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### **Rail trail could benefit from encroachment after all**

By Mike Stucka  
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TOPSFIELD — Decades of encroachment onto town property could be transformed into buffers between the rail trail and a number of improperly oversized yards.

Last night, about 20 engineers, landscapers and homeowners spent about two hours discussing how the rail trail could be built, particularly between Washington Street and a Proctor School driveway, where several yards appear to have incorporated parts of the town land.

Yet because the town owns a 50-foot swath of former railway, and the rail trail will be just 12 feet wide, some trees, perhaps fences and even a hill supplemented with yard waste could be incorporated into the rail trail's plans. Planners hope to screen homeowners from pedestrians and bicyclists on the trail, and the existing encroachments could save money because they wouldn't be ripped out and then replaced.

The trail's other section, running from the Proctor School driveway to Main Street, hasn't been as well-studied. Geller has said a town employee he wouldn't name owns a septic system under the trailway, while a survey shows a wood fence behind Highway Superintendent David Bond's home on town land.

In at least some of the cases, the encroachments on town property happened before the current residents bought their properties.

Dan Peabody of Eastgate Garden Design said some pine trees planted at Bob and Cathy Morgan's house could grow into an effective natural screen. The trees were planted last year in mulch that extends about 17 feet into town property — but would remain a few feet from the edge of the rail trail.

"If it works, it works," said Bob Morgan, who said he hadn't known where the property lines were when he changed his yard. "We'll do whatever it takes to make it right. It's not a point of contention."

Peabody said the rail trail might need a fence or a natural screen of plants behind the DeAmario property, where a significant drop wrecks privacy. A large hill, with trees and other landscaping, could be extended from the Cabral property to behind the Smallman property, he said. Alternately, another fence behind the Smallman home could go up in roughly the same spot that a wood-and-wire fence is now, upon the town land.

Rail Trail Committee Chairman Joe Geller said the committee would take the input from last night's meeting, ponder it and use it for refinements for a public meeting to be scheduled in August. The committee still hasn't decided how it would route the rail trail between playgrounds.

Beals joined Geller in soliciting more advice from residents.

"It's 'draft' stamped all over it," Beals said. "We need some input on perhaps the subtle differences that need to be tuned up."