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Needham Rail Trail breaks ground

Crews have begun removing tracks along a 1.7-mile stretch of a defunct railroad line that will soon be re-opened as a biking and walking path.

The rail trail in Needham is envisioned as part of a seven-mile path between Newton, Needham, Dover and Medfield.

“We’re happy to be making progress on this part, hopefully it will be an example for the rest,” said Peter Cohen, board member of the Bay Colony Rail Trail Association, which has been raising funds and advocating for the trail since 2009.

A combination of state funds and privately raised money donated by the association is supporting the project. Removing the tracks and ties should take around three weeks, turning the trail into a rough path that will be walkable but likely difficult to manage with bikes, strollers or wheelchairs.

The next phase of the project will lay down a stone dust surface to finish the trail. Town Meeting is being asked to appropriate up to \$100,000 of Community Preservation Act money to complete that work if the donated money and other funding sources are insufficient.

Park and Recreation Director Patty Carey said the expected Town Meeting appropriation should be enough to complete the work, although the town is also waiting to hear back about a state grant. There is no timeline for the finishing work at this point.

The second phase will also include modifications around street crossings to improve safety and the installation of some fencing at steep drop-offs.

The association is working on an individual basis with around 20 abutting property owners who may choose to install some sort of privacy fencing or shrubbery. The group has raised \$50,000 for that purpose.

Needham is the furthest along of the towns. Dover is just now undertaking the type of feasibility study that Needham did two years ago, while Medfield, with a potential trail of just 1.25 miles, is waiting to see how Dover proceeds, according to Tad Staley, another association board member.

Although Newton took up its ties and rails last year, the salvage has yet to be removed from the site and the finishing work is not yet done or definitively planned.

At some point in the future, the plan in Needham is to install trailheads and parking areas near High Rock Street and Charles River Street. Staley said the association would continue fundraising towards that endeavor, estimated to cost around \$137,000.

The association also wants to extend the trail to connect with the Needham Junction commuter rail station.

Staley said that what started as one seven-mile rail project had turned into multiple smaller projects. Many of those projects appear to be still years away from completion.

The state has indicated that a bridge over the Charles River, connecting the Needham and Newton portions of the trail, might need to be removed, another issue to be addressed, Staley said.

The trail will be a closed construction site for the next three to four weeks.



Supporters gather for an introduction to the work that is to be done on the Needham portion of the Bay Colony rail trail. Wicked Local Staff Photo/John Walker