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NEWBURYPORT

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## Blazing an old rail trail Design OK'd for recreational path

By John Laidler, Globe Correspondent | November 25, 2007

More than three decades ago, Newburyport officials conceived of converting a newly abandoned railroad corridor into a recreational trail that would loop through the heart of the city. Now, part of the vision is about to be realized.

The state Highway Department recently approved the city's design of a 1.1-mile trail extending from the commuter rail station to the Merrimack River and then east toward downtown. Construction is scheduled to start next summer.

The project marks the first phase of the Clipper City Rail Trail, the name the city has given to the trail network envisioned so many years ago. When fully realized, the trail - most of it built on inactive rail bed - would extend along an approximately 4-mile loop from the train station through the downtown and back.

"It's a very significant milestone," Geordie Vining, senior project manager for Newburyport's planning office, said of the pending construction of the first phase. "The city has been looking forward to this project for many, many years, and rail trail projects are notoriously complex, given the need to secure the rights of way over old lengths of trail corridor and the need to acquire funding."

Vining said he has newspaper clippings from the 1970s, when the two rail corridors that comprise the proposed loop were abandoned, which show that show people in the city even then were talking about using the corridors for "positive community use." He said the city began to actively pursue the idea in the 1990s.

Mayor John Moak welcomes the pending start of construction.

"What I think is unique and promising about this project," he said, "is that it offers benefits in three different areas - the local economy, the environment, and alternative transportation. That's what we need to look for nowadays."

The fact that part of the Clipper City Rail Trail is soon to be built is also of significance to regional trail development efforts, according to Bill Steelman, director of development for the Essex National Heritage Commission, whose agency is helping coordinate some of that activity.

Stelman said the trail section from the train station to the river will mark the first constructed segment of the Border-to-Boston trail, which is envisioned as a 27.8-mile trail from the New Hampshire line to Danvers, most of it built on inactive rail bed. (An eventual goal is to extend the trail to Boston).

Since Border-to-Boston is itself part of the East Coast Greenway, an envisioned trail extending from Maine to Florida, the Newburyport trail segment also forms part of that larger project. And Steelman noted that the Clipper City Rail Trail is part of the Coastal Trails Network, a planned 30-mile network of off- and on-road trails in Amesbury, Salisbury, Newburyport, and Newbury.

"All three of those projects will benefit in the long term from the opening of the Newburyport trail," Steelman said, noting that support for building trails is enhanced when the public gets to experience them.

"In my experience over the last four years, I've become a believer in the adage that 'if you build it, they will come,' " said Steelman, a Newburyport resident.

Much of the planned route of the Clipper City Rail Trail has been used informally by local residents as a walking path over the years, and one section has been "adopted" by a neighborhood, according to

Vining. But the pathway lacks fencing, is not connected to other trails and sidewalks, and significant amounts of leftover railroad debris, overgrown vegetation, and dumped trash lie along its route.

He said the city's vision is to transform the path into a safe, attractive space that will serve both as an alternative transportation corridor between the train station and the downtown, and as a linear park that can be enjoyed by those who live, work in, and visit the city.

"It's also important to Newburyport's economic development as we position ourselves for the future," he said.

The city took a major step toward undertaking phase one of the Clipper City Rail Trail in 2005 when it reached a 99-year lease agreement with the MBTA to use the rail corridor from the train station to the river for a recreational trail.

It then secured the state and federal funds to cover the \$2.8 million cost of building the trail. Newburyport was responsible for design, but was able to fund that approximately \$250,000 cost with state and private grants.

The design, prepared by Stantec, provides for a 10-foot wide paved trail that will run along the old rail corridor to the river, on its way passing such places as Haley's Ice Cream, the MetroRock North Indoor Rock Climbing Center, and the Henry Graf Jr. Memorial Skating Rink.

From the river, the trail will extend east along the shoreline, cutting directly through an old rail embankment and under the Route 1 Gillis Bridge, connecting with a walkway that connects to the existing sidewalk that runs north across the Gillis bridge to Salisbury and south to Merrimack Street on the edge of the downtown.

The project will also link the trail with the city's evolving Harbor Walk trail along the waterfront. The city plans to build a portion of the Harbor Walk from Cashman Park east to the area where the first phase of the Clipper City Rail Trail reaches the river.

Future phases of the Clipper City project will involve extending the trail through the downtown and back to the train station.

The city has made notable progress on those other phases by purchasing former B&M Railroad land from Guilford Transportation, and securing a long-term license to use other land owned by National Grid. But Vining said significant hurdles lie ahead, including securing funding for design and addressing additional right-of-way issues. ■