

Central Massachusetts



View of the Blackstone River from Lookout Rock. In this region, increasing development pressures are threatening critical resource areas.
(John Pelczarski)

From the summit of Mt. Watatic to the floodplain of the Blackstone River, this diverse region encompasses rich agricultural lands, an abundance of rivers, ponds and man-made waterways, historic villages and the urban centers of Worcester, Leominster and Gardner. Amidst a patchwork of publicly held lands, unique natural features such as Wachusett Mountain, Wallum Lake and the Blackstone and Nashua rivers help to define the character of the region. Equally important is the region's heritage as a major industrial center.

In recent years, westward expansion of suburban Boston has driven land prices up and fragmented open landscapes many residents previously took for granted. Greenway and trail priorities here reflect concerns about dwindling availability of open space and the impact this will have on the natural resources, community character and quality of life. Advocates have called for protection and development of existing trails as “spines” of a region-wide trail network and for making these trails more accessible by linking them with population centers. They also have called for greenways along critical river corridors and ridgelines. Interest in developing rail-trails throughout the region is high, with a focus on creating a cross-state, multi-use trail along the Central Massachusetts rail line. Specific priorities for the region include:

Secure and protect the Midstate Trail.

The 92-mile Midstate Trail links a variety of public lands and provides hikers with spectacular views along the way. It runs from Rhode Island in the south to the New Hampshire border where it links with the Wapack Trail just north of Mt. Watatic. Currently only about 50 percent of the trail is permanently

protected. Once fully secured, the Midstate Trail will serve as the central trail spine in the region, with the potential for connecting with local and interstate trail networks.

Create and extend the Mass Central Rail Trail.

Many community-based efforts to create a multi-use trail along the Central Massachusetts rail line are well underway. Some sections are complete, some are being designed, while others are in the conceptual stage. Together, the pieces form a regional trail and a critical segment of the proposed cross-state trail and the East Coast Greenway. Efforts from Berlin to the east are part of the proposed Wayside Trail that will run almost 25 miles along the rail corridor owned by the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA). Sections in West Boylston and Rutland have already been constructed, thanks to the efforts of Wachusett Greenways, a regional greenway organization. Recognition of this project as a statewide priority will be critical to garner the support and funding needed to protect the corridor and develop the proposed trail within this region and beyond.

Trails and greenways provide recreational opportunities year round. Cross country skiing on the Mass Central Rail Trail near West Boylston. (Colleen Abrams)





Greenways help preserve an understanding of and appreciation for the past. A old railway bridge over the Nashua River near Fitchburg. (Nashua River Watershed Association)

Provide support and funding for a variety of priority rail-trail efforts in the region.

There are many important rail-trail efforts underway in this region. Each holds the potential to provide recreational and non-motorized transportation opportunities to residents and visitors. The Nashua River Rail Trail, an 11-mile multi-use trail along a former rail corridor now owned by DEM, is currently under construction. When built, it will extend from the MBTA commuter rail station in downtown Ayer through Groton, Pepperell and Dunstable to the New Hampshire border.

Another important initiative is the Blackstone River Bikeway, a multi-state project that will eventually connect Worcester to Providence, Rhode Island, linking roughly 1,000 acres of parkland and securing a key section of the East Coast Greenway.

Additional priority rail-trails, including the Upper Charles Trail, the Assabet River Rail Trail, the Southern New England Trunkline Trail (SNETT), the Grand Trunk Trail and the North

Central Pathway are in varying stages of design and development. Each project has its own challenges. All need further support and funding for completion and to make them safe and accessible to the public.

Create river greenways throughout the region to protect natural resources, water quality and to provide recreation and educational opportunities.

Priority rivers corridors include the Blackstone River, one of two American Heritage Rivers in the state, the Sudbury, Assabet and Concord rivers (SuAsCo), portions of which were recently designated federal Wild and Scenic Rivers, and the Nashua River, where a successful protection effort began more than 30 years ago emphasizing the role of greenways in river restoration. While significant acreage has been protected along these rivers, focused attention is needed to secure critical gaps and create vital greenway connections while conservation opportunities still exist.

Greenway advocates in Central Massachusetts expressed a sense of urgency and have joined forces to take advantage of many greenway and trail opportunities throughout the region. Two efforts underway that reflect this rallying of community support include the Lake Manchaug Greenway and Wildlife Corridor, a multi-town effort to link the Douglas and Sutton state forests, and an initiative to create the Squannassit Regional Preserve, a biological preserve along the Nashua, Squannacook and Nissitissit rivers.



The Blackstone Canal and historic towpath in Uxbridge. (Paul Meleski)

Worcester Trails — Blazing urban trails

In Worcester, a number of paths and walkways lead to historic sites, scenic views and a rich variety of park



View of Worcester skyline from the East Side Trail. (Colin M.J. Novick)

lands, including Elm Park the nation's oldest public park. While these urban gems are a source of pride for the city, many are viewed as neighborhood rather than regional resources.

The Regional Environmental Council

(REC), in partnership with the Massachusetts Audubon Society, the Greater Worcester Land Trust, private landowners, educational institutions and volunteers, hopes to change this perception.

Starting with existing paths that feature one or more of the city's parks, the REC is mapping and blazing paths and greenways with a consistent symbol to visually connect each to the next. The East Side Trail, a 3.5 mile section of this proposed network, leads hikers past Bell Pond, a unique glacial feature, through blueberry thickets, an oak savanna, open fields, and past the shores of Lake Quinsigamond. The trail also connects places of historical significance, including the remnants of an abandoned coal mine shaft where 19th century entrepreneurs once attempted to launch a local coal producing industry.

Worcester Trails supporters hope to expand the system of trail blazes to city streets and sidewalks throughout the city and beyond.