



Rail trail work chugging along

By Danielle Ameden/Daily News correspondent
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HOLLISTON - Having cleared its latest hurdle under the state's golden dome, the long-derailed Upper Charles Rail Trail project is chugging along again.

The venture involves transforming a 20-mile stretch of former railroad beds into a 12-foot-wide multipurpose loop trail connecting Milford, Holliston, Sherborn, Ashland and Hopkinton. Construction on the town's segment of the trail has long been stalled by problems locking in funding and delays acquiring the rail corridor land.

"Through the years, people have said when is this ever going to occur?" said town trail committee chairman Robert Weidknecht, who described work on the 10-year project as slow but steady.

"The construction can't start until we acquire the land," he said. "We have to go one step at a time."

Currently in negotiations with CSX Corporation Inc., the town is on track to close the land sale by fall, Weidknecht said.

Once the land is bought, construction bids can go out for a two-mile stretch, from Cross Street to Hopping Brook Road, of the town's 6.7 mile trail. The two-mile segment should be ready for bicycle wheels, rollerskates and joggers' feet by the middle of next year, he said.

Funding has been one roadblock the town has faced trying to get the paved trail built. However, Weidknecht said the committee is confident after receiving recent good news.

"Deval Patrick approved our money back again," said Weidknecht, referring to the town's "roller coaster ride" trying to secure state funding.

Patrick has committed to reinstate the state's supplemental budget, which includes \$800,000 for Holliston's trail, he said. The fund was cut by former Gov. Mitt Romney last year, a move vetoed by legislators before the funds were cut again by Romney.

That money, coupled with \$1.25 million earmarked in the state's Transportation Bond Bill, will pay for the land, Weidknecht said. Also, a guaranteed \$613,000 federal Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) grant will be used for construction of the initial segment, he said.

Another major obstacle Holliston has faced has been dealing with CSX, which purchased the town's railway corridor in 1997. The company issued an extended moratorium on sales, followed by company layoffs and in-house reshuffling.

Despite an early 2005 promise to put the sale on the "fast track," CSX representatives have been slow to "come to the table" to discuss a sale, Weidknecht said.

Holliston is now working with consultants from Boston's Trust for Public Land to move the sale along. In addition, the town and CSX are working with a third-party appraiser from Danvers to come to a price agreement.

"There have been and continue to be discussions," CSX spokesman Bob Sullivan last week. Sullivan would not comment on when the sale was expected to close, but Weidknecht hopes it happens by fall.

"I'd like to remain optimistic on that," Weidknecht said.

While waiting for the sale to close, the committee has made some tangible progress by lifting the rail tracks and doing trail maintenance.

In May, two employees from Tree Specialists of Holliston worked with rail trail volunteers to clear away the invasive, exotic Norway Maples that could have crashed onto the corridor if not cut down.

"They were dragging brush to the chipper. We had one guy chipping, another guy cutting, climbing. They got a lot done," said Rolf Briggs, Tree Specialists owner.

In November, crews worked to reconstruct drainage channels by the Highland Street bridge to ready the trail for construction.



Rolfe Briggs, right, and Robert Weidknecht look at damage by a tree to a rail trail wall off Woodland Street in Holliston.
(Ed Hopfmann)

Police have also been warning ATV and dirt bike riders, who rip down loose gravel en route to a sand pit at Hopping Brook Industrial Park, to stay off the trail, Weidknecht said.

"It's illegal to go down the rail bed using ATVs," and for good reason, he said. "They gun it, then run it. They just erode (the trail) and create all kinds of problems ... It's causing a lot of damage."

Officers have issued verbal warnings and citations for trespassing with a motor vehicle along the trail "more than once," Holliston Police Lt. Keith Edison said.

"Obviously, the concern is if someone's going to get hurt or do damage to the trail," he said.

The trail committee will be working with selectmen to put up barriers and post signs prohibiting the riders from traversing the trail, Weidknecht said.

Residents have also left Christmas trees on the trail, he said.

"It becomes a dumping ground for people," he said. "We have trash pickup. We've been keeping the trail clear and open."

Holliston committee members have been inspired by the progress of Milford's trail, Weidknecht said. A June grand opening is planned to celebrate the 3.5 miles constructed there, little more than half of the total planned trail.

"They're down to the finishing touches," said Reno Deluzio, chairman of the Milford Upper Charles Trail. He said contractors are building entryways with pink granite pillars and will landscape and put up signs before spring.

Locals have already hit the pavement of the Y-shaped trail, which has branching entrances at Sacred Heart Church and Dunkin' Donuts on Main Street that meet at Fino Field and lead to the Rte. 85/Interstate 495 overpass. The remaining three miles are slated to be finished by 2008.

Deluzio said the town's progress has been quicker than Holliston's partly because town councilors, the town planner and town engineer have helped the project along. He said the project has been challenging, but worthwhile.

"Although it's long and difficult, if a community stays with it, it can be done," he said.