

REGION

The Boston Globe

Regional bike trail speeds up Momentum building at state and local level

By John Laidler, Globe Correspondent | October 11, 2007

A 13-year-old vision of a bike trail stretching from New Hampshire to Boston is gaining momentum, with the recent formation of a state-level task force to advance the plan and the pending construction of initial segments of the trail.

"We've had a good year," said Bill Steelman, director of heritage development for the Salem-based Essex National Heritage Commission, which is helping coordinate the regional trail effort.

Among other recent milestones for the project, the state Highway Department has hired a consultant to lay the groundwork for the preparation of a preliminary design for the trail.

A firm is expected to be chosen next year to develop that preliminary design, using \$800,000 that US Representative John F. Tierney secured for the project in a 2005 federal transportation funding bill, according to Steelman.

"The idea of the Border-to-Boston trail has been around for some time, but it's been mostly relegated to lines drawn on regional maps and plans," said Geordie Vining, project manager for the Newburyport Planning office. "There has been a lot of activity the past couple of years to try to move that idea a little bit closer toward reality."

First envisioned by area bicycle enthusiasts in 1994, the Border-to-Boston trail as planned would extend for 27.8 miles from the New Hampshire line south through Salisbury, Newburyport, Newbury, Georgetown, Boxford, Topsfield, Wenham, and into Danvers.

Most of the route would be on inactive rail bed, with the remainder on designated roads. A future goal is to extend the trail from Danvers into Boston, fulfilling its original vision.

The long-discussed project first gained traction in late 2005 with the earmarking of federal money.

The following January, a coalition was formed to promote the project, with representation from the eight communities along the trail, the Essex National Heritage Commission, National Park Service, the Metropolitan Area Planning Commission, and the Merrimack Valley Planning Commission. The Park Service provided technical assistance through a grant.

Through the initiative of the coalition, all eight communities signed by the end of last year a resolution agreeing to participate in a joint planning process for the trail.

The coalition members also joined forces to create an implementation plan for the project. On Jan. 23, not long after completion of the plan, coalition representatives met with the commissioner of the state Highway Department, Luisa M. Paiewonsky, and her staff. It was at that meeting, Steelman said, that Paiewonsky suggested the creation of the task force.

Chaired by Paiewonsky, the task force includes state transportation officials and representatives of the eight communities and the other participating agencies.

Stelman said the state's decision to form the task force - he is aware of only one other formed by the state for a specific bike project - is a sign that it views Border-to-Boston as a promising effort.

"We boot-strapped our way through this implementation plan. We think that demonstrated a significant level of interest and competency on the part of coalition members," he said, observing that the regional nature of the project might have appealed to the state.

Also encouraging to the coalition is the state's willingness to invest in hiring a consultant to prepare for the design contract.

A bid for a design firm is expected to be issued by the end of next year, with the work likely to take about 18 months, Steelman said.

Meanwhile, in another major boost for the project, Newburyport and Salisbury over the last several years secured agreements with the MBTA to lease their respective 1.1-mile and 3.8-mile segments of the trail. Topsfield secured a similar lease with the T for a portion of its trail.

Newburyport, using state grants and private funds, has fully designed its trail segment. The state Highway Department is set to hire a contractor next spring to undertake the \$2.8 million construction, scheduled to start next summer.

Salisbury is designing an initial 1.4-mile stretch of its trail segment, from the Merrimack River to Mudnock Road. The state has committed up to \$2 million to pay for construction of that segment, which the town is calling the Old Eastern Marsh Trail.

According to Steelman, the pending design contract for the overall trail will not cover the already designed Newburyport and Salisbury sections.

Similarly, any future federal and state funds allocated for construction of the trail would not go toward the already funded Newburyport and Salisbury segments. Overall construction is estimated at \$22 million.

Significant hurdles still lie ahead for the project. One is the need to obtain federal and state funds for the construction. Another is for Boxford, Georgetown, Newbury, and Topsfield to secure lease agreements with National Grid for rights-of-way it owns on the trail.

"They are a key player here," Steelman said of National Grid, noting that the success of the project depends on securing all the needed rights-of-way. But he said the fact that National Grid is participating in the task force is a hopeful sign that the needed leases can be negotiated.

Meanwhile, Danvers and Wenham are moving to secure lease agreements with the MBTA for rights-of-way in those towns.

Jerry Klima, chairman of the selectmen in Salisbury, said he believes Border-to-Boston has "a sense of momentum," noting the participation of National Grid and the state's willingness to prepare the way for the design process. And he said that at the local level, "there's a great deal of energy being put into it."

Klima said developing a regional trail would give people the chance for extended recreational outings that take them through multiple communities.

And he said communities, by working together on the trail project, also enhance their own trail-building efforts.

"It makes it more likely you will be successful in each town along the way because you have more energy, you get more exposure and interest from the state." ■