

Recreation path becomes a battleground

By Danielle Ameden/Daily News staff
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Charles River Trail

MILFORD - As the town prepares for its Charles River Rail Trail ribbon cutting ceremony this spring, officials say they are frustrated by bureaucratic roadblocks that getting in the way of progress on the second half of the trail.

The 3.5 miles of recreational trail already constructed have proven popular with pedestrians, who have hit the pavement running, said Board of Selectmen Chairman Brian Murray. He has high praise for the 12-foot-wide trail that branches from Main Street entrances at the Sacred Heart Church and Dunkin' Donuts that meet at Fino Field.

"It's absolutely beautiful, it's breathtaking," Murray said of the trail. "You get onto the trail once you're up past Louisa Lake ... You're just totally out in the woods. You don't even know you're in Milford."

Built on old railroad beds, the multipurpose loop trail will eventually connect the town with similar stretches planned in Holliston, Sherborn, Ashland and Hopkinton for 20 miles of trail in total.

While Milford has made the most progress of the five towns, the Board of Selectmen, Rail Trail Committee Chairman Reno DeLuzio and local legislators have been held up getting Phase 2 of the town's trail started because of trouble striking a compromise with the Federal Highway Department over rights to land owned by National Grid.

To proceed with construction bids for the trail, the committee must own or be granted easements for the land used to obtain the federal government's go-ahead.

While the rest of the three miles of land for Phase 2 has been OK'd, rights to the contested property - a one-mile stretch from Rte. 109 to the Holliston town line - has been harder to secure, DeLuzio said.

"They're very cautious about giving up land rights," DeLuzio said of National Grid. "They're a willing partner in this, there's no question about that. It's the stringent federal highway rules."

Currently, the power company is willing to grant the town a 99-year license to the property, DeLuzio said. The town is OK with that document, and would give the power company access to the land for pole maintenance and emergency work, he said.

In a February letter to the state's deputy secretary for transportation planning copied to state and federal transportation officials and legislators, Murray wrote the town's risk assessment entering into a license agreement instead of a lease "is extremely low and therefore the public interest is protected."

However, the Federal Highway Department is arguing the limited-rights license is not good enough. The battleground has prompted legislators to step in on Milford's behalf to push for the project to proceed with a signed license, Murray said.

Lawmakers will argue for the town that "we have a unique situation that deserves special consideration," DeLuzio said.

National Grid spokesman David Graves said Friday his company was looking forward to an impending meeting with the town and legislators, including state Rep. Richard Neal, D-Springfield, to settle the trail committee's construction speed bump.

"The first thing we have to do is sit down and talk things over," Graves said. "Hopefully, we'll be able to come to some kind of an agreement."

A spokesman for the Federal Highway Administration in Massachusetts could not be reached for comment.

Rights to the land must be obtained soon for the project to stay on the state's Transportation Improvement Program budget, DeLuzio said. "Federal funds will be withheld if we don't break this dilemma and get this resolved," he said.

DeLuzio said \$4.1 million has been earmarked in the TIP budget for Milford's Phase 2 trail construction, but that money could be lost.

"The government is saying if we grant the money, we want to have a reasonable assurance that the trail is going to exist," said Murray.

"We're hoping we can come to some mutually agreeable solution, and I think we will," DeLuzio said. "We're hoping in a month's time this thing can be resolved."

In the meantime, the Rail Trail and Friends of the Upper Charles Rail Trail committees are focusing on a long-awaited grand opening of its first segment of trail, DeLuzio said.

The Friends committee is preparing for a "real community celebration" to mark the occasion June 16, public relations chairman Nancy Wojick said. The festivities will include food, music, entertainment, giveaways, fitness demonstrations and a fun run.

"Hopefully we'll have a good day, but rain or shine we're going on June 16," DeLuzio said. "It's been a long-awaited opening day."

Vendors interested in participating in the trail's grand opening celebration are asked to contact Dave Cassinelli at 508-634-7038 or by e-mail at davecassinelli@comcast.net.

Earlier celebrations were canceled twice because of construction delays, he said. The work is slated to be done by May 1, with workers now adding finishing touches such as road striping, landscaping, granite and brickwork at the trail's two entrances.

DeLuzio said the celebration should not be delayed by recent news of Sumner Street land contamination. The discovered toxins will likely force the town to erect as a barrier a chain link fence near the contaminated area to keep people on the trail, he said.

The constructed part of the trail is already getting a "tremendous amount" of usage, Murray said, connecting people and nature and earning high praise from residents.

"It's amazing how the trail has opened up that recreational opportunity to the residents," he said. "I think this one of the best decisions this town has ever made."

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