

RAIL TRAIL CONVERSION ADVISORY COMMITTEE
Town of Sudbury, Massachusetts
Minutes of Meeting on October 27, 2005

Present: Pat Brown, Betty Foley, Madeleine Gelsinon, Bob Hall, Bridget Hanson, Jennifer Pincus, Bill Place, Nancy Powers, Dick Williamson and Carole Wolfe

Absent: Dennis Mannone, Erich Poch and Sigrid Pickering

Also present were nine interested residents of Sudbury: Jennifer Cavallaro, Daniel DePompei, Laurie Ensley, Margaret Harty, Elaine Kneeland, Jay Leu, Jim Nigrelli, Allan Wallack and Melanie Weaver

Community Input

Before the meeting was called to order the members of the community were invited to make comments. The comments were mainly a criticism of the way the responses to the trail neighbors' questionnaire were summarized and how that preliminary summary had been interpreted in the 9/15/05 Town Crier report of the RTCAC meeting in which they were first presented. That report by Stacey Hart was based on a telephone interview with Dick Williamson and included statistics concerning preference for a particular type of trail and trail surface. The percentages quoted in the report for questions 2 and 3 were normalized to the number of questionnaires *that indicated a preference*. The report left out that qualifier that had been provided by Dick. A number of respondents to the questionnaire indicated a need for more information before making a choice. The commenters felt that the percentages should have been given normalized to the total number of responses, including those who indicated a need for more information. This normalization reduces the percentages for those who prefer a particular type of trail. The top choices were for a multi-use trail and for an asphalt surface. By normalizing the percentages to the total responses, the implied support for such a trail is reduced. Some trail neighbors strongly oppose this type of trail. Several visitors suggested that the RTCAC should have replied to the Town Crier in a timely fashion to correct the impression the article conveyed. The Committee returned to these subjects later in the meeting and again in the community input at the end of the meeting. Another topic raised by the community members concerned the definition of a rail trail, specifically whether there is a distinction between a 'shared-use trail' and a 'rail trail'. The RTCAC has made no attempt to be precise in the use of those terms, but a multi-use rail trail usually means a 10-12 feet wide trail with a firm surface suitable for biking, running, in-line skating, wheel chairs, etc. in accordance with EOTC, Mass Highway and AASHTO guidelines that restrict its design in order to receive funding.

Minutes

Approval of the minutes of the July 18 meeting were delayed once again in Sigrid Pickering's absence because committee members were not certain they had the final revision in hand. Minutes of the September 12 meeting were approved as amended by one statement Carole Wolfe had requested and Bob Hall had failed to include.

Old Business

Update to the Board of Selectmen: The letter to the selectman, which had seen several revisions, was approved with one addition to the first item in the letter indicating that community members have been attending the RTCAC meetings. A request to the selectmen to hold a public forum about the rail trail will be made after they have received the letter and the survey is completed. The contents of the letter will constitute the major part of the committee's contribution to the Annual Town Report. The co-chairs will do appropriate editing.

A Response to Public Discussion of the Questionnaire: Letters to the Town Crier regarding the way in which the survey results were summarized, in addition to other letters that have been highly critical of the way the RTCAC is proceeding, raised the question of whether the committee should respond to counter the very negative impressions carried in the paper that some members think unjustified. The committee decided not to respond to negative opinions, but only to factual errors.

Review of Documents Associated with Survey of Trail Neighbors' Opinions: Pat Brown described the documents that will go into a packet of materials to be placed in the reference room of the Goodnow Library. It will include copies of the questionnaires submitted by the neighbors, an informational letter sent to them in June advising them of the questionnaire to follow, a spread sheet of the names and addresses of the people who received the questionnaire and a description of the criteria by which they were selected. The documents were all approved for this purpose. The packet will be taken to the library soon.

Consideration and Evaluation of the Comments on the Questionnaires: The committee plan had been for its members to read the comments made on the returned questionnaires at the present meeting, and to summarize the impressions they made. It was deemed impractical to do so in the time remaining. Later in the meeting, a decision was made not to attempt this during the next meeting either. Rather, the members would read them on their own time at the library and summarize their impressions that will be discussed and summarized at the November meeting.

Discussion of the survey results resumed at this point with the presentation of Dick Williamson's revision of the statistical summary noted above. . The summary included two different summaries of questions 2 and 3. Calculated percentages of choices made in questions 2 and 3 were normalized to both the number of indicated choices and to the total number of respondents who had answered those questions, including those indicating the need for more information before a choice could be made. The argument was made that the initial statistic served no purpose, and the committee decided to delete it. Jim Nigrelli also questioned the use of averages of categorical data applied to the answers of question 4 which dealt with the various concerns of the trail neighbors. The data were clearly bimodal, and the average alone can be misleading in such cases. The data will be reworked dividing the frequency of responses for each concern into three intervals: 0 and 1 ratings, 2 and 3 ratings and 4 and 5 ratings. Dick Williamson will make the recommended changes to be reviewed at the next meeting and will also add the statistics for questions 7 and 8. When the summary has met with the committee's approval it will be included in the packet containing the questionnaires deposited in the library. Several members of the community suggested that when the summary is approved, the revision should be sent to the Town Crier to correct apparent discrepancies between the paper's account of the survey and the information submitted to it. Allan Wallack also suggested that the RTCAC should develop procedures for the submission of its finding to newspapers or other media and procedures for handling reports it perceives as erroneous.

Dick had done two further analyses looking at (1) the differences in responses from abutters and from people who lived near the right of way (ROW) and (2) the differences in responses to questions 2, 4, 5, and 6 based on their preferences for the type of surface. In the first it was clear that people who lived nearby were more approving of an asphalt multi-use trail than residents whose property directly abuts the ROW. In the second analysis it was quite clear that preferences for a multi-use trail versus a foot path or no public access were highly predictive of the type of surface that was preferred, as one might expect. There are a number of other interesting aspects of the analyses, but the committee did not elect to include them in the packet placed in the library as it had not had time to review and discuss these analyses.

Subcommittee Reports: Neither the Conservation nor the Safety Subcommittees had met since the previous meeting and thus had nothing to report.

Information Items

Dick Williamson reported on a number of documents, mainly studies of rail trails done largely by government agencies or universities, that have been placed in the library. These studies have not yet been reviewed and approved as good, unbiased studies by the RTCAC, which was the committee's original intent. To do this appeared to some members as an impracticable goal in the near future. The suggestion was made that a list of these studies should accompany their retention in a drawer at the library. Dick pointed out that most of these studies are available on the website of the Friends of the Bruce Freeman Rail Trail. Carole Wolfe proposed that these minutes should not mention that fact, as it seems inappropriate for the committee to refer the public to any website that strictly plays an advocacy role, whatever its persuasion might be. A vote on that proposal failed, 6 in favor of the notice, two opposed and one abstention. A new study conducted by the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy on "Rail-Trail Maintenance and Operation" has just been published. Dick distributed the few copies he had, and Jim Nigrelli had obtained a pdf version that he offered to distribute to committee members.

Dick then reviewed some of the things he had learned from a number of events he had attended since the previous RTCAC meeting. He attended two meetings at the State House of the Rail Trail, Bicycle and Pedestrian Caucus. Issues addressed were similar to those discussed at Mass Highways' "Moving Together 2005" conference on 10/19/2005. The meetings included information on Safe Routes to School, for which of \$2.5 million dollars will be available for study and development. The money would not be spent on rail trails but might possibly be used to create links between rail trails and nearby schools. Cathy Lewis of CTPS asked several Framingham and Sudbury residents to do rush-hour counts of bicycle and pedestrian traffic on roads near the CSXT rail bed. The counts are in support of the CTPS study of the conversion of this rail bed into a rail trail. Dick Williamson did counts at the intersection of Nobscot Rd. and Route 20. Only a handful of cyclists and pedestrians were counted at that intersection. The "Moving Together 2005" Conference included a series of 12 workshops on different aspects of biking and walking in the Commonwealth. John Hendrickson of Fay, Spofford and Thorndike presented one on the rebuilding of the Cape Cod Rail Trail, which is now 25 years old. One finding of interest was that the asphalt has held up remarkably well, except where it has been disturbed by tree roots. In the rebuilding, which is expected to cost \$6.2 million, root barriers that are the products of much research on the problem will be used to avoid that kind damage to the rebuilt trail. There was a workshop on the new Mass Highway Design Manual. The intent of the changes indicate a greater willingness to follow clear and consistent principles in designing and developing projects and a greater responsiveness to community input. The new guiding principles are stated in the website (http://www.ecs.umass.edu/baystate_roads/MT2005/workshops.html).

It was also noted at this meeting that a proposed amendment to brown-fields legislation being considered by the senate would cap the liability for contamination along a ROW at \$50,000. Passage of this amendment would almost certainly expedite the purchase and sale of railroad properties for trail purposes. It also appears that Mass Highway is settling on procedures that will prevent the spread of contamination during the construction of a rail trail. These include keeping all of the earth that has to be displaced during construction within the confines of the railbed, covering it where feasible by the trail surface. Carole asks if it was also noted that unpaved surfaces are being considered in appropriate places.

Proposed Agenda Items from Committee

Dick Williamson had prepared a draft of an RFP for an engineering and environmental assessment (feasibility-study) of the north-south trail in Sudbury, suggesting that an initial discussion might commence at the November 10 RTCAC meeting. The draft does not include questions pertaining to conservation issues, which are to be developed by the Conservation Subcommittee. It was decided, however, that there would not be enough time in the November meeting for this discussion, and it will be postponed until December. Craig Della-Penna, formerly regional director of the Rails-To-Trails Conservancy, will speak at the November meeting.

The meeting was formerly adjourned at approximately 9:45, and the community members were invited again to offer comments.

Community Comments

Many of the comments in this period were concerned again with the survey results, perceived difficulties with the statistics employed, relations with the press and the need for a policy to guide those relations. Allan Wallack suggested that the survey results should be made public without any attempt to summarize them in one statistic or another. Elaine Kneeland noted that the Acton and Concord studies did not consider safety concerns – a matter of importance in view of two recent incidents of crime on the Minuteman Trail in Lexington – suggesting that our selectmen should be apprised of this concern. Allan Wallack pointed out that the Acton and Concord studies also failed to consider unpaved trails. And finally, Ms. Kneeland expressed a deep concern that the proposed trail would have adverse effects on the nature of the town. She pleaded that the recommendations of this committee should have the best interests of the whole town in mind, not special interests of one or another group. The comment period ended at approximately 10:00 P.M.

Submitted October 31, 2005 by Bob Hall

Approved December 10, 2005