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Rail Trail Committee responds to criticism

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TOPSFIELD - It was standing room only at Tuesday's Topsfield Selectmen's meeting where the Rail Trail Committee presented a rebuttal to public criticism levied against them this summer.

After hearing parts of the 15-page report put together by the Rail Trail Committee, formed to oversee the development of a four-mile bike trail in Topsfield, selectmen fielded wave after wave of concerns by residents, despite the fact the meeting wasn't intended to be a public hearing.

As Chairman John McArdle had firmly told the audience that this meeting was not going to turn into a debate, one resident had eventually gotten upset that nobody was allowed to ask questions of either the committee or the selectmen, with the resident griping, "...then why are we all here?"

"I don't know why you're all here," Selectman Boyd Jackson quickly responded, with Selectmen Dick Gandt answering multiple procedural questions about public meetings for the next 15 minutes.

As one of the founding member's of the Coalition for Children's Safety and Serious Concerns Regarding the Proposed Topsfield Rail Trail Project, Charles "Bob" Morgan was first to speak, simply asking selectmen to be on a future meeting to present their reaction to the report.

"I am glad that the committee is providing more information," Morgan said, adding that further discussions are still certainly needed.

The coalition has been the largest critics of the rail trail project.

However, there were those not as calm, as random comments were shouted out throughout the meeting, mostly of those opposed with the trail.

"I believe there ought to be a town-wide ballot next spring," Selectman Steve Clark said after many comments from audience members about asking the whole town if they want this trail.

At a selectmen's meeting in July, Morgan and others, strongly criticized the Rail Trail Committee, saying they had been ignoring "adverse effects" that the bike trail may have on the environment, the safety of children, the privacy of residents, and the community overall.

One claim was that the committee stated there was no wetlands in the near the first phase of the trail project on a grant application, when wetlands, in fact, did exist. Joe Geller, Chairman of the Rail Trail Committee, said they have since realized the mistake and informed the grantor.

Geller stressed Tuesday the committee didn't have a design of the project to present and, additionally, didn't have any idea of when construction might start.

Addressing the notion of how open the process has been, one committee member stated that since they began

working on the project in 2005, the Rail Trail Committee has been before the selectmen eight times, in addition to going before the Conservation Commission, the Highway Department, and the School Committee. The committee said they also manned a table at the first night of the Topsfield Fair, and during the Strawberry Festival.

School Committee member Nancy Luther said that the trail promotes safe routes to school, also saying that claims of increased crime and trash along these bike trails were unfounded.

Dave Keating of 7 Maple Lane went before the board to say he is just concerned that the process is being carried out in the right way and that the privacy of residences near the trail is maintained.

Selectmen also voted to allow the Rail Trail Committee to apply for a number of grants, with Clark ensuring that the money cannot be spent until the town is in agreement on the trail.

After the meeting, Morgan said that while putting the rail trail on a ballot isn't a bad idea, he would rather have Town Meeting decide its fate, as it provides more chance for discussion and debate.

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