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Morgan left off Rail Trail Committee

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TOPSFIELD - Topsfield Selectmen effectively denied a rail trail critic's application to join the Rail Trail Committee Monday after hinting his involvement could hinder the group's productivity.

Following remarks by Selectman Dick Gandt, colleague Dick Carlson moved to table the motion by the Rail Trail Committee to appoint Bob Morgan, spokesman for the Coalition for Neighborhood Information, a group critical of the construction of a 4.5-mile bike path through town.

"I am concerned by the way Bob has presented himself," Gandt said, referring to the several board meetings where Morgan and other coalition members spoke against the way the path was being planned. "I don't feel he would be a constructive addition to the committee."

The motion was passed with support from four board members, with Chairman John McArdle abstaining. Selectmen didn't set a date to revisit the motion.

The Rail Trail Committee was formed in 2005 to oversee the planning, construction and maintenance of a 4-mile stone dust path that would lie on an abandoned rail bed. Members have maintained that the project won't cost taxpayers a cent and will be maintained entirely by volunteers.

However, Morgan and others members of the coalition have criticized the plan for ignoring adverse effects of the rail trail, such as pollution, crime, and cost during selectmen meetings.

As Morgan is an abutter to the proposed trail, selectmen had initially said he couldn't serve on the committee. After speaking with the state's ethics commissioner, Morgan said he could technically be appointed under certain conditions.

Despite Selectman Steve Clark's legal disagreement with the state commissioner's opinion, Morgan began working with the Rail Trail Committee to perform all the appropriate actions in order to be appointed to the board.

Rail Trail Committee Chairman Joe Geller had been present at Monday's meeting but didn't comment about the appointment. The next day, Carlson said tabling was simply an "easier way" to get rid of the motion.

Both a warrant article and a ballot question will go before residents this spring to receive a consensus around certain aspects regarding the construction of the rail trail.

While the ballot question bluntly asks whether the town wants the bike path, the warrant article, submitted by the coalition, asks the town to not approve the construction of the path until a 25-percent design is completed on the entire 4.5 mile trail, among other conditions as well.

Topsfield's proposed rail trail is part of a 26-mile trail that proponents hope will run from Salisbury to Danvers. Several months ago, MassHighway approved 25 percent design funding on the entire project. While towns such as Topsfield are still in charge of public outreach and abutter concerns, state consultants will go before regulatory boards to handle issues such as wet land concerns and major route intersections.

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