

Trail advocates meet with selectmen

By Ashley Ryan Gaddis

agaddis@cnc.com

Local advocates for turning the abandoned MBTA railroad bed into a walking and biking trail through town shared some history of the project and some ideas for getting it off the ground with the Topsfield selectmen Monday night.

"I've been working on this for ten years," said Joe Geller, a Prospect Street resident and Recreation Committee member. "It's sort of been a big part of my life for a long time."

Geller told the selectmen he first became interested in converting the old railroad corridor, which cuts a 25-foot swath across the town, into a trail as a member of the North Shore Bikeways Coalition. He joined what was then the Topsfield Open Space and Recreation Committee when it formed in 1997, and in 1998 he began writing letters inquiring about leasing the right-of-way to the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority, which owns the corridor from Proctor School southeast to the Wenham line, and Mass Electric, which owns the rest from Proctor School northwest all the way to Newbury.

Geller collected copies of deeds to the corridor and has walked it several times. In 1999, he helped the Open Space Committee conduct a survey of

town residents which showed more than 80 percent of respondents supported converting the rail bed to recreational use, he said.

"It's a gem," Geller said of the corridor.

Town resident Nancy Luther told the selectmen a trail along the old railroad bed could offer children a way to walk or ride their bikes to Proctor School. She also said state and federal grant money is available for such projects, as well as private funds.

Geller said that any trail funded by federal money would have to be handicapped accessible and closed to motorized vehicles. He suggested the use of a material called stone dust for the trail, which he said could be laid over the tracks and railroad ties that exist on the land. Stone dust is friendly to wheelchairs, he said, and costs about \$100,000 per mile. The length of the corridor the MBTA owns is about two miles, Geller said.

The MBTA has expressed interest in offering the town an 85-year lease for the right-of-way and, recently, the selectmen have been exploring that possibility. Mass Electric has expressed no interest in leasing its portion of the corridor for a trail, which disappoints Geller since the portion owned by Mass Electric runs along the new park at the former landfill and a trail there could serve as a vital link between the new park and downtown.

Selectmen reversed themselves

Ever since the selectmen decided at their Nov. 11 meeting not to seek a lease with the MBTA for a trail, many local residents and trail advocates have come forward asking the selectmen to reconsider their decision. On Nov. 18, the selectmen reversed themselves saying they would continue to pursue negotiations with the MBTA for the corridor. As residents have pronounced their enthusiasm for the project and willingness to undertake a lot of work on its behalf, the selectmen have grown more supportive of the trail.

"I myself personally have done a flip," Selectman Joe Iarocci said Monday night. "I'm highly enthusiastic and not just about the trail but in bringing people together to do something like this."

Recreation Committee Chairman Mark Mscisz asked the selectmen if they would like his committee to take over the task of investigating the process for converting the right-of-way to a trail. Selectman Chairman Boyd Jackson said the selectmen probably would hand responsibility for developing the trail over to the Recreation Committee but that first the selectmen need to secure a lease for the land that is beneficial to the town.

Jackson said the selectmen are awaiting a proposal from the MBTA's real estate division before taking any further action.