



Topsfield selectmen host impromptu rail trail debate

By Mike Stucka

Staff writer

TOPSFIELD — A short presentation by a critic of a proposed rail trail turned into a wide-ranging hour-and-a-half debate packed with questions, fears of sexual assault and worries about lawsuits.

Still, Bob Morgan of the Coalition for Neighborhood Information said he'd learned more from the meeting than he had in the previous nine months.

The exasperated chairman of the selectmen, John McArdle, begged Morgan to begin talks with rail trail committee leader Joe Geller.

"It is about time for the two of you to act in a somewhat adult manner," McArdle said as Morgan leaped from his seat. McArdle continued, "You have questions. Joe has answers. Ask them of Joe."

Last night, selectmen tried to answer some of the questions from coalition members, many of whom own property abutting the proposed trail. The rail trail committee wants a Town Meeting vote on a section running from Main Street to Washington Street, which could eventually tie into a broader townwide trail system. That could become part of the proposed "Border to Boston" system running from Salisbury to Danvers.

Morgan worried the trail, on four miles of abandoned railbed, could bring too much traffic between two playgrounds near Proctor Elementary School, saying, "in fact, it may be a very serious disaster." He wanted to know exactly where the trail would go and how close it would be to the playgrounds.

Geller replied, "That's exactly what we're paying for, is the design to tell us where the trail's going."

Selectmen didn't vote on trail-related matters, but accepted a petition with about 110 signatures, which may put another vote on the Town Meeting warrant. At least two selectmen said they would oppose efforts by abutters to be placed on the rail trail committee.

"I personally am not interested, in a sense, of having the fox in the chicken coop," Selectman Stephen Clark said.

Ellen Gutowski, who lives on Parsonage Lane near the trail, cited experiences from her life when she said children could be flashed by perverts or injured by spooked horses. She said when she got some petitions signed, she found out that most people were "vastly confused or completely in the dark."

An information session tentatively scheduled for March 24 is planned to clear up some of the issues.