

A community newsletter from the Natick Cochituate Rail Trail Advisory Committee on the proposed Cochituate Rail Trail. Visit our website at www.natickma.gov/crt

Welcome to the Natick CRT Update!

The Natick Cochituate Rail Trail Advisory Committee is appointed by the Board of Selectmen, and serves to advise the town about the potential rail trail from Natick Center to Saxonville in Framingham, as well as to seek input from members of the community.

Its 11 members include four citizens at large, along with representatives of the Board of Selectmen, Planning Board, Recreation and Parks Commission, Conservation Commission, Finance Committee, Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committee and the Community Development Department. Members serve for three year terms.

The group typically meets once a month as posted on the town's community calendar. All meetings are open to the public. ■■■

What is a Rail Trail?

A rail trail is a recreational area located within an abandoned railroad right-of-way, or ROW. Rail trails are increasingly common in Massachusetts and throughout the United States.

Examples of rail trail projects in the state include the 22-mile Cape Cod Rail Trail stretching from Dennis to Wellfleet, the 11-mile Minuteman Bikeway from Bedford to Cambridge, and the Milford Upper Charles Trail. ■■■

Local Development Looks to a Possible Future with a Rail Trail

In the last year, Natick government continues to be challenged to manage growth in our suburban community. A number of significant residential development proposals have been reviewed by the town, including some which are directly adjacent to the railroad ROW.

These large development proposals include a component of affordable housing units as the town works toward a State goal of 10 percent affordable units. One project, proposed for Chrysler Road,

would be constructed next to the ROW near Home Depot and Cochituate State Park. Working with town committees, the developer has made considerations for connections to a future rail trail with pedestrian access and a vegetated buffer between parking and the ROW. A portion of mitigation funds from this developer may potentially be applied to the rail trail project.

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Another project still in the early planning stages is construction of residential units at the former Natick Paperboard site along North Main Street. All of the 'Paperboard' proposals to date include consideration of the future rail trail as an amenity for residents use to connect to the town center and commuter rail station.

Good communication by town committees such as the Design Review Board, Planning Board and Zoning Board of Appeals during the review of these projects has helped developers to consider and preserve a rail trail as a future amenity accessible for Natick residents. ■■■

Update on CSX Negotiations

The Natick CRT project gained attention in local papers last summer when the ROW owner, CSX, valued the 20-acre Natick portion at \$14.5 million. In response, the Selectmen voted to have an appraisal of the ROW done for the town, which will consider the CSX valuation methodology, but also include alternative approaches to valuation.

A contract for the appraisal was awarded in August and results are expected before the end of the year.

CSX did not take environmental conditions into account, but the land must be tested for contamination based on a process that will be agreed to by the town and CSX.

The Town of Natick does not intend to use local tax dollars to fund the acquisition of the ROW, particularly given the demands on Natick's budget to fund town services. Exploring alternative sources of funding is one of the goals of the Advisory Committee.

Predictably, the negotiation process between the town and CSX is a slow one, as it has been in other communities where CSX offers its land at a higher price than municipalities can afford to pay.

Every 180 days, Natick and CSX renew a 'railbanking' agreement that allows for exclusive negotiations so that town can acquire the ROW for a trail and CSX can potentially convert the ROW back to railroad service in the future. ■■■

Community Outreach

On May 28, the CRT Advisory Committee held a public meeting at the Morse Library to provide an update on the project and to give people an opportunity to offer comments and ask questions. Presenters included a representative of the state Department of Conservation and Recreation, a Framingham CRT Committee member and others. We plan to hold these similar meetings in the future to encourage community participation. The CRT web page at www.natickma.gov/crt has information provided at the May 28 forum. ■■■

Framingham Trail Moves to Design Phase

The ROW which may become the Cochituate Rail Trail extends from the Saxonville neighborhood in Framingham in the north to Natick Center in the south, about 4 miles in total.

In the past year, Framingham has secured long term lease agreements from the property owners to use the Framingham portion of this property for a rail trail. This summer, Town of Framingham representatives interviewed a number of professional design consulting firm and eventually selected Weston & Sampson Engineers to provide design services for their rail trail.

Framingham will create a design review subcommittee to work through the design process with the consultant. Framingham has invited the Natick Rail Trail Advisory Committee to participate with two members on the design review subcommittee.

This cooperation should help a future trail to have continuity from one town to the next. This will also help both parties review options for a trail crossing at Route 30 at the border of the two towns.

The web site www.crtrail.org has more information about the Framingham end of the project. ■■■

Can I Use the Rail Trail Now?

Along the ROW, the rails and ties have been removed, and street crossings have been repaved. The surface looks passable and ready for public access. The town DPW has installed barriers to discourage dumping and to prevent unauthorized vehicle access.

So what is preventing people from using the corridor for recreation? The answer is that the ROW is still private property and the public does not have permission for access. Although the ROW appears to be in better shape and more fit for pedestrian and bicycle traffic, there are also safety concerns.

If you observe dumping or other illegal activity on the ROW, please report it to the Natick Police. ■■■

Contact the CRT Advisory Committee

The CRT Advisory Committee holds public meetings about once a month. Visit www.natickma.gov/crt for more information, or email crt@natickma.org, or call the Selectmen's office at (508) 647-6410.

The CRT Advisory Committee web page includes

- CRT Reports
- Maps
- Frequently Asked Questions & Answers
- Meeting minutes
- Links to other projects and resources
- Committee directory
- Contact information

Please visit the web page for regular updates! ■■■
