. An example of the minimal impact of horses can be seen at the section of the trail going north from Bare Hill Rd. This area has been used by horses for years and the trail is in excellent condition even though no work has been done on it for many years. On Oct. 21st there was a horse competition on the trail which included jumps. The trail surface did not show any signs of wear. The CNI presentation also stated that horse hoofs damage stone dust trails. Our chairman had a discussion with a ranger at Bradley Palmer State Park who has worked there for over 5 years. He has never seen damage to a stone dust trail from horses. The "accessible" trail is the only one at Bradley-Palmer that does not allow horses. This is because of possible damage to the plastic wood walkways over sensitive areas.

The CNI states "every dollar that funds a low-priority bike path is a dollar that isn't available for an urgent repair that might save the life of someone's son or daughter, husband or wife". Records show that SAFETEA-LU, the Federal Transportation Authorization for highways, spent \$60 million in 2005 for recreational trails out of a total of \$35 billion for highway funding. That represents 0.17%, which is a very small portion of the total authorization budget. It should be noted that funds appropriated for recreational trail building can only be used for this distinct purpose. If Massachusetts does not use its allotted funds, those funds are redistributed for the construction of trails in other states (as has happened for several years). The federal and state governments and our Selectmen understand the value and benefit of spending a limited amount of money on developing new recreational resources for the health and well being of society.

The CNI states that abutters cannot be involved with the TRTC as it is a violation of the Commonwealth's Conflict of Interest laws, Ch. 286a. This is misleading. Abutters can be involved in discussions about the rail trail, however they cannot vote on committee matters since it might affect their property values. The states guidelines say "You may *not* take any official action affecting your own financial interest". Further details are in Commission Advisory # 05-02.

The CNI cites a web-posting written by Rob MacLeod in 1999. The CNI cited a claim that accidents are 2.6 times as likely on bicycle paths as on the road. Mr. MacLeod states “the risk of collision increases on bike paths because of the mixture of traffic speeds”. To put this in context, the web-posting was written by a man who lives in Utah and advocates the use of public roadways for high-speed road bikes with narrow tires – which should not be confused with casual bike riding. He is countering arguments made by others that the “cyclists” should not be allowed on public roads, and that they should use “bicycle paths” instead. Mr. MacLeod defined a bike path as “a separate facility for cycling, sometimes shared with pedestrians, usually adjacent to a roadway.” This individual’s personal opinions posted on the web are not relevant to the Topsfield Rail Trail, which will not be adjacent to a roadway and is not intended for “cycling.” Furthermore, we do question the basis for his statistics regarding various types of accident rates and his accidents are more likely to happen on a bike path. Nonetheless, the TRTC agrees with his premise that “cyclists” on road bikes are generally better off riding along public roadways rather than on recreational paths. The TRTC has consistently stated that the TLC is a recreational path intended for a wide variety of users, and that it would not be attractive to “cyclists” on road bikes.

The CNI talked about the negative effect of mountain bikes on trails stating they cause significant damage to the environment and wildlife when going through wilderness areas. The TLC is a former rail bed. It is flat. It is in a rural area -- it is not in the wilderness. Judging from other stone dust trails like the Marblehead Trail and the Mass Central Rail Trail, both of which have been in existence for over 10 years, bicycles have not damaged these trails. As far as “wilderness” areas are concerned, the TLC had trains going through it and has had people passing through it, though low in numbers, for many years since the trains. Calling this the TLC a “wilderness” is inappropriate.

The CNI presented the “crime report” from Sudbury. This is misleading since Sudbury does not have a rail trail. It does have a group, the Sudbury Citizens for Responsible Land Stewardship, consisting of individuals who own property adjacent to a proposed rail trail and are against its realization. Their website attempts to link crime reports to rail trails in other Massachusetts towns. The CNI mentioned several of these crimes and distributed newspaper articles from that Sudbury web site to the Selectmen during the meeting.

- It was stated that the Town of Lexington has 3 police assigned to bicycle patrols for the Minuteman Trail and that there were “many, many, many incidents”. The 2006 Lexington Public Safety Report states “Bicycle Patrols, begun in 1992 in response to the growing number of persons using the Minuteman Bikeway, are all but eliminated today.” In addition, we just received an email from Sergeant Mike McLean who is in charge of the Minuteman Bikeway through Lexington. He makes these statements: “As far as problems on the path are concerned, they are minimal. There is a heavy population on the path during the day, so any illicit activity is quickly reported and dealt with” and “The path has been a tremendous asset for the town and for the residents to take advantage of. In addition to its great recreational uses, it offers a safe travel alternative for the youth and elderly to riding or walking on the streets.”
- Another report was from Hudson indicates that snowmobilers were allegedly on their way to illegally ride the Assabet River Trail. The article states the incident occurred on private property and the snowmobiles were “assumed” to be heading toward the trail.
- In the Town of Lee a man was arrested for indecent exposure at Sandy Beach on Laurel Lake and at the Kripalu Center in Stockbridge. The article “alleged” the same person also committed indecent exposure on the Ashuwillticook Trail.

- The CNI said the police chief in Arlington is very bothered by problems on the Minuteman Bikeway. The July 1st , 2007 Boston Globe article states there were 11 incidents in Arlington on the trail in all of 2006. On July 4, 2007, an Arlington police officer told Joe Geller that 8 of the 11 incidents were for youths congregating on the trail.

The words “alleged” and “assumed” are someone’s guesses, and possibly wishful thinking about an activity and have no place in a factual context.

The CNI stated the School Committee did not endorse the TLC. In fact, the School Committee sent a letter to the Selectmen stating, “At the 10/4/07 meeting, we voted unanimously that the rail-trail would have no negative impact on school operation”.

The CNI stated they walked the Marblehead trail and found 280 pieces of trash in less than 0.1 mile and then 75 pieces in 1/6 mile. In three places they reported finding trash from teenage parties. Mr. Morgan stated “The Marblehead trail was disgusting”. The following weekend David Read from the TRTC walked the trail and stated “I went for a walk there Sunday and found it a very clean, beautiful trail”. On 11/4/07, Selectmen Dick Gandt cycled the trail and found only 11 pieces of trash along its 3.5 miles -- and this was just after Halloween.

The CNI talked about hazardous waste on the trail and that someone else from the CNI was communicating with the selectmen about creosote and removal of rail ties. In fact, Bob Morgan, the spokesman of the CNI, had vegetation removed from the trail, which is Town property, abutting his house a few months ago. The Conservation Commission approved the work within the bordering vegetated wetland but we could find no record of the Town of Topsfield being asked permission to remove vegetation or plant trees on Town land. Morgan later stated at a recent Rail Trail Committee meeting that the soil disturbed by the landscaping activity was not tested. We agree that it would not be necessary to do the testing.

The TRTC hopes to obtain approval to plan, design and build Phase I of the trail within the next year. We understand the need to be considerate of valid concerns raised by the trail neighbors, and we intend to address those concerns during the design and construction process. During the CNI presentation Bob Morgan said “...admitted, Phase I is not going to change the character of Topsfield”. We wish to build Phase I and then have the public debate about the remainder of the trail as funding becomes available.

When information is presented to the public one has the responsibility to make sure it is factual and up to date. Now you know the rest of the story.

Your Topsfield Rail Trail Committee
Joe Geller, Chairman
Kathie Tremblay
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