

The Salem News

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Keep pushing on rail trails

Despite the apparent popularity of all things “green” these days, those advocating for bicycle trails in the North of Boston region have found the going rather tough.

On the North Shore, a small group of people with a lengthy moniker — the Coalition for Children’s Safety and Serious Concerns Regarding the Proposed Topsfield Rail Trail Project — is holding selectmen’s feet to the fire with regard to the first phase of a proposed bike trail that would, at first, run a mere third of a mile from Main Street to Washington Street downtown.

Meanwhile, up in the Merrimack Valley, Haverhill Mayor James Fiorentini is trying to drum up support and cash to purchase a former railroad right of way along the river that could be used by bikers and walkers.

These trails have proven popular in other places, such as the suburbs west of Boston. They are not only an important recreational resource, but are used by those who would rather hop on their bicycles than jump in the car to go shopping or travel to work. Indeed, the Minuteman trail through Lexington and several adjacent communities has proven so popular, it can become congested at times, leading to incidents of “bike rage” which were cited by trail skeptics during their meeting with Topsfield’s selectmen recently.

Advocates of what is being called the Topsfield Linear Common have already raised more than \$42,000 and obtained rights to land that they hope will become part of a regional network of trails leading all the way into New Hampshire.

But coalition members took an hour of selectmen’s time the other night to make sure their concerns about property rights and safety issues were addressed.

Experience has shown that many of opponents’ concerns are unfounded, and regular use of some of these out-of-the-way parcels can actually make the surrounding neighborhoods safer.

Supporters of the Topsfield project are further along than their counterparts in Haverhill, who have identified the land they would like to acquire on the Bradford side of the Merrimack River. But they still lack formal plans, money and community enthusiasm. Fiorentini’s endorsement should help.

We hope advocates of these trails in Topsfield, Haverhill and elsewhere find a way to move forward.

Activating underused properties like abandoned rights of way to expand recreational opportunities and transportation alternatives serves a useful public purpose and ought to be encouraged.