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# Happy trails for proponents of path

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TOPSFIELD — Just three weeks after tagging it costly and problematic, the selectmen climbed aboard the town's "Rails to Trails" campaign, which would turn an old railroad track leading to Wenham Lake into a hiking and biking path.

Selectman Joe Iarocci said Monday he was "highly enthusiastic" the project would move forward, and apologized for the board's "hasty" decision to kill it.

The Recreation Committee, following the lead of the national group Rails to Trails, wants to lease 2.5 miles of unused track from the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority. The

track runs from the Wenham town line to the tot lot in Topsfield.

The selectmen, who ultimately have to sign the lease for it to take effect, were initially concerned with overgrown brush and debris on the track. Part of the 85-year lease proposed by the MBTA would shift maintenance responsibility, and liability, to the town.

"They (the railroads) basically come as-is," said Mark Boyle, director of the MBTA realty department.

But after learning that the Recreation Committee planned to use volunteers to clear the trail, and not town money, the selectmen decided the trail was a workable idea.

One section of the proposed Topsfield path, between Summer Street and St. Rose Church, is to-

tally impassable because of cement pipes and construction debris, according to Joe Geller, the main proponent of the project and a member of the committee.

"We're trying to do it with volunteer efforts or external funds," said Geller. "As a last resort we may come to the town."

Geller said his group plans to appease the proposed trail's abutters, who might find a path disruptive. Now, the selectmen and committee members are pursuing cost estimates and the legal particulars of the lease.

Geller estimated the covering for the trail — stone dust — will cost \$200,000. He doesn't plan to pursue a warrant article asking the town to cover the costs.

The MBTA decided two years ago

to offer unused tracks to towns that agreed to maintain them. It has been a successful plan, according to Boyle, who said the MBTA is trying to broker the same deal with 25 area towns. On the North Shore, Danvers proposed such a trail several years ago, but the initiative was defeated. Peabody is in the process of converting some abandoned tracks into trails, and Salem has already done trail work on some old railroad beds.

Boyle said the MBTA will not be tailoring the lease to the needs of the town. Geller said the offer by the MBTA two years ago was "overly restrictive" and asked the town to remove the rail beds and pay for their transport to an MBTA facility. The new draft does not include that stipulation.