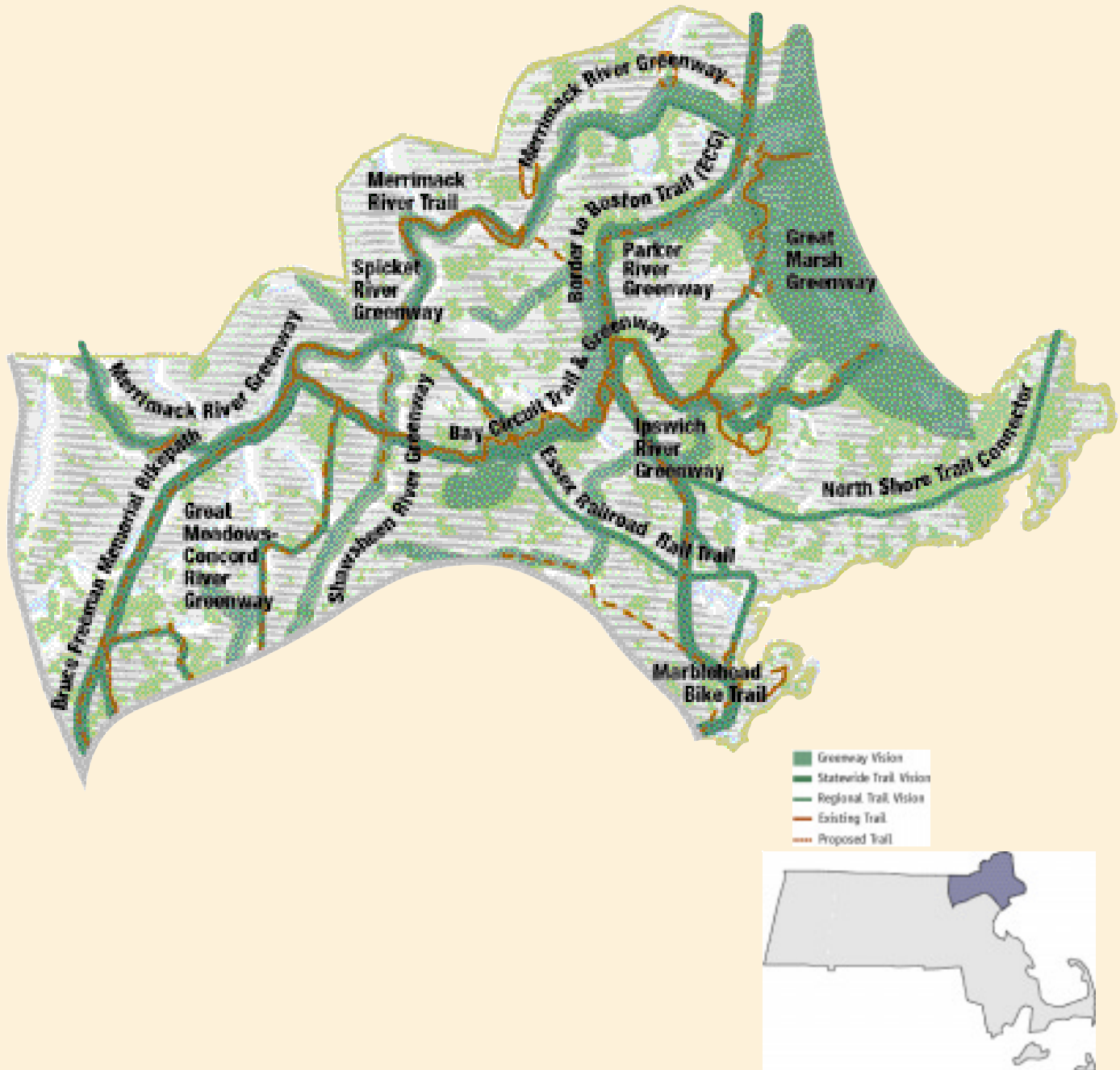


Northeastern Massachusetts



Town Landing on the Essex River in the Great Marsh.

(Katie Busse)

More than five rivers carve their way through the coastal plains of the north shore and Merrimack Valley. The rivers eventually meet at the Great Marsh, which at 10,000 acres is New England's largest salt marsh. The Great Marsh, combined with a multitude of barrier beaches, dunes, islands and adjacent uplands, provides critical habitat and breeding grounds for a variety of avian and marine life. Further south, rocky headlands, beaches and working harbors line the coast, and together with riverine and forested habitat help to define the region.



Haying in the Great Marsh. Advocates are working to protect this unique salt marsh through conservation, stewardship and education. (Katie Busse)

Just as water dominates much of the landscape, it has also helped shape the region's greenway priorities. Efforts are underway to protect the area's watersheds, coastal habitats and cultural resources, as well as a move to stimulate downtown revitalization through the creation of riverwalks and riverbank restoration. Many historic mill sites and surrounding lands are now in public ownership, creating opportunities to create linear parks like the Merrimack River Trail, which features the river and many natural and cultural treasures along its banks.

Several inactive rail lines currently owned by the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) weave through the region's inland and coastal communities, presenting excellent trail and non-motorized transportation opportunities. Specific priorities for the region include:

Create a system of river greenways to protect natural and cultural resources, water quality and to provide recreational and educational opportunities.

The region's major rivers — the Merrimack, Spickett, Shawsheen, Ipswich and Parker — are all targeted as priorities for protection. Another priority is to complete the Merrimack

River Trail, a proposed riverfront path following the entire river. While segments in Haverhill, Lawrence and other river communities are already well underway, more work is needed to achieve the vision of a continuous riverfront pathway and linear park.

Secure key MBTA corridors and target them for future rail-trail development.

Many proposed rail-trail projects in this region may require use and development of corridors currently owned by the MBTA. Two priority trails are the Border-to-Boston Trail, the Northshore leg of the proposed East Coast Greenway, and the Essex Railroad Rail Trail that spans the region from Salem to the Merrimack River. It is critical to protect these and other corridors from fragmentation or conversion to other uses. Much progress in working with the MBTA has been made to date. However, greenway advocates need additional support to secure these corridors, and need assistance negotiating with private railroad companies and the Executive Office of Transportation and Construction (EOTC) regarding rails-with-trails projects and important liability questions. Local organizations also have requested technical assistance in securing "Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21)" funding for priority initiatives.

Create and protect the Great Marsh Coastal Greenway.

This proposed greenway will link the Parker River National Wildlife Refuge and Crane Beach. It also will help protect the integrity of the Great Marsh ecosystem and create numerous recreational opportunities. A large portion of this area has been designated by the state as the Parker River/Essex Bay Area of Critical Environmental Concern, and greenway advocates again have identified it as a priority for protection and stewardship.



Creating new rail-trails and bicycle routes are priorities for this region.

(Colleen Abrams)

Complete the Bay Circuit Trail and Greenway.

In this region, the 200-mile Bay Circuit Trail is nearly complete and is a widely used local and regional asset. The Bruce Freeman Memorial Bikepath, a seven-mile rail trail from Lowell to Westford is currently under construction and will form an important link in the Bay Circuit Trail. The remaining gaps have been targeted for protection in order to complete the trail, protect its continuity and make it fully accessible to the public. Broadening the corridor and solidifying the greenway surrounding the trail was also identified as a priority.

Support creation of the Six Community Trail and Bicycle Route.

This priority trail project will create safe bicycling and pedestrian opportunities along Routes 22 and 133, linking the communities of Wenham, Hamilton, Manchester, Beverly, Essex and Ipswich to scenic and natural areas throughout the communities and along the coast.

As in other regions, advocates in the Northeast have requested state support — training, technical assistance and coordination — for grassroots greenway efforts. They also recognized the need to explore a variety of tools to leverage the protection of greenways and trails through the municipal planning and development process. Examples include adopting the Community Preservation Act, developing local greenway plans and incorporating them into municipal zoning through overlay districts, and requiring trail set-asides as part of the local permitting process.



*A wooden bridge on the Bay Circuit Trail. While nearly three-quarters of the 200-mile trail have been secured, there is still work to be done to complete the historic greenway.
(DEM)*

Bay Circuit Trail — Realizing the vision

Appalachian Trail visionary Benton McKaye and Frederick Law Olmsted contemporary Charles Eliot II launched the legendary Bay Circuit in 1929 as a grand experiment in open space protection. They were among a group of influential Bostonians worried about the rapid expansion of the city into surrounding rural areas. More than 70 years later, the Bay Circuit has become an increasingly popular hiking trail. Stretching 200 miles from Bay Farm in Duxbury to Plum Island in Newburyport, it connects more than 80 parks and open spaces and highlights a diversity of natural and cultural features along the way.

During the past decade, the Bay Circuit Alliance and its partners have made great progress. Efforts have focused on community trail building, securing key segments, and on constituency building. Public awareness has played a key role, and every year since 1990 Bay Circuit enthusiasts have turned out to hike the 200-mile trail and renew their support for this long-term greenway effort.

The northern section of the Bay Circuit is almost complete. Here, as in other areas, efforts are focused on protecting the remaining gaps and linking existing trail segments. Advocates also are working to broaden the greenway corridor to buffer the trail and protect important green space along the entire route. Today, with more than 150 miles of trail on the ground, the pioneering greenway vision is within reach.