
4 Recommendations

Constructing a rail trail on the Central Mass. right-of-way is feasible. The trail could be built on the MBTA-owned section from Berlin to Waltham. Connections could be made into Belmont to connect to the MBTA's Alewife Station and thereby to the Minuteman Commuter Bikeway.

Grade Crossings

The main design concern on the trail would be at-grade crossings. All trail users would probably be required to stop at all intersections, except perhaps where trail traffic is heavier than road traffic. Some additional traffic controls on the motor vehicle traffic ought to be considered. Traffic control would need to be designed on an intersection-by-intersection basis. There is the tendency in our culture to minimize motor vehicle delays at the expense of the time and convenience of pedestrians and other nonmotorized users. It is important to remember that our children and our elderly are disproportionate segments of nonmotorized users.

The communities would need to focus during the design stage on safety issues. Discussions would need to be held with local police departments, with town engineers and planners, and with community groups to gather information and to help ensure the safety of the future users of the trail. The engineering issues that would be covered in the design phase include traffic control devices and geometrics. The actual design of intersections would need to comply with guidance provided by the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO) and with the Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices (MUTCD).

Enforcement

The planning for safety would need to go beyond engineering issues to include enforcement and education. Selected spot enforcement of speed limits at cross streets could help reduce speeding. Also, the presence of safety personnel during periods of heavy use or at times when use by schoolchildren is particularly high is recommended. The assignment of police to the trail would be handled by each local department.

Education

Education is important for both motorists who will cross the trail and for trail users. Parents, perhaps through parent-teacher organizations, would need to be told that this trail, although separated from traffic for most of its length, does have intersections that require their children to be cautious. The fact that the trail would be "separated" from traffic may give some people, especially those who have had no experience using trails, the false idea that it is appropriate for use by youngsters, as well as some novice adults, who have insufficient experience with traffic. These less experienced cyclists must learn to stop at all cross streets and proceed only when safe to do so.

Environment

The design contractors, through the Massachusetts Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) process, would work closely with local conservation commissions and other concerned citizens to ensure that environmental impacts are minimized. Issues to be addressed would include the clearing of trees, the design of the trail through flood plain areas, and the construction of parking spaces (if any).

Local Jurisdiction

While no formal arrangements have been made, the local communities would most likely be the entities responsible for trail maintenance and policing. The trail would be part of the community's overall responsibility, much as occurs when a new street is added. Community-based organizations were formed along the Minuteman Bikeway to take on some general maintenance and to provide a forum for discussion of issues. Such organizations could be formed in each community to help local officials. On the Norwottuck Rail Trail, many businesses have signed on to the "Adopt-a-Trail" program, and there is a waiting list.

The next formal steps toward construction are an application for design funds and community leases with the MBTA for use of the right-of-way. These leases would spell out commitments for policing and maintaining the proposed trail. These arrangements are necessary to allow the release of design funds. (A copy of a lease allowing use of the Lexington Branch for the Minuteman is included in Appendix F.)

As the owner of the right-of-way, the MBTA could decide to build a trail. While the MBTA would work with the local communities, it would not require local permission. The MBTA, however, is interested in focusing its resources on providing public transportation; but it is amenable to the use of its rights-of-way for trails if it has no other present use for the corridors and if other responsible entities assume liability, maintenance, and policing. The most suitable entities for this task are the local communities.

Likewise, MassHighway is supportive of trail projects and has funded the design and construction of the major trails in Massachusetts. MassHighway, however, would not commit design and construction money to a project unless right-of-way issues, including maintenance and policing responsibilities, had been spelled out.

If this project proceeds, then many years would lapse before a trail would be in place. The design phase would take between one and two years, as would the construction. Allowing for time spent securing funds and awarding contracts, it would be a minimum of five years before a trail could be in place.