

Topsfield residents concerned rail trail is moving too fast

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Topsfield -

Walking out of Charles Morgan's driveway and turning left onto Washington Street, one eventually sees a lawn-mowed path through the woods that happens to be a section of a historic railroad.

It also happens to be the site where Topsfield officials want to build a bike path through the town that would eventually connect Boston to New Hampshire.

On Tuesday, members of the coalition met at Morgan's Washington Street home and spoke about their concerns regarding the proposed 4.5-mile project.

Morgan, a member of a coalition critical of the bike path, feels he, and everyone else in Topsfield, is being kept in the dark about the planning.

"If the process was all open, it would be a completely different thing," Morgan said, whose group, the Coalition for Children's Safety and Serious Concerns Regarding the Proposed Topsfield Rail Trail Project, formed just three weeks ago.

While the Rail Trail Committee holds open meetings, the coalition feels that the rest of the process is not being disclosed properly and that important details are being left out.

One coalition member, Paul Stump, claimed the Rail Trail Committee hasn't considered the potential for contamination in the old railroad ties, where arsenic is sometimes found.

"You have to assume contamination," Stump said. "No one has brought that issue to light."

But Joe Geller, chairman of the rail trail group, said soil testing is not required by the state for the trail between Main Street and Washington Street. Geller went on to dispute the coalition's claims that the public has been kept in the dark about the project.

"I think we've done an admirable job with public relations," Geller said.

A public meeting on the project was held in March and anyone is welcome to attend Rail Trail meetings and speak or ask questions, he added.

Strolling through the partially wooded path, Morgan, and others in the coalition, said that just a couple weeks ago the Rail Trail Committee was set to begin constructing the first part of the trail before addressing crucial

aspects such as environmental concerns and property rights.

"They wanted to stick that shovel in the ground," Morgan said.

However, Geller said that, by no means, were they ready to stick a shovel in the ground and that they were waiting for approval from the Conservation Commission before even starting to make designs. After designs are made, he added, selectmen would still have to approve the trail and his committee would hold another public forum.

As the path would be designed and constructed in sections, the first piece connects Washington Street to Main Street, running aside areas such as the playground behind Proctor School.

"Here is the number one disaster area," Morgan said pointing to the heavily trafficked area as Stump is measuring the distance from the playground to the path area, appearing to him to be about 20 feet.

The path is set to run from the Wenham town line to the Boxford town line near Pye Brook.

"I think the committee needs to be reconstituted," Morgan said about the Rail Trail Committee and how it is run.

Morgan said has been examining the minutes of the Rail Trail Committee and all discussion have been centered on fundraising and acquiring land along the rail trail from the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority.

"The rest of the planning is non-existent," Morgan said, about the apparent lack of planning on part of the Rail Trail Committee.

During the July 9 Selectmen meeting, Selectmen Chairman John McArdle invited Morgan and the rest of his group to join the Rail Trail committee.

"That would accomplish nothing but being divisive," Morgan said, in an example, about the three coalition members joining with six Rail Trail Committee members. "The problem is effectiveness of the group."

While Morgan and other coalition members were not positive on the proper way a bike path should be permitted, via Zoning Board of Appeals or Planning Board, all felt Town Meeting was the best option.

"We believe Town Meeting is the best forum for deciding how or if we should do this [the bike path]," Morgan said, with other coalition members chiming in.