

**RAIL TRAIL CONVERSION ADVISORY COMMITTEE**  
**Town of Sudbury, Massachusetts**  
**Minutes of Meeting on November 10, 2005**

**Present:** Pat Brown, Betty Foley, Madeleine Gelsinon, Bob Hall, Bridget Hanson, Sigrid Pickering, Jennifer Pincus, Nancy Powers, Dick Williamson, Carole Wolfe.

**Absent:** Dennis Mannone, Bill Place, Erich Poch

Also Present were Bill Williamson from Framingham and Barbara Pike from Concord, both Friends of the Bruce Freeman Rail Trail, and several Sudbury residents whose names were not obtained

The meeting began at 7:35 P.M with a talk by Craig Della-Penna, formerly the regional director of the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy in New England and presently a strong independent advocate for rail trails. He began with a personal history of how he became involved in the rails-to-trails movement following his employment by a railroad and the realization that there was no history of rail trails. He began to bridge that gap with his first book, "24 Great Rail Trails in New Jersey". He has since written two other guides to rail trails. At the meeting he showed maps of the railroads at different times revealing a vast network throughout New England that reached a high water mark around 1915. There followed a gradual abandonment of many of them leaving the potential for many to be converted to other uses, including rail trails. Another impetus to his involvement was his failure to understand why some people objected to the conversion of the unused railbeds when he had biked on more than 50 trails and found no significant problems with any of them. His maps also included present trails in New England, Massachusetts in particular, and projects in the mill or likely to be in the near future. He noted that presently there are more than 200 rail-trail projects currently underway within a hundred-mile radius of Sudbury, 60 of them in Massachusetts. He then talked briefly about books relevant to the development of rail trails that he strongly recommended. These included the following:

"Getting There" by Stephen B. Goddard

"Divided Highways" by Tom Lewis

"The Geography of Nowhere" by James Kunstler

"The Tipping Point" by Malcolm Gladwell

"Stations: An Imagined Journey" by Michael Flanagan

Craig then showed numerous pictures of rail trails throughout New England, emphasizing the amenities and advantages to communities along the trails. He cited several cases where the development of unused right-of-ways (ROWS) led to the revival of towns or areas along the railbeds, and instances where residents in some areas wanted rail trails so badly they have worked on their own to initiate the construction and pay for the development without government support. For example, in a region west of Concord, NH, the residents have begun the arduous task of pulling up the rails and ties themselves. On a similar note a trail 25 miles long in Ontario was built completely without government assistance. He seemed to be saying that proponents of rail trails have funding options other than federal or state funds with their accompanying restrictions. Undeveloped the railbeds are dead corridors, he argued, often full of trash. Developed they become linear parks serving recreation and travel. They are also social facilitators. "People interact on trails."

Throughout his talk he attempted to address various concerns about rail trails wherever they have been developed. He noted that "rail-trail wars" have often been over the nature of the surface, some proponents favoring an asphalt surface, others a stone-dust or other relatively soft surface. He repeatedly emphasized the prevalence of stone-dust trails, noting that over 50% of the trail surfaces throughout the country are stone dust. When asked about his views on asphalt surfaces he did not object to them, but said he would prefer to have a

stone-dust trail than no trail at all. Compacted stone dust, he maintained, was good for all uses except roller blading, for which he clearly has little enthusiasm. He regarded as myth the idea that stone-dust trails are more expensive to maintain, claiming that over long periods the costs are about the same as for asphalt. But the maintenance he envisions is largely through voluntary help to inspect the trails every few months, fill the holes and tamp the rough parts. Moreover, the equivalent costs of the two types of surfaces over long periods appears to depend on the reconstruction of the trails, perhaps after 20-25 years, that would entail again the greater initial cost of the asphalt surface. This kind of reconstruction is currently underway on the Cape Cod trail. He noted later that rail trails are eligible for repair costs under Chapter 90 of the Massachusetts General Laws, which offers state aid for the repair of roads and sidewalks.

Craig also touched on other issues such as the problems, real or imagined, of having a house close to a trail. He showed a number of pictures of houses extremely close to trails, including one of his own that has been converted to a bed-and-breakfast inn, only 8 feet from the east-west trail in Northampton, MA. He has mounted a "trailcam" to photograph the users of the trail throughout the day, beginning with grade school children biking or walking to school in the morning, followed by mothers walking with younger children, many in carriages, through much of the day, children returning from school in the afternoon, etc. The major use of most trails, he claims, is walking. Don't call them 'bike trails' he urged. Only 1% of the users are bikers he claimed later in the meeting. Serious bikers traveling at high speeds don't use rail trails, but prefer the roads. They are often opposed to trails, fearing that where trails are built they will be chased from the roads.

He described his own analysis of the economic impact on real estate values along the trail, taking as his initial base approximately 500 homes that appeared in for-sale notices in the towns of Arlington, Lexington and Bedford (towns along the Minuteman Rail Trail) and Ayer, Groton, Pepperell and Dunstable (towns through which the Nashua River Rail Trail passes) that is, towns near Sudbury having rail trails. Among the 500 listings there were 27 in which the proximity to trails was listed as a desirable amenity. The upshot of the analysis was that those houses sold at prices closer to the original asking price and in a significantly shorter time than houses not close to trails. He downplayed concerns about security, mainly with anecdotal evidence that has been frequently noted, such as the removal of a large wooden fence in one case and 11,000 ft. of chain-link fencing in another, both requested by the property owners when the trail was constructed. He knew of no evidence that wildlife is seriously disturbed, though he presented no data to support that claim. At several points in his talk he touted the role of volunteers who have helped maintain trails, citing, for example, the work by a seventy-something woman who regularly swept a trail she used, sometimes blowing leaves off the trail as she skated along it.

Trail surfaces were again a major topic in the question period that followed. Craig indicated that stone-dust trails can be built in accordance with the more flexible guidelines of the new Design Manual of the Mass Highway Department, which is available on the MAPC website. Carole Wolfe asked if trails paved with stone dust could be narrower than the minimum requirements for asphalt trails. The response was that the manual still calls for a 10-ft. minimum, which Craig noted is only about 1ft., 6 in. wider than the ties in railbeds. A width of 8 ft. was tried on the Norwottuck Rail Trail (Northampton to Amherst) and found to be too narrow. He noted that the ties and track are still in place in Weston, which voted down a section of the Mass Central trail, but the railbed is still used regularly by equestrians and walkers. It wasn't that Weston didn't want a trail; they didn't want a trail that outsiders could use, is the way Craig interprets that fact. In further comments he was critical of trail enthusiasts who sometimes complain bitterly against the use of motorized vehicles, not taking into account the conditions and culture in which such use occurs. In northern New Hampshire the snowmobile is an important part of their economy, not just a recreational vehicle, and the trails, or railbeds, are important for travel. The people are used to them and ready to share the trails. The story is much different in southern parts of the region where most people regard them as a noisy nuisance. ATVs, on the other hand, find no support among trail users and neighbors, and measures must be taken to keep them off the trails. In that regard, Craig noted that

police don't defend railroads; they do defend trails. There are, of course, barriers that can also make access to rail trails difficult for that kind of vehicle. In his final remarks he dealt with the concept of rail banking made possible by the National Trails Act in response to the loss of land when railroads were abandoned and the land reverted to the owners of adjacent property. The concept was not realized in Massachusetts until the CSX railroad invoked it. The MBTA, the second largest landowner in Massachusetts, mistakenly thinks of itself as a railroad, Craig claimed, providing it with an excuse not to relinquish its ROW. He did not elaborate.

The committee thanked Craig for a very interesting talk and excused him around 9:10 P.M.

### **Past Minutes**

The official meeting of the RTCAC commenced immediately, and the first order of business was to approve the minutes of the July 18 meeting. Approval of the minutes of the October 27 meeting was deferred until the December meeting because the final draft was not sent to the members until this morning, and some members had not had a chance to read them.

### **Consideration and Evaluation of the Comments on the Questionnaires from Trail Neighbors**

The hour was deemed too late to begin this task, and it too was deferred until the next meeting as, of course, was the summary of the survey to be given the Board of Selectmen.

### **RTCAC Contribution to the Town Report**

A draft of the article describing the committee's work this year was prepared by Pat Brown and Dick Williamson. It has to be approved and signed by every member of the committee and submitted to the Board of Selectman by November 23. There was some concern that this might not be possible, as the committee would not convene again before that date. Every effort will be made to submit the report on time, and signatures may have to follow, which the committee understands is not a problem for those assembling the report.

### **RTCAC Membership**

Pat Brown again raised the problem the committee has had in securing and maintaining adequate membership. Lamenting what appears to be inadequate representation of abutters of the trail, she noted Maureen Valente's earlier suggestion from the selectmen that the committee identify candidates who appear genuinely interested in the project but retain an open mind about its desirability. There is no guarantee that such a candidate would be accepted, but the chance of success seems to make the effort worthwhile. An attempt will be made to do this. Also sorely missed are representatives from the Park and Recreation Commission and the Planning Board. Repeated attempts to correct this situation have not been successful, and it was not clear how the situation could be rectified. Moreover, a clear lack of someone on the town staff needed to coordinate the efforts of the RTCAC with town committees and departments that should be involved in the planning was also the subject of discussion. A potential solution to the problem was not reached.

The meeting was adjourned at 10:00 P.M.

Submitted by Bob Hall, November 18, 2005

Approved on December 10, 2005