



Northampton Rail-trail News

Friends of Northampton Trails and Greenways, Inc. (<http://www.fntg.net>) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization that supports the expanding network of rail-trails in Northampton, Massachusetts. Volume 9, Winter 2015

My last update from the trails

This will be my last “update from the trails” as I step down after serving for ten years as the founding president of the Friends of Northampton Trails and Greenways. It’s been an honor and a privilege to serve in this capacity.

Fellow founding officers Judy Cardell, Julia Rise-man, and Susan Voss shared my sense that an organization that supported City efforts to design, build, maintain, and improve our local trail network would help to build what is now an amazing network of trails. Other officers Sean Kinlin, John Gaustad, and Mary Jo Stanley have allowed the organization to grow in so many ways. I’m excited to report that incoming co-Presidents George Kohout and Craig Della Penna have many ideas and initiatives up their sleeves. I thank them all for their efforts on behalf of our trails.

Since our last newsletter, we’ve been busy with many projects. Our new trail map and brochure (en-

closed with this mailing) was printed after updating maps and sponsors. A special shout out to Scott Jensen (brochure designer), Barbara LaBombard (Easthampton ad sales coordinator), John Gaustad (Northampton ad sales coordinator), and Jon Caris and Victoria Beckley (map-makers). An advisory committee for FNTG met to brainstorm ways the organization can help support the trails in the areas of maintenance, education, outreach, expansion, and art along the trail.

Since our founding in 2006, the Friends of Northampton Trails and Greenways has raised and disbursed more than \$45,000 to support the local trails. I look forward to continuing to be involved with activities of the Friends after my term end at the end of the calendar year.

See you on the trails!

Nicholas Horton

Rail Trail Network in the news

The local Rail Trail Network has been featured on the editorial and opinion pages in recent months. An editorial from September 8, 2015 in the *Daily Hampshire Gazette* entitled “Bike trail pushes west with goal finally in sight” started with the quote: “file this under ‘you can’t keep a good idea down’ and continued to describe work on the extension of a dirt trail from Grove Avenue

in Leeds heading towards the Williamsburg line. The editorial continued to sing the praises of this section (describing it as one of the prettiest in the area).

Masslive.com featured an article on the Leeds expansion, which will be closed until winter. Once completed, the 145-year-old stone arch Beaver Brook Bridge will be rehabilitated.

A letter to the editor from Trish from Amherst de-

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scribed a great vacation biking on the Norwottuck Rail Trail (no need to travel to Europe or hike in the Rockies or swim in Hawaii).

A FNTG member, now living elsewhere in Massachusetts, writes: "I like to see what's happening with the rail trail and the group. I'm glad there's so much interest. The bike path was one of my favorite places to be up there. Many fond memories walking and biking around Florence and Northampton on the path, and sometimes going out to Hadley."

Another member wrote: "Recently, I've taken visitors from overseas out on the trails and they enjoyed them very much. Plus I've been walking with my neighbor as she recuperated from knee surgery and we found the bike path one of the best surfaces. On one of our walks, we encountered an elderly couple from the Cape—they were vacationing here because of the trail system, had rented adult trikes, and were staying at a local B&B. So the trails are more than a local amenity."

An article from February featured planned improvements to Easthampton's Manhan Rail Trail. These include new lighting, a mill parking lot, and three paths to connect the trail to the parking lot.

Moving further afield, an editorial in the *Hartford Courant* began with:

You can buy a T-shirt in London that says "Mind The Gap," the popular message of caution to London Underground riders. In

Connecticut we need to produce a T-shirt that says "Close the Gap," a message of hope to Farmington Canal Heritage Greenway bicycle riders.

The greenway is an 84-mile multi-use trail that runs from New Haven to Northampton, Mass., in the right-of-way of a historic 19th-century canal and rail line. The trail has been built, section by section, over the past two decades and is extremely popular with bikers, walkers, runners and rollerbladers.

The editorial continues to press for efforts to close the remaining gaps in the trail, some of which are owned by Timothy Mellon of the famed Mellon family. It closes by encouraging Mr. Mellon to consider options for a "rail with trail" setup as works effectively in Northampton.

Finally, an article in *wickedlocal.com* described how the Waltham rail trail project (part of the Mass Central Trail Trail) is building momentum. This 23 mile trail (from Waltham to Berlin) is part of the long-abandoned railroad that connected Boston to Northampton. The State Department of Conservation and Recreation granted the project a MEPA certificate which allows it to move forward.

A related article on efforts in Sudbury was also encouraging in terms of future renovation and construction of the trail in this part of the state.

Living life next to a rail trail

One of the most notable things about New England that most people don't realize is the super-abundance of unused former steam railroad corridors. In fact, since the 1960s, there have been over 70,000 miles of former steam railroad corridor taken out of the nation's inventory, and the majority of this mileage is here in the Northeast. Within a 125-mile radius of Northampton, there are currently over 200 projects underway that will provide non-motorized options for day-to-day use. The network of off-road paths that can be built in Eastern New York and Southern and Central New England is simply unmatched anywhere else in the U.S., and they connect right where people live, work, play, and attend school. The link between the residential, commercial, and institutional is most evident.

We live on Chestnut Street in Florence and on the trail adjacent to our house each day begins with pretty much the same scenario. Starting at around 5:30 a.m., or the crack of dawn, joggers and power-walkers pass by. By 7:30am, the dog walkers are out and by 8:00am, school kids pass by. In fact, scores of kids. Most are

walking, but a substantial number are on bikes and even a smattering on roller blades. So many kids here walk/bike/blade to school that I would hazard a guess and say one or two school buses aren't needed because of this safe route to school. And speaking of schools, in 1969, approximately 50% of children walked or bicycled to school, including almost 90% of children living within one mile of school. Today, fewer than 15

To call these facilities "bike paths" is a misnomer, as there are too many walkers and joggers. In fact, to call them "recreational trails" is also misleading, as they are really also transportation facilities. The city has come around to this realization as well. A few years ago, they began plowing the trail in the winter so it can be relied upon as a "Safe Route to School" (see related article on plowing). Around 8:30am, a number of utilitarian bikers ride by. These are generally people biking to work. At midday, the users are mostly retirees and mothers pushing baby carriages. The dog walkers are back out late in the afternoon. Finally, the evening strollers, joggers, and walkers pass by. My wife, who is a dedicated power-

walker, is on the trail twice a day for a two-mile walk with our Scottish Terrier-ist, Ivan.

On weekends, the complexion of the path changes. There are more bicyclists, who tend to be tourists, but the local joggers, power-walkers, strollers, and dog walkers are still out there in force.

Being only 8 feet away, our house was one of the closest houses ever to have a railroad built next to it. Conversely, it is certainly one of the closest houses to sit next

to a rail trail. When I was doing advocacy work full-time, getting communities to build out these projects—sometimes in the face of extreme opposition—it was invaluable to be able to speak from experience about what it is like living near a popular trail.

We love living where we do and we're home—on the rail trail.

Craig Della Penna

Trail construction in Westfield



The Friends of the Columbia Greenway Rail Trail (FOCGRT) are proud to announce that the third phase of the Columbia Greenway Rail Trail, which will extend from its current terminus at East Silver Street to Main Street (at the Stop & Shop plaza) is nearly complete. With this phase of the trail, users will have two access points to downtown Westfield and the core district—one at East Silver Street and one at Main Street.

This will have very meaningful impacts for many downtown Westfield businesses. A ribbon cutting and trail dedication ceremony is planned to be held in tandem with the installation and dedication of eight historic/interpretive panels. This, too, is a long-awaited project, and one which has been a collaborative effort between the Friends group as well as Westfield State

University. The historic panels will serve as a living history museum of Westfield's past as a one-time port city, its transition through the industrial era, to its current status as a gateway New England city. Panels will include: Early Westfield, The Canal, The Railroad, Tobacco, Columbia Bicycle, The Green, Immigrants, and Industry.

Accompanying the historic panels will be the installation of directional 'You Are Here' signage and Rules of the Trail.

In early October FOCGRT hosted nationally recognized speaker Mark Fenton for a two day lecture and workshop series. On Thursday, October 1, more than 150 community members and students from Westfield State University enjoyed a lecture entitled "Increasing Health and Physical Activity with Sticky Design." On Friday, October 2, Fenton spoke with 80 community leaders (elected and appointed officials) as well as WSU students and faculty, and community members.

The FOCGRT provides a key linkage between the existing trail southbound to New Haven (along the Farmington Canal trail) and northbound to Northampton (via Southampton). It's exciting to see phase three near completion.

Jeff LaValley

Ten years of plowing

One more reason to appreciate the Northampton Department of Public Works: they work hard to clear the snow from our streets AND the rail-trails of Northampton, and have been doing so for 10 years!

Here is a quote from the Daily Hampshire Gazette's '10 Years Ago Today' column from the late winter: "Public Works crews typically plow 150 miles of roadway after snow falls. This year, they'll be plowing 152.5 miles. The extra 2.5 miles is because the City's bicycle path has

been added to the list of spots to clear after a storm, for the first time since it was created in the early 1980's."

More than ten years ago, the City of Northampton began to plow the Northampton section of the Mass Central Rail Trail between Stop and Shop and Look Park. This effort began as sidewalks were under construction along Bridge Road and the JFK school as a way to ensure that students could walk to school.

Despite budget cuts, the City of Northampton Department of Public Works has assiduously cleared the

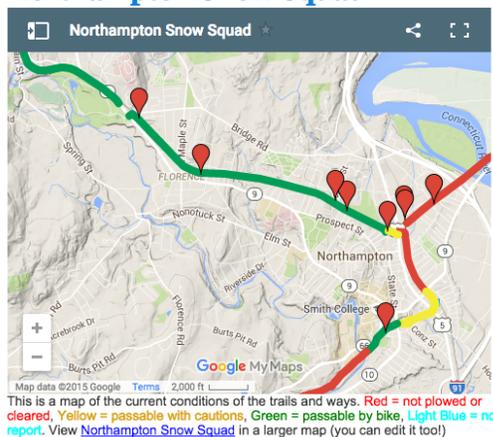
trail after each major snowstorm. Thanks to the engineering of those that originally built the railways, after a day of sunshine most remaining snow or ice has melted and retreated to the sides of the path.

As is the case for many civic improvements intended to help one group (such as curb cuts for wheelchairs proving useful for strollers), beginning to plow this section of the rail trail had many other benefits. People now flock to the rail trail in the winter, with bikers, walkers, strollers, and wheelchair users taking advantage of the clear paths when other sidewalks and streets are clogged with snow. Bikers bundled up with layers now make their way to and from school and work.

In 2012, Smith College and the now defunct Business Improvement District teamed up to start plowing the section of trail from King Street to Main Street paralleling the active rail line. This allowed many people to connect directly from Florence to downtown and facilitated using the rail trail for both recreational and practical purposes. School children can make their way to and from JFK Middle School, Leeds Elementary, Jackson Street School, Smith College Campus School and other locations without having to rely on cars.

Other groups, such as the ad-hoc Northampton Snow Squad (snowsquad.org) have been helping to clear sideways and bike paths.

Northampton Snow Squad



Map of the snow clearance status of the local rail trail network in Winter 2015 (source: <http://www.snowsquad.org>)

The demise of the Northampton Business Improvement District (BID) last year left the section of rail trail between King Street and Main Street unplowed. In addition, the seven-mile section of the Norwottuck Rail/-Mass Central Rail Trail between Woodmont Avenue in Northampton and the Swift Connector in Amherst is not plowed. As a result, after the first major storm, the trails ice over and are impassable until the spring melt in mid-April.

Is it time to revisit plowing of these additional parts of the rail trail network? Our trails are a major amenity that draws tourists and citizens of Northampton and neighboring communities to make their way safely from place to place while separated from the road network. What would be required for the City of Northampton to take on the plowing of the segment of trail between Stop and Shop and Main Street and for the Department of Conservation and Recreation to begin a pilot project to plow the trails over the coming winter?

Some barriers have been identified:

COST: One of the impediments to plowing is the additional cost to the City or the Commonwealth. **RESPONSE:** Five years ago, the Minuteman Rail Trail in eastern Mass began to be plowed. Jeff Roth, member of the Arlington Bicycle Advisory Committee stated that cost was \$34 per mile per storm. While snow removal for the rail trail is not inexpensive, the cost is dwarfed by the regional snow removal budget. The potential number of new users of the rail trail during winter justifies running a pilot.

SPECIAL ISSUES WITH THE BRIDGE: Snow removal is complicated on bridges crossing rivers, since snow cannot be pushed into the river. Care is needed in such locations. **RESPONSE:** The State DOT already clears bridges, including the Route 9 Calvin Coolidge bridge over the Connecticut River. Alternatives exist to allow bridge clearing.

USE BY SKIERS: The MCRT is sometimes used by cross-country skiers during the days immediately following a snowstorm. **RESPONSE:** While it is true that skiers do use parts of the trail that have long stretches between roads, after the trail has iced over it is not possible to ski.

The health benefits of regular exercise are widely known. Being able to walk to and from the center of Florence into Northampton, stroll along the path paralleling the Amtrak rail line, or bike from Northampton to Amherst year-round can help to decrease carbon emissions and improve the cardiovascular well-being of children, adults, and the elderly. *Rails to Trails* magazine recently heralded the "sea change" in support of health, fitness, and car-free transport in the Bay State, citing collaborations between the Massachusetts Department of Transportation and the State Department of Health and Human Services.

The City of Northampton and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts have invested in helping to create a network of trails that are beautiful and functional. It's time to leverage this investment and take it to the next step by keeping these trails clear during the winter.