

Selectmen say no need for rail trail advisory group

7/11/08

By Brendan Lewis
blewis@cnc.com

The proposed Topsfield rail trail continues to elicit discussion at Selectmen meetings, where this week's gathering focused on the potential formation of a rail trail advisory group. However, the board decided the idea is past its prime.

A rail trail advisory group would be designed to serve as an ad-hoc committee to the Rail Trail Committee, the elected body charged with overseeing the planning, construction and maintenance of a proposed 4.5-mile bike path through town.

Bob Morgan, spokesman for the Coalition for Neighborhood Information, asked that the selectmen instruct the Rail Trail Committee to form this group, through a letter sent to Town Hall in late June.

Morgan's group has been a vocal opponent of the proposed trail which is expected to be a small section a 26-mile bike path from Salisbury to Danvers, called the Board to Boston trail. The trail would lie on the abandoned Maine to Boston rail bed.

"They (the Rail Trail Committee) should be required to consult with and consider the ideas proposed by the advisory committee," Morgan wrote in a letter. The spokesman did not attend the meeting Monday night.

Selectman Richard Gandt said, while he encourages input for any town project, he didn't see the need to form an advisory group.

"I appreciate the comment, but I think we've gone beyond that," Gandt said.

Both Gandt and Selectman Martha Morrison agreed the time to form this advisory group would've been three years ago when the Rail Trail Committee was formed, according to the best practice guide.

A best practices guide called the Rail-to-Trail Conservancy encourages the formation of an advisory committee when a town is considering the construction of a rail trail.

"The purpose of that really has been [met]," Morrison said at the meeting. Selectmen continued to say how the coalition's visits to the selectmen meetings accomplished the goals of an advisory committee, only in an informal way.

Selectmen Nancy Luther, a former member of the Rail Trail Committee, said that more discussions between abutters and trail organizers are scheduled for the future.

"When they (the Rail Trail Committee) have an informational meeting, they (abutters) will be able to see what the trail will look like," Luther said about some of the steps that will be taken by the Rail Trail Committee.