

RAIL TRAIL CONVERSION ADVISORY COMMITTEE
Town of Sudbury, Massachusetts
Minutes of Meeting on August 8, 2005

Present: Sigrid Pickering, Bill Place, Madeleine Gelsinon, Carole Wolfe, Dick Williamson, Pat Brown, Elizabeth Foley, Nancy Powers, Bridget Hanson, Bob Hall.

Absent: Dennis Mannone, Eric Poch, Jennifer Pincus.

Also present were two residents of Pennymeadow Road, Elaine Kneeland and Jim Nigrelli, the town manager, Maureen Valente, and Stacey Hart, a reporter from the Metrowest News.

Pat Brown called the meeting to order at 7:35 P.M. As a decision had to be made about who would take the minutes there was a brief discussion about some of the difficulties the committee has had in writing, approving and posting them in a timely fashion on the RTCAC website. Bob Hall volunteered to take the minutes at all future meetings and to distribute a draft for comment no later than a week after the meeting. Committee members are to make their comments within a week after receiving the draft, and Bob will organize the comments and distribute them to the members in order to facilitate discussion and approval at the subsequent meeting. The committee accepted this proposal effective immediately.

Presentation by Nick Rubino of Earth Tech

Earth Tech is the consulting firm that performed the feasibility study and design of the Assabet River Rail Trail. Mr. Rubino was involved in both aspects of that project. The purpose of his talk was to inform the committee about what it might expect from a feasibility study and how best to go about getting what it wants. He emphasized the need to be as specific as possible in identifying the concerns of the committee and to prioritize them, in recognition of the fact that it is unlikely it will get everything it wants with the funds available. What the committee can expect is a general survey of the major features of the right-of-way (ROW), the identification of problem areas, possible options to solve the problems and ball park estimates of the costs. He illustrated the way such studies typically proceed by describing the way things happened for the Assabet River Rail Trail. In that case, the initial study was not really a feasibility study, but rather a survey of the general features of the ROW. It identified such features as bridges or bridges no longer intact, road crossings, possible sites of hazardous materials and ownership of the ROW. The cost of that survey was \$10,000, which was split among the five towns involved. More problems were encountered in Stow than in the other towns, and it appears now that development of the trail, already underway or completed in Hudson and Marlboro, will proceed from the ends toward the middle.

A major concern in Sudbury stems from the fact that a significant portion of the ROW passes through wetlands. Mr. Rubino emphasized the need to talk at the outset with the town conservation commission to determine their concerns and for any consultant to work interactively with the commission throughout a feasibility study in order to recognize problems and identify possible solutions. Storm drainage, for example, might be solved by having the trail surface sloped so that runoff would be directed to a drainage ditch on one side of the trail. Leaching systems might provide relief in some areas where there is sufficient space. In areas where there appear to be no possibilities of introducing a paved surface board walks have been used to span such areas. A stone dust path may be an alternative solution in such cases. An initial feasibility study will not provide detailed surveys of the wetlands, including vernal pools, nor of wildlife habitat and sites of hazardous waste, among other things. At the very least, however, the initial phase should include an assessment based on a visual inspection of the site and on data gleaned from state and local sources. Detailed surveys, of hazardous waste sites for example, can be very expensive, and it is not clear at what intervals along the ROW samples

should be taken. But the consultants should be able from public records and other data to identify likely spots of contamination. Licensed Site Professionals (LSPs) are needed to identify possible sites, but the cost of testing at such sites can be picked up by the state, as it has in Hudson and Marlboro. Sigrid Pickering noted that there are wildlife experts who can be hired at reasonable cost to survey the wildlife that might be affected by construction of the trail so that potential problems might be made known to consultants at the outset of a feasibility study.

Mr. Rubino touched on other aspects of a trail that should be considered in preparation for the submission of an RFP. These included parking areas, lighting and connections to other trails. Such considerations might be facilitated by the consultants walking the ROW with members of the conservation commission and RTCAC and meeting with members of those committees for perhaps 4-5 hours. Briefly, other points made in the discussion were: (1) Chain-link, shrubbery and stockade fences were installed in Hudson and Marlboro to mitigate privacy concerns, but there are no general rules to determine when fencing is provided. Such considerations are a part of the final design in response to the requests of individual abutters. One way those requests can be made known is in public hearings, which often occur sometime between the 25% and 75% studies. The fencing must be inside the ROW. (2) The kinds of data needed from feasibility studies will depend in part on what the funding sources are likely to be. For example, funding through the CMAQ (Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality) program requires estimates of reductions likely to occur in vehicle miles traveled (VMT), a consideration not required in funds obtained through enhancement funding. (3) Earth Tech has worked on unpaved trails in other states, but none in Massachusetts. It favors paved trails because of lower maintenance and less frequent replacement. There are unpaved trails in Massachusetts, but they are under the auspices of the Division of Conservation and Recreation (DCR), not the Mass Highway Department. (4) Carole Wolfe inquired about methods to reduce noise along the trails. Mr. Rubino replied that he had never had to consider that question. (5) Pat Brown was concerned that local requirements for trail properties in wetlands might be greater than state requirements, with the unwanted consequence that designs satisfying state specifications would not meet Sudbury's requirements, thereby requiring design changes and their inevitable costs. Mr. Rubino advised downloading state data first, then checking with the conservation commission before prioritizing our requirements for a consultant. (5) What about graffiti? Nothing much can be done except that Earth Tech has identified a treatment for surfaces that makes removal easier. (6) Hudson and Marlboro have purchased two bicycles in each town for police use in maintaining order and security.

Question Period for Visitors

Mr. Nigrelli asked two questions about Earth Tech's experience with the development of rail trails: (1) For how many trails had it been the consultant for the feasibility and design stages. About six in Massachusetts and a total of about 25 nationwide. (2) Has Earth Tech ever concluded that a trail was not feasible? Not really, but their recommendations were given with clearly different price tags. Mr. Nigrelli also asked what Mr. Rubino's basic recommendation for a trail surface might be. As noted above, Earth Tech favors paved surfaces, at least for multipurpose use, but that recommendation would depend upon possible effects on wildlife, on what users are to be accommodated and other factors. Mrs. Kneeland asked how wide the Minute Man trail is. Dick Williamson responded that it was 12 feet but narrowed to 10 feet in some areas. Mr. Rubino was excused with gratitude at 9:35 P.M.

Additional Agenda Items

The minutes of the July 18 meeting were reviewed, and some corrections were made. Sigrid Pickering will incorporate those suggestions and prepare a final draft for review at the September meeting.

The questionnaire sent to abutters and neighbors of the ROW was discussed. Pat Brown was insistent that a proper paper trail be established for that effort, which should include knowing how the list of recipients was developed (the criteria), who possesses the list and who will be entrusted with the responses before and after tabulation of the data. Bob Hall has the spread sheet that constitutes the list. Dick Williamson and Bill Place will provide him with a description of how it was generated. The selectman's office will be the repository for the neighbors' responses until they are tabulated and again after the tabulation is completed. A notice will be placed in the Town Crier that the deadline for submission of responses will be extended through the end of August because the questionnaires were sent late without a change in the original submission date – in the hope that responses might be obtained from people who had not yet sent them thinking they were too late. The collation of the responses will take place on Thursday, September 8 at 7:30 P.M. No other business will be transacted at that time. Dick Williamson will be responsible for a canonic spread sheet in which to record the data collected, perhaps, on multiple laptop computers.

The meeting of Pat Brown and Dick Williamson with Sudbury's safety officials, police chief Peter Fadgen and fire chief, Kenneth MacLean, along with the town manager, Maureen Valente, was summarized by Pat Brown in both written and verbal summaries provided at this RTCAC meeting. The earlier meeting took place on July 20, 2005. The points that were emphasized by Pat at the present meeting were as follows: The chiefs want to respond to concrete proposals, not to general questions or hypothetical situations, of which there are many. They are happy to confer with their counterparts in other towns that have established rail trails, but they would like to work with a restricted list of towns that are similar to Sudbury. They might talk initially in an informal way about the experience of the other towns and later about specific questions arising from specific Sudbury concerns and design features of a Sudbury rail trail. These considerations gave rise to the formation of a Safety subcommittee as described below.

Safety Subcommittee: The subcommittee will have Dick Williamson, Carole Wolfe and Madeleine Gelsinon as its members. Its first charge will be to identify about five towns similar to Sudbury with established rail trails. They will probably include some of the towns along the Minute Man and Nashua River Rail Trails. Ms. Valente indicated again that we can not expect the chiefs to go off on general research missions, but they would be willing to discuss with us issues we should be aware of in order to help us formulate questions for the RFP.

Conservation Subcommittee: Because conservation considerations are to be a major concern of any RFP that Sudbury will submit, the committee proposed that a subcommittee to concentrate on conservation issues be established. The proposal was approved and the subcommittee will consist of Bridget Hanson, Carole Wolfe and Sigrid Pickering. The committee's charge led to a discussion of when and to what extent its work should take place. The discussion indicated that people had come away from the first meeting with the Conservation Commission with different views of what had been suggested. It was agreed, however, that its first charge would be to develop a list of questions we propose to include in the RFP and then pass them before the Conservation Commission for its review and recommendations.

Return to Published Studies of Rail Trails: Bridget Hanson proposed that everyone read the Indiana study of rail trails, which looked at five different communities, four with rail trails and one that rejected a trail. The committee will review that study at the September meeting. Dick Williamson is currently seeking permission to place on our website (or that of the Friends of the Bruce Freeman Rail Trail) a number of studies that most of the committee is not yet familiar with. Dick will distribute a list of those studies as permission is granted.

New Scheduling of RTAC Meetings: Scheduling meetings in the way it has been done recently has proven difficult and left members with no clear guidelines for when they might occur. It was proposed, therefore, that a regular time each month would be a better way. The committee approved that proposal, and the second Thursday of each month was chosen as the best time, beginning in October. The next meeting had already been scheduled for Monday, September 12.

Time line for RTCAC efforts: Madeleine Gelsinon suggested that it would be helpful to members if they had some idea of what we hope to accomplish by certain times. Funding issues seem to be the major constraint, depending upon when additional funds might be needed. If the committee thought it necessary to request additional funds for the coming year it would be necessary to have a proposal ready this fall, but there was no inclination to proceed that way. Dick Williamson indicated that if the initial RFP were complete by next summer we would be in time to request additional funds for the following year.

More abutter representation on RTCAC? The RTCAC can only suggest candidates to the Board of Selectman, which it has done. Ms. Valente pointed out, however, that the primary criterion employed by the selectmen is that the candidate be concerned with the overall value of the project to the town as a whole, not to specific groups in favor or opposition to it.

Final Comments by Visitors

Mr. Nigrelli raised the question of who was responsible for the Concord feasibility study, and specifically what role the Friends of the Bruce Freeman Rail Trail played in that proposal. There appears to be some confusion about that role, one Concord official giving the impression that the role was substantial. In any case, the Concord RFP was written by Concord officials, and the role of the Friends was not clear at this time. Mr. Nigrelli also wondered if the RTCAC would examine rail-trail studies whose findings were opposed to the establishment of a trail. It was pointed out that the committee is committed to finding unbiased studies executed with care, whatever their conclusions. Those will be posted on the RTCAC website. Elaine Kneeland noted that the households of abutters and neighbors of the railbed received only one questionnaire for the RTCAC survey, which could not reflect differing opinions that might exist within a home. It was pointed out that this was meant to be a survey of households, not a vote by individuals.

The meeting was adjourned at about 9:45 P.M.

Submitted by Bob Hall, August 10, 2005

Approved by the RTCAC on September 12, 2005