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Topsfield hashes over rail-trail questions at forum  
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TOPSFIELD — Even though one of Topsfield's most controversial issues has been burning for nearly a year, supporters and opponents of the rail trail still found questions that drew gasps of astonishment last night.

The biggest whopper? One 24-year resident had been driving grandchildren to trails in Marblehead and Lexington. What, the questioner asked, could residents do to make the rail trail happen and improve the town's quality of life?

The question went to trail opponent Cathy Morgan, who was taken aback. After a few moments, she replied, "I find that an odd question." Later, she added, "It's a misnomer that this bike path will create a safe place for our children."

The 1 1/2-hour forum, planned to pre-empt some of the questions from Town Meeting, raised other questions less partisan but no less important. Who, really, would pay to build and maintain the rail trail? And would the rail trail bring a host of vandals, drunkards and flashers behind rural homes — or would it be a good way for families to enjoy themselves with some exercise?

Nearly right out of the gate, Topsfield Rail Trail Committee Chairman Joe Geller tried to set the tone on the safety question.

"It's important to have alternate routes and safe ways to get kids to school," Geller said.

The first phase of the trail would tie Washington Street to Main Street, running behind Proctor School, along a third-of-a-mile-long stretch of abandoned railroad bed.

Geller said the town's elementary school committee supports the projects, and communities with trails like Salisbury, Newburyport and Lexington are all expanding them and don't need police patrols.

Morgan pointed at a line item in a trail guide budget to fight vandalism.

"Evidently, the rail trail maintenance people say, 'Build a trail, and the vandals will come,'" she said.

Another member of opposition group Coalition for Neighborhood Information, Eric Gutowski, said it was a dangerous mistake to put horses, bicyclists and toddlers on the same path. With flying tennis balls and baseballs from nearby school playing fields that could spook horses, the town faces even greater liability, he said.

Gutowski argued that the trail committee's plans for grants and volunteer donations wouldn't pay the bills, leaving the town's taxpayers to squander rare money building and maintaining the trail.

"This trail is not a necessity," he said. "It is a luxury."

A Rail Trail Committee member, Gregg Demers, said the trail could actually unite the town by giving people safe walking access across Route 1 and other busy roads. About 200 people would use the trail per day, the committee estimated.

The forum will be rebroadcast on the town's community access channel at 7:30 p.m. on April 1, April 15 and April 29, all before the May 6 Town Meeting.