

**Summary of
Department of Conservation and Recreation Public Meeting
Norwottuck Rail Trail Reconstruction
and
Norwottuck Rail Trail Advisory Committee Meeting**

**Tuesday, April 3, 2012
6:30 p.m. – 8:00 p.m.
Hadley Elementary School Cafeteria
21 River Drive, Hadley, MA**

NOTE: The following summary does not serve as a verbatim transcript of the meeting. For the Question-and-Answer segment of the meeting, this summary highlights issues that were raised and replies. In some cases, comments on the same topic made at different times during the meeting are grouped together. Questions were answered by Paul Jahnige and Doug White; those asking questions typically did not identify themselves.

The public meeting began a little after 6:35 p.m. with Gary Briere, DCR Chief of Bureau of Recreation, welcoming the public to the meeting, giving an overview of the meeting agenda, and acknowledging the participating public agencies and officials. Gary then introduced Rob Kusner, Chairman of the Norwottuck Rail Trail Advisory Committee, noting that simultaneously the Norwottuck Rail Trail Advisory Committee (NRTAC) was meeting to hear the information presented and the public comments and questions. Rob called the NRTAC meeting to order at 6:45 pm (NRTAC members Joel Dansky, Andy Morris-Freidman, and Frank Olbris were also present; Fran VanTreese was unable to attend) and introduced all members of the committee as well as several public employees and citizens who have regularly attended NRTAC meetings. He also acknowledged the late Alexandra Dawson for her valuable contributions to the reconstruction project.

Next, Paul Jahnige, DCR Director of Greenways and Trails Program, and Doug White, Massachusetts Department of Transportation Design Engineer, each gave short presentations about the overall project and general engineering elements. The following items were discussed:

The project focuses on improving trail safety and the trail user experience, with key items being resurfacing the trail to remove the current surface of asphalt with glass mixed in, replacing the bridge decks, and improving road crossings. Funding for the project includes state funds through DCR and MassDOT and federal funds. DCR has continued with ongoing maintenance focusing on safety, including blowing loose glass off the trail surface, patching small sections of rough, root-heaved pavement, and repairing pavement damaged from beaver burrows in wetland areas.

The project includes removing trees, and DCR has reduced tree removal to the extent possible. Trees to be removed are marked and counted, and include tree removal for widening, root damage control, hazard tree removal, pullouts, and turnarounds. A total of 195 trees will be removed, 35 of which are larger than 14 inches in diameter (at breast height: DBH), with the remainder of smaller size.

The project extends from Damon Road to Station Road and includes about 8.5 miles of trail. The trail will be widened to 10 feet where possible. 10 feet is the current generally accepted minimum width for multi-use trails; many new trails are built 12 to 14 feet wide. In places with wetlands along the trail or other significant constraints, the trail will stay at current width (about 8.3 feet) or be widened to 9 or 9.5 feet, as conditions permit. Trail shoulders will be 2 feet wide, except in some constrained places, where they will be narrowed to 1 foot. Overall approximately 70% of the trail will be widened to 10 feet.

There are five bridges between Damon Road and Station Road. Three are included in this project: Fort River bridge, South East Street bridge, and Hop Brook bridge; these bridges will have new wood decks and new wood railings. The Connecticut River bridge and Snell Street bridge will be renovated through the Accelerated Bridge Program and are separate projects from the trail reconstruction project.

Improvements at road crossings include new road and trail signs, pavement markings on roads and the trail, and raised splitter islands in the trail. DCR is considering a hybrid pedestrian beacon system at the South Maple Street crossing. To cross, pedestrians and cyclists would press a button to illuminate yellow then red lights to stop vehicle traffic; otherwise the lights would not be illuminated, allowing vehicle traffic to flow.

To increase parking, a redesign of the parking lot at Damon Road will increase parking from the current 30 spaces to 60 parking spaces. And, new parallel parking along Rail Road Street in Hadley will add 11 parking places. To accommodate these spaces, DCR proposes Rail Road Street become one-way, west to east.

The project will replace and upgrade all signs to current standards.

Realignment of the trail at the west side of the Route 9 tunnel will make the curve at that approach less sharp. The realignment will cross into the adjacent wetland. To minimize wetland impacts, 130 feet of textured concrete boardwalk will be laid to elevate the trail above the wetland. The wetland impacts will be limited to installing the footings for the boardwalk. Textured concrete would be a less slippery surface when wet than wood.

The ramp to the west of Route 116 will be extended to meet the grade (slope) requirement for compliance with ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) standards.

To enhance the user experience along the trail, scenic pullouts and turnarounds will be added. The turnarounds will be 10 feet deep to accommodate the turning radius necessary for adult tricycles and recumbent bikes used in the universal access bicycle programs and by others.

The numerous intersections with other walking trails will remain rustic and current signage will be maintained.

Gary returned to the podium to close the presentation portion of the meeting, inviting public questions to follow or folks to send comments to DCR. He noted the following timeline:

21-day public input period following this meeting
25% Design public hearing: May/June 2012

Permitting: through fall 2012
Final Design public hearing: spring 2013

Gary then opened the meeting for questions. The question-and-answer period went from about 7:05 to about 8:10pm.

Questions-and-Answers:

What section(s) of the trail had been removed from current plans compared with previous plans?

Answer clarified that the current plans include the portion of the trail from Damon Road to Station Road; earlier plans included the section from Station Road to Warren Wright Road. Because the Station Road to Warren Wright Road section is newer and does not have as critical a need for reconstruction - no glass in the asphalt, for example - and has considerable length of adjacent wetlands, it is not included in the current reconstruction project.

What accounts for the project cost of \$6.9 million?

Answer clarified that the federal earmark is \$4.4 million. The state MassDOT match brings that total to \$4.9 million. Other DCR funds from the state capital budget and the Accelerated Bridge Program bring the total investment to \$6.9 million. The \$4.4 million in federal funds is the budget for the current reconstruction project. MassDOT and DCR feel that this is sufficient funding for the reconstruction project.

How long will the reconstruction work take, and what will be the status of the trail during construction?

Answer: about 18-24 months for construction and that work will be done in sections. Sections of the trail will be closed while under construction and opened when complete. A discussion followed about providing alternate routes during closures. The comment was made that the trail is used as a transportation route, as well as for recreation. DCR acknowledge that they understood the various uses of the trail and aim to balance the multiple use of the trail, and will work with stakeholders to provide information about trail closures, alternative routes, and to minimize disruption.

How much of Railroad Street was proposed to be one-way?

Proposed to make Railroad Street one-way to Whalley Street. A follow-up comment was made that farmers drive field equipment in both directions along Railroad Street to travel between fields and barns. Making the street one-way would force the farm equipment onto less acceptable routes. DCR and DOT thanked the participant for this information and will review the design again to consider alternatives.

I am glad that the project is now doing more to protect wetlands; will there also be steps to protect or create wildlife habitat?

Answer clarified that habitat considerations, in addition to disturbance to wetlands, particularly tree canopy cover important to wildlife, have been included in minimizing environmental impacts. Also noted was that an effort to remove invasive species when feasible is part of DCR's trail management goals.

Has DCR considered adding a natural surface path alongside the paved path, as in examples from other places?

Answer noted that this design was considered originally in 1992, but that there is insufficient width on the trail bed to have side-by-side trails, especially given delineated wetlands.

Will public comments be posted so that good questions and answers can be available to the public?

Answer: DCR will post these comments and questions and answers.

Concerning Proposed Splitter Islands:

James Lowenthal, President of the Pioneer Valley Chapter of MassBike, complimented the plans, stating that he supported them in general and appreciated the thoroughness and attention to trail users' concerns evident in the current plan. He noted and complimented removing the asphalt with glass, repairing root damage, widening to the 10-foot width standard while making reasonable compromises on width in sensitive places, realigning the curve at the Route 9 tunnel, and improving street crossings. However, he opposed the addition of raised splitter islands in the trail at road crossings, citing no evidence for the problems splitter islands address. He voiced the concern that raised splitter islands would create more accidents with bicycles running into them, that the worry about vehicles driving on the trail had no evidence indicating this is a problem, and that raised splitter islands would make the trail unplowable in the winter. He noted that even if the trail were not plowed, plowing snow from the Connecticut River bridge would be very helpful to year-round cyclists.

A bit later it was noted that police cruisers occasionally drive on parts of the trail system in Northampton.

DCR clarified that the splitter islands are designed to discourage vehicles from driving on the trail and to slow bicycle traffic approaching intersections, making it very visible to cyclists that they are approaching a road crossing. They are not designed to create a barrier to cyclists or trail management, such as plowing. DCR will consider flush, textured splitter islands, rather than raised islands.

Will there be alternative routes identified when sections of the trail are closed and how will the public be made aware of these routes?

Several questions were raised about ways to make the public well-aware of alternate routes around closed sections of the trail during construction, including advanced notice. Several suggestions were offered on various modes of communication including notices on the trail, e-mail notification, local newspapers, DCR and other websites, and municipal notification systems.

DCR noted it has signup sheets at this meeting, will be keeping an e-mail list for Norwottuck Trail notifications, and that they will continue to work with and consult with municipalities and trail users to provide notification.

Will there be contractual obligations, provisions, or incentives to keep the contractors on schedule to minimize trail closures?

Answer explained that contracts can have provisions that one section be completed before starting work on the next section, but it is more difficult to address delays in delivery of materials in contracts.

Will DCR invite or accept input from cyclists concerning alternate routes and phasing options?
DCR confirmed that they will work with cyclist organizations and trail users on these issues.

A suggestion was offered to consider a “speed table” at South Maple Street.

A suggestion was offered to consider using helical piers to support the boardwalk at the Route 9 realignment.

A comment was made thanking DCR for the wonderful trail, noting that the speaker’s children learned to bicycle and appreciate nature on the trail.

Why does the light at Damon Road take so long? Sometimes the person crosses Damon Road before the light turns red and then traffic stops for no apparent reason.

Answer clarified that the light had a 90-second minimum between red lights. If a cyclist had previously called for the red light and crossed, a second cyclist coming along might have to wait until the end of the 90-second period before the light will change again. DCR noted however, that at the request of MassBike, they recently worked with MassDOT and the City of Northampton to reduce the time between red lights to 60 seconds.

Can DCR do anything about the poor drainage (wet conditions) along the trail near the Amherst College playing fields by Woodside Avenue?

Answer clarified that those areas are jurisdictional wetlands and drainage ditches in need of maintenance. DCR has met with the Conservation Commissions in Amherst and Hadley—a similar situation exists along the trail near Spruce Hill Road in Hadley—and in compliance with wetland regulations, DCR will restore those drainage ditches to their original design and function.

Can the access to the rail trail at South East Street be paved?

Answer: Paving there is not in the current plan, but the request is noted.

Can road crossings have yield signs for bicycles instead of stop signs.

Answer noted current plan calls for stop signs; consistent signage at road crossings is preferred.

Are any of the trees to be removed on adjacent private land? Can DCR remove private trees to improve sight lines at East Street in Hadley?

Answer: All trees proposed to be cut are on DCR lands.

Will more trees will be removed from the Hadley section of the trail than Amherst section?

Answer noted that the number of trees removed is close to the same in each town.

Specific anticipated tree removals are:

Trees being removed by size:

6 inch in diameter or less : 67 Trees
6 inch to 8 inch: 52 trees
9 inch to 12 inch: 40 trees
13 inch to 18 inch: 25 trees
20 inches and greater 10 trees (67+ 52+40+25+10= 194)

Trees being removed by location:

Northampton: 20 trees
Hadley: 91 trees
Amherst: 83 trees (20 + 91 + 83= 194)

Trees being removed by species:

Maple 42 (42/194 = 24%)
Norway Maple included in Maple
Locust 32 (32/194 = 19%)

Estimated that 2 invasive tree species- Norway Maple and Black Locust account for about 20% of the trees being removed.

Black Cherry 24
Elm 21
Sumac 17
Birch 9
Oak 7
Cedar 5
Poplar 5
Pines 4
Ailanthus 2
Spruce 2
Crab Apple 2

Black Locust trees are particularly damaging to the trail (root damage), but shade and temperature are key characteristics of the trail, and will there be replanting of trees where removed, especially in Hadley where there are many Black Locust trees along the trail?

Care will be taken to maintain shade and canopy cover when possible, some re-planting will occur. Tree removal will balance canopy preservation and root control.

In response to an additional question about tree canopy, DCR noted that the Damon Road parking area redesign includes tree planting and landscaping.

Have permeable pavers, boardwalks or other technologies been considered to combat or prevent root damage in the future?

Various root control and prevention methods have been considered and researched. Roots will be cut during the reconstruction. The final surface also needs to take into account the various trail uses and users.

Will the expansion joints on bridges, especially the Connecticut River bridge, be re-designed so that they are flush with trail?

The Connecticut River bridge will be renovated as part of the Accelerated Bridge Program, in coordination with trail reconstruction, and we hope to address this concern.

Courtesy on the trail can be an issue for both walkers and cyclist. Some walkers take up more than one lane, and some cyclist speed past walkers without any warning. Will any steps be taken to try to address trail courtesy?

Trail courtesy is important for all users. New signs about courteous use of the trail will be developed and added to trail access points. DCR welcomes other ideas to promote trail etiquette and courtesy.

Will there be a pad or accommodations for a porta-potty at the Station Road parking lot?

The current plans call for resurfacing the parking lot at Station Road, and the request for adding a porta-potty will be considered.

During the trail closures, especially when bikes are re-routed to Route 9, will there be steps taken to educate drivers and cyclists to improve courtesy between motorists and cyclists?

DCR will hope to use this as an opportunity, working with other partners, to address this issue through education.

Hope DCR / MassDOT will consider other traffic calming treatments at South Maple Street, such as a "speed table" or textured pavement. There is confusion, because pedestrians have the right-of-way within a crosswalk, but cyclists don't. There is confusion over right-of-way at South Maple Street; some motorists stop proactively to let trail users cross and others do not.

Minutes submitted by Anne Wibiralske on behalf of the Norwottuck Rail Trail Advisory Committee.