

Feds pull rail trail funds

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Topsfield -

The Federal Highway Administration has pulled more than \$700,000 in federal funding for a proposed 26-mile bike path from Danvers to Salisbury a year after it was designated a “high-priority project.”

The news has left local trail advocates and organizers puzzled, as the project, called the Border to Boston Trail, is one of only two projects not granted funding among more than 100 regional and local projects. The other project not included was another rail trail project, the Assabet River Rail Trail.

In all, the federal government had earmarked more than \$500,000,000 in funding for highway and transit projects across the state, according to a document found on the Boston Regional Metropolitan Planning Organization Web site.

The federal office had committed \$718,000 for a feasibility study, which would have been used to inform potential contractors about the project and to start preliminary design work.

“It’s odd because the funding package contained many others,” Boxford Rail Trail Committee member Steve Davis said. “It could’ve been a random decision...throwing darts at a dart board.”

Topsfield Rail Trail Committee Chairman Joe Geller speculated that the project could’ve been pushed off the list due to a drop in federal revenue that comes from gasoline tax. With news emerging that Americans drove 10 million miles less than they did last year, Geller said it is feasible that a decrease in federal transportation money caused the project to lose funding.

“Highway gasoline tax revenues are down,” Geller said.

A representative from the public affairs office for the Federal Highway Administration was not able to provide an explanation for the funding loss by deadline.

But both Boxford and Topsfield rail trail organizers won’t be taking this sitting down. They are involved in letter-writing campaign intended to convince the federal administration to restore the money.

Border to Boston Coalition Chairman David Read is spearheading this letter-writing campaign, attempting to gain the support of political figures ranging from selectmen to U.S. senators and congressmen.

Both U.S. Senator John Kerry's office and Congressman John Tierney's office have pledged to "take action and restore funding."

Individuals such as Davis and Geller are focused on including state legislators in this fight and have already received the cooperation of State Sen. Bruce Tarr, R-Gloucester.

The proposed trail is set to run 26 miles through Essex County and require the cooperation of many communities including Boxford, Danvers, Georgetown, Newbury, Newburyport, Salisbury, Topsfield, and Wenham. It is proposed to sit on top of the abandoned Maine to Boston railroad bed.

Geller said that the regional organizers for the project had stated that the construction on the trail would not begin for at least another five to 10 years.

"That kind of statement was assuming there would be bumps in the road," Geller said, considering the most recent news as a one of those "bumps." He said that if the letter-writing campaign is not successful in restoring the funding, the regional project organizers could always request the funding for next year.

In the meantime, Topsfield Rail Trail Committee members and volunteers are taking steps to make the Topsfield section more accommodating to folks who may want to preview the trail.

Geller said he and others are working to have a board put over a railroad bridge that crosses the Ipswich River in order to make it safer to walk over. They are also looking to receive permission to take out a railroad switch that may be dangerous for bikers willing to ride on top of the railroad ties.

- "It's a perfectly walk-able from the Wenham town line to Washington Street," Geller said.