

# Rail trail debate in the works

*Event would be  
televised on  
Topsfield's cable  
channel*

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A heated issue in town will be hitting the local airwaves soon, as Topsfield's local access cable channel wants to feature a debate surrounding the construction of a bike path to run through Topsfield and possibly connect Salisbury to Danvers.

The debate would feature representatives from the town's rail trail committee and a grassroots neighborhood organization, formed in July, which has been critical of the plan. The town's rail trail committee was formed to oversee the transformation of a four-mile section of an historic railroad into a rail trail for bikers, walkers, or horseback riders.

Through a number of rebuttals and retorts, the debate has been a frontline issue at multiple selectmen's meetings, often associated with long-winded arguments either for or against.

"It has taken an awful lot of time at selectmen's meetings," Bill Whiting, member of the Topsfield Cable Committee, said about the issue that clashes passive recreation with crime increases, environmental issues, and logistical problems. "...45 minutes per issue is sometimes too much to afford."

According to Whiting, the idea

is to feature the debate to a large audience in a timely fashion before Town Meeting, as it is expected to be a major issue in the spring.

"The intent of this is trying to get people informed of issue and possibly extradite the process," Whiting said of the debate to engage the services of Town Moderator John Kinhan.

As the Cable Committee first created an outline for debate about three years ago when the town was voting to become eligible for Community Preservation Act funds, they are deciding to bring back a tool that served the town well.

"It worked once and we'll try to use it again," Whiting said about the debate that ended up in an unfavorable vote in Town Meeting of 2004.

Whiting said that hosting the debate on Topsfield Local Access Channel 10 has a number of purposes, including informing voters about the issue, saving time at Town Meeting this spring, and hopefully getting folks used to utilizing the local cable.

"I would like people to get used to the fact that the town has a couple channels of sharing knowledge," Whiting said, adding that he plans on featuring any power point presentations or supporting material on the town's Web site.

A date has not been set as of yet, but Whiting is expecting to schedule the event in early April.

While many are involved in both sides of the rail trail debate,

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organizers expect to call upon two vocal members on opposing sides, being Charles "Bob" Morgan, spokesman of the Coalition for Neighborhood Information, on the con side, and Joe Geller, Chairman of the Rail Trail Committee, on the pro side.

While Geller gave confirmation that he would be taking part in the debate, Morgan had not returned a phone call to his home.

Using the past format, the debate will take on a traditional make-up, with the moderator giving a brief introduction, followed by opening statements by both sides. As prepared questions will be given to both teams in advance, they will only be used if time allows after written submissions from the audience cease.

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