

Topsfield Rail Trail gets public airing

by Faye Raymond

It was designed as a public forum to talk about starting to construct a rail trail through Topsfield. An estimated 100 people crowded Proctor School last week to talk about the plan, or lack of one, as opponents say.

Town Moderator John Kinhan gave a panel of proponents (Joe Geller and Greg Demers) and opponents (CNI—The Coalition for Neighborhood Information's, Kathy Morgan and Eric Gutowski), a chance to inform townspeople of their views prior to a May 6 town meeting vote. A positive vote then would signal a go-ahead to begin building a portion of the rail trail through center town.

It's a plan that is not going to cost the local taxpayers a dime, just perhaps some in-kind service, proponents say.

Geller said that he's worked on the Rail Trail for Topsfield for the past 12 years, and on the RT committee for three. In 2004, 86 percent of respondents to a survey were in support of a rail trail being built here. Geller emphasized that if the trail is built, it will be done with "The three Gs—grants, gifts and generosity of volunteers."

"It's important to have alternate routes to get bikes off the street and a way for kids to get safely to school," said Geller.

Kathy Morgan counters that "the proposed trail, in addition to being a multi million dollar public works

project without any revenue, will pose public safety issues." She argues that the multi use trail will have a mix of cyclists, walkers, horse back riders and runners, on a trail that cuts through tot playgrounds, ball fields and tennis courts behind Proctor School.

"What happens if a foul ball spooks a horse?" opponents questioned.

In addition to calling for a full plan and costs for the proposed trail, Morgan says the Topsfield endeavor is all part of an overall plan to open up a trail from Boston to the border in New Hampshire. It mostly follows abandoned rail beds or power line right-of-ways.

"This trail is not a necessity, it's a luxury," Gutowski reminded the audience.

Morgan wanted to know how vandalism, police patrols and maintenance costs would be handled. She spoke of vehicle parking needs for those who use the trails, construction of expensive road crossings, especially at Route One. She noted that a trail surface preferred for rail trails elsewhere is paving, not stone dust.

Again proponents said that any costs will be covered through grants and volunteer help.

"The rail trail in West Boylston is 11 years old and at the 10-year mark the first maintenance of the trail consisted of smoothing out the dips in the surface," said Geller.

■ Rail Page 7

Topsfield Rail Trail gets public airing

From Page 6

Morgan cautioned that one of the RT's goals is tourism. She did not know if this wide an exposure was the intent of local trail advocates. "I don't think it will be a most safe environment for our children," she pointed out.

While there is an issue with young

people loitering in the parking lot down town, Morgan said that once a trail is built, "they are going to go behind somebody's house on the bike path."

Geller reminded folks that houses abutting rail trails in other communities have shown an increase in value, once abutting bicycle trails were

established. He also pointed to studies done on three rail trails, pointing out that an estimated 200 people per day use these trails.

Greg Demers added that their hope in doing trails is in "Creating a safe clean asset to the town. We can have that in Topsfield if we plan to phase it in."