

Progress on Rail Trail chugging along

By Vladimir Shvorin

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Work surrounding the Topsfield Linear Common project, otherwise known as the Rail Trail, is progressing despite delays involving the removal of railroad ties.

The town of Topsfield is working alongside the Iron Horse Preservation Society, a national nonprofit that removes and salvages abandoned railroad tracks. Iron Horse then provides the railroad materials to the U.S. government at no cost, to be reused at the U.S.-Mexico border in the form of anti-vehicle barriers. Ties that are unfit for service at the border are used as fuel at biomass power plants.

"It's been going slower than we had hoped because the Iron Horse society has been more successful than they thought they would be," said Joe Geller, chairman of Rail Trail Committee group formed in 2005 to oversee the project. "They're working in other communities and that's delayed the work here. While we're impatient, this is still going to be a great

benefit for Topsfield, to work with the Iron Horse group."

The 3.9-mile trail project will stretch from the Wenham town line to the Boxford line. Currently, the first of four phases has been completed.

The second phase is approximately 75 percent finished and the third phase will likely be moving forward in the coming weeks, said Geller. Topsfield has already secured a 99-year lease with the MBTA, the owner of the southern half of the trail. Lease negotiations are ongoing with National Grid, the landlord of the northern half. Phase 4, which will take the project north once a lease agreement is reached, has yet to begin.

"Thus far we've finished Phase 1, which goes from Washington to Summer Street," said Geller. "That trail's in heavy use. People are enjoying it. Phase 2, Summer Street to Route 1, is 75 percent finished. It's certainly useable. Just yesterday, we installed a fencing system around Route 1 so people can go on the trail and cross Route 1. For Phase 3, [which will go to the Wenham border], the ties are partially

removed. We're headed south with construction."

Progress on the Rail Trail has been slow, but steadily paced. Hope seems to be on the horizon, however, said the Rail Trail Committee chairman.

"There's a chance that, in the next couple of weeks, all of the ties will be removed for the rest of the trails going down to the Wenham town line," said Geller. "Then, we have to look at the finished surface of the trail going south. And we have two miles of trail going north that we're working with National Grid on to work out a lease so we can start working on that northern section that'll go up to the Boxford town line. We don't have a schedule for that. It's just a matter of how the negotiations go with National Grid."

Planned uses for the trail will include a range of recreational purposes and non-motorized commuting. Although he said there hasn't been any criticism from residents within the last year, Geller reported the Rail Trail Committee does provide a forum for residents to voice concerns at their public meetings.

"Well, there were people that

were concerned about privacy issues," said Geller. "[People were concerned about] security, encroachment. Now that we have a major section of the trail finished, many of the people that were against the trail now embrace it and really enjoy it.

"The people that were against the trail were concerned that it would be like a Route 128 for bicycles and it would be an eye sore. But some of those same people are now saying that 'the trail looks beautiful and looks like it's always been in town.'"

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