

TRI-TOWN TRANSCRIPT  
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A Federal Highway Administration representative said earlier this week his agency would help with start-up costs for a rail trail in Essex County, just so long as the state proves it will be able to fund a portion of trail construction in the future.

FHA spokesman Doug Hecox said the state didn't provide enough supporting evidence to indicate how it would fund its share, 20 percent, of the estimated \$26 million construction price tag.

"We want to make sure everybody know what their responsibilities are," Hecox said. "We are fans of rails to trails. We just don't like them when they are half done."

The FHA recently "deferred" \$718,000 to fund a 25 percent design for the Board to Boston rail trail, a proposed 26-mile bike path that would sit on top of an abandoned railroad bed that runs from Danvers to Salisbury. The trail would go through eight communities in all, including Boxford and Topsfield.

The Border to Boston project was one of only two projects that was "deferred" out of a group of more than 100 regional and local transportation projects, totaling more than \$500 million in funding, according documentation from the Massachusetts Metropolitan Planning Organization.

News of the funding in 2007 had represented a jump in momentum for many regional and local organizers involved with the trail.

As many state transportation departments are struggling from the increasing cost of road materials, the FHA is more cautious when giving out seed money that may be lost from lack of future funding, Hecox said.

"Many of them (state transportation departments) don't have the 20 percent," Hecox said of a typical 80/20 percent split between the federal government and the state on transit projects.

In addition to financial documentation, the FHA is also asking state and regional planning groups to provide more project details such as accurate construction costs, the need for environmental mitiga-

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# Show us the money

*Feds say state needs to prove it can help fund rail trails*

## Show us the money

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tion, and disability access.

However, these are the same details that typically result from a 25 percent design, which was what the \$718,000 was needed for in the first place.

Despite a chicken and egg-like dilemma, the federal government says that is the state's problem.

"That's their obligation," Hecox said, about the need for the state to fund the 25 percent design to identify important project details.

MassHighway didn't return calls for comment in time for deadline.

One of the main regional groups assisting in the planning of the Essex County rail trail is the Border to Boston Coalition.

Coalition Chairman Dave Read said his group may be suffering from the state's lack of credibility in estimating costs for projects; referring mainly to the Big Dig.

"I think there are repercussions from previous years and Big Dig [situations]," Read said. "They are concerned about cost overruns."

While Read only considers this

a minor inconvenience, the move has the potential to delay work if federal administrators aren't persuaded to change their minds.

In the past two weeks, Read has been spreading word of a letter-writing campaign that he hopes will influence the FHA to grant them the funds sooner than later. He is asking state and U.S. legislators to help persuade the FHA in this push.

If the state does try to provide more financial evidence, one trail organizer said that any local documents would be forthcoming.

"If there is anymore supporting documentation [needed], there are eight towns that will do their best to get that information," Topsfield Rail Trail Committee Chairman Joe Geller said.

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