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On the fast track

A nonprofit works with several communities to quickly and cheaply transform old rail beds into recreational paths, while similar projects elsewhere are taking years to complete



Rex

Koepnick (right) of the Iron Horse Preservation Society and Ryan Devaney help remove railroad ties to create a rail trail off Prince Street in Danvers. (Lisa Poole for The Boston Globe)

By [Katheleen Conti](#)

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Tired of putting her bicycle in her truck and driving to a Windham, N.H., rail trail, Methuen resident Joyce Godsey set out to advocate for a better place to ride in her own community.

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For the past two years, Godsey has been spearheading the effort to convert a 2.5-mile stretch of Methuen's abandoned railroad tracks into a rail trail. It's possible, she said, that Methuen could have a completed rail trail by next year — at little to no cost.

“We're lucky because we're very uncomplicated. We don't have residential abutters,” said Godsey, who formed and heads the Methuen Rail Trail Alliance. “Methuen the city can't afford [a rail trail conversion]. A lot of the funding comes from grants and donations. Engineering studies alone are upwards of \$20,000. We don't have the physical complexity of other people's trails.”

While most rail-to-trail projects can linger in the costly planning and design process for a decade, Godsey has placed Methuen's on the fast track by accepting an offer she could not refuse — having the railroad tracks and ties removed, disposed of, and replaced with a crushed-stone surface for free by Iron Horse Preservation Society, a Reno, Nev., nonprofit.

“They basically come in, take out the rail stock and in essence, they give you a rail trail,” Godsey said.

Since arriving in Massachusetts a few months ago to work with a group leading a rail trail project in Danvers, Joe Hatstrup, Iron Horse Preservation director, said he has found the state's process for converting rails to trails unnecessarily complicated. Creating rail trails in Massachusetts, he said, does not have to be so difficult.

"The thing that's really sad is [communities] have been trying to get these [trails] together for, in some cases, in excess of 15 years, and it's ridiculous," Hatstrup said. "Some of the cities were paying huge amounts of money, six digits, a quarter-million dollars, for these designs . . . and then you don't have anything yet but a road map to look for more money. They do all these feasibility studies that by the time it's done, by the time you finish your studies, it's 10 years later and it's not even relevant anymore."

This is Hatstrup's first business trip to the "east side of the Mississippi," but he's been removing old railroad tracks for the past 18 years. Five years ago, he formed Iron Horse Preservation, an organization focused not just on removing old railroad material, but on leaving behind a completed crushed-stone surface rail trail, at no cost to anyone. The 18-employee organization makes its money from the sale of the railroad material, and makes sure that none of it ends up in a landfill, Hatstrup said.

This turnkey, no-cost product, which Hatstrup calls "unique," has quickly caught the attention of area communities in various stages of rail trail projects, as well as that of state transportation officials, some of whom have been meeting with Hatstrup to further discuss his method.

The meetings may serve as an indicator of the willingness of transportation officials to move away from the state's reputation for heavily favoring highway transit projects over bike and pedestrian projects.

According to a study released in May by the National Transportation Enhancements Clearinghouse, Massachusetts ranked last in the nation in allocating federal funds designated for bike and pedestrian projects.

According to the study, from fiscal years 1992 through 2009, Massachusetts was eligible for \$151 million in funds, but only allocated \$62 million, or 41 percent. That is an improvement over last year's study, which indicated that until that point the state had only distributed about 37 percent of those funds.

This problem was pointed out 10 years ago, said Tom Michelman, president of the Friends of the Bruce Freeman Rail Trail, a proposed path that would go from Lowell to Framingham. The state Department of Transportation is not in charge of allocating federal funds for bike and pedestrian projects. That job goes to regional planning organizations, he said. For instance, federal funding for the Bruce Freeman Rail Trail, which has been in the works since 1989, is controlled by the Boston Regional Metropolitan Planning Organization.

"Massachusetts, unlike other states, generally puts the onus of paying for preliminary design, feasibility studies, and design onto the towns, onto the municipalities that are promoting the project," Michelman said. "But there's no quid pro quo that says if you go through this process

that your project will definitely be funded. Municipalities have to enter into this process to some degree by faith.’’

Most rail trail projects are also led by volunteer groups that have to negotiate leases with the rail and land owners, which in many cases are state transportation entities, such as the MBTA, or private companies. The MBTA, for instance, offers 99-year leases to groups like Godsey’s in Methuen for rail trail projects that have been approved by a community.

It costs about \$750,000 to design every 5 miles of the Bruce Freeman trail, paid for with donations and federal and state funds, Michelman said. Phase 1, a 6.8-mile stretch from Chelmsford to Westford, was just completed last year. The second phase, 13.1 miles, is in the preliminary design stage with five communities and is not scheduled to be built until 2021 through 2025, Michelman said.

“You get a quality product [in the end]. I’m not saying this is the best way — there are other ways it can be done,’’ Michelman said. “It’s not easy to build a rail trail in Massachusetts. It doesn’t have to be this hard, but changing the process is hard.’’

As word got around of the rail removal work Iron Horse did with the Danvers Rail Trail group, other groups quickly followed. Hatstrup said he is working with rail trail groups in Methuen, Topsfield, and Wenham; the Wakefield-Lynnfield rail trail group; and the Bike to the Sea communities of Malden, Saugus, Revere and Lynn, among others. Because the organization does the work at no cost, Hatstrup argues, a bidding process is not necessary. It also eliminates the cost for the community of removing creosote-treated railroad ties, which are considered a hazardous material, he said.

“I think we’re going to be in Massachusetts for at least two years. There’s a demand for what we’re trying to do,’’ Hatstrup said, adding he understands the skepticism from communities that would essentially get something for nothing. “We’re a cash-flowing nonprofit that doesn’t require handouts, and it’s a unique idea.’’

Joe Geller, chairman of the Topsfield Rail Trail Committee, has been involved in that project for 18 years and recently brought Iron Horse Preservation into the mix. He said the group is saving money by using the nonprofit and will gain 1.9 miles of trail to the Wenham town line as a result. Geller said he is waiting to see the final product, but he can’t argue with the process so far.

“No one can figure out how they make money,’’ Geller said of Iron Horse. “But you can’t look a gift horse in the mouth, and you may scratch your head, but the bottom line is a trail is coming.’’

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