

Rail Trail committee pushes for June finish date

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Topsfield Rail Trail organizers are counting the days before the first pile of stone dust hits the ground for the first phase of a 4-mile bike path. While some issues with abutters are still unresolved, the Rail Trail Committee is looking to start construction as soon as possible.

The trail, which would run through town on an abandoned rail bed, received state funding that will expire at the beginning of summer. Therefore, the town must be ready for construction by late March or early April.

“So, it’s exciting times,” said Rail Trail Committee Chairman Joe Geller, who began working toward this goal 17 years ago.

With designs complete and approved by selectmen, the committee has sought bids for the first phase of the trail, which runs from Washington Street to Summer Street. Since doing so, Geller said they have already received 21 different bid offers and hope to gain a competitive deal from an apparent demand for the work.

Geller said construction would include digging up topsoil and pressing a stone dust surface into the ground where the trail is designed to run. Some areas of the trail that will require installation of an asphalt service and others will only require trail barriers on existing pavement.

With construction nearing, the Rail Trail Committee recently held another public forum for abutters.

The workshop featured two speakers that shared expertise on abutter liabilities and how rail trails can affect property values.

“The original impetus was to answer questions about liability,” Geller said.

Geller said abutters such as the Morgan’s and DeAmario’s, both of whom have been vocally opposed to the trail, attended the meeting to speak about their liability to trail users that get hurt on their property.

Presenter Craig Della Penna, a rail trail advocate who has speaks on the issue nationally, told the crowd of cases where property sales were higher than the asking price because of the close proximity to a rail trail.

Steve Winslow spoke about personal injury law and abutter’s liability to those who are injured on their property. He said that the homeowners insurance would need to cover the abutters in this case.

Earlier this week, Geller said the committee was set to discuss the various construction items that they plan to complete with the help of volunteers, such as sign installation and the planting of new grass along the trail.

Also at the meeting, Geller said they would briefly discuss the planning of a ribbon-cutting ceremony once the first phase of the trail is complete. Among many individuals, Geller said they would be inviting the state officials that aided Topsfield in receiving the grant money that will make the trail a reality.

“We owe them a deep debt of gratitude,” Geller said.