

Ashuelot Rail Trail Plan Advisory Committee Meeting

Minutes

August 29, 2019

Present: Dean Beaman, *Winchester Trail Riders, Inc.*; Bruce Bohannon, *Swanzy Rail Trails Advisory Committee*; Rick Brackett, *Monadnock Conservancy*; Drew Bryenton, *Monadnock Cycling Club*; Trixie Lefebvre, *New Hampshire Horse Council*; Rowland Russell, *Antioch University New England*; Gus Ruth, *Winchester Conservation Commission*; Will Schoefmann, *City of Keene*; Margaret Sharra, *Town of Winchester*; Barbara Skuly, *Ashuelot River Local Advisory Committee*; Art Susmann, *Pisgah Mountain Trailriders*; Laura Susmann, *New Hampshire Horse Council/Monadnock Happy Rails*; Tricia Zahn, *Cheshire Medical Center*.

Staff members present were Todd Horner, *Planner* and Henry Underwood, *GIS Specialist/Planner*.

I. Welcome and Introductions

The meeting began at 3:00 p.m. and introductions were made.

II. Minutes of September 13, 2018

Margaret Sharra made a motion to accept the minutes. The motion was seconded by Rick Brackett and passed by unanimous vote.

III. Project Updates

Henry Underwood said SWRPC was wrapping up memoranda on various topics related to the trail: existing plans and other literature; mapping the trail and nearby assets; a crash analysis; trail conditions; program and policies related to the trail; counts of trail users; and, the results of an online survey. Henry Underwood explained that documents on all of these items were sent via e-mail and are also available at the project website for review and feedback. He also updated attendees that more documentation was planned, including information from interviews with municipalities, trail owners, and other groups; the results of trail intercept surveys conducted by SWRPC and an Antioch University New England student; and, resources related to trail funding and design guidance. He asked if there were any questions or anything attendees would like to share relative to the provided information. Trixie Lefebvre asked if SWRPC had received her e-mail response with written feedback. Henry Underwood confirmed that it had been received and requested additional feedback be shared prior to the end of the month of September.

IV. Draft Vision, Goals and Objectives

Todd Horner reminded attendees the project has involved a lot of outreach and it is time to synthesize all of the feedback we have been hearing into a plan. The first step is to develop a vision, goals and objectives.

Todd Horner shared the definitions relative to these terms from the memo distributed to attendees. First, attendees shared general and specific goals and needs seen as more critical to enhancing the rail trail. Responses included:

- Mitigating encroachments of private property owners;
- Balancing all of the needs and uses of the trail;
- Improving safety, especially at bridges;
- Central town hubs with maps, information, bike repair stations, directional information, and seating as places for locals to launch “loop hikes,” as well as to provide seating and information for longer distance trips;
- Consistent branding;
- Maintenance and management plans to keep the ditches clear and the brush cut back;
- A cooperative and collaborative organization that includes all user groups;
- Programming for community engagement, especially schools;
- More adequate trailer parking (such as that provided off Matthews Road in Swanzey);
- Recognizing historical uniqueness and value (using interpretive signage and other methods);
- Increased general awareness of trail;
- Increased use of the trail as replacement for vehicle trips;
- Safe road/trail crossings.

Todd Horner read the three-sentence draft vision statement:

The Ashuelot Rail Trail will function as a continuous transportation and recreation corridor that is scenic, accessible, safe and welcoming to a wide variety of users—local residents and visitors alike. Trail facilities will balance the needs and priorities of the trail’s many stakeholders, including state agencies, municipalities, landowners, user groups, businesses, and non-profit organizations, who will work collaboratively to maintain and develop the trail as a shared public asset. The Trail will be widely celebrated as a valuable resource that enhances the surrounding area’s quality of life, ecology, and economic vitality.

Attendees commented that the vision language should be specific about trail users (i.e. permitted users) and there should be a reference to historical assets. Attendees confirmed that the draft vision was a good start and covered what was discussed as needs and goals.

Todd Horner led a discussion around draft goals and objectives. He asked the group to consider three questions:

- Does anything need to be clarified?
- Is anything missing?
- Are they realistic and attainable?

Attendees provided feedback relative to six draft goals:

Goal 1: Increase awareness of the trail, among both local residents and visitors

- The State has already designed the Ashuelot Rail Trail as a numbered trail (400) and has already created signage and promotional materials that call out this name. It was confirmed that trail markers and signs are removed during the summer so they are not stolen.

- The City of Keene created a logo design for their trail network that may be able to be used or modified.
- A consistent approach of branding shared by other trails in the region is needed.
- Trails need signage that is available year round (including mile markers).
- Coordinate with the State’s activities around digital mapping and publishing information trails (specifically snowmobile trails), through a smartphone application and other means.
- Establish and post street addresses for parking areas to benefit trail users and emergency responders.
- Incorporate rail trail and parking areas in existing mapping initiatives.
- Improve accuracy of rail trail on internet mapping platforms like Google Maps (including Street View or similar photos).
- Leverage resources available from the State Board of Tourism.
- Think about convenience items for trail users (parking and rest areas).

Goal 2: Increase use of the trail as an alternative for trips made by car.

- Consider how non-motorized wintertime users can collaborate with snowmobile clubs to keep trails accessible for use during the winter.
- Promote programs that incentivize people do their shopping by biking (such as Bicycle Benefits).

Attendees briefly discussed how surface preferences differ depending on the user group and time of year as well as gaps in data collection of wintertime users. Trixie Lefebvre asked if the trail would be considered seasonal, for use in its “natural state” (i.e. the trail would not be cleared of snow in the winter). It was pointed out that the sections in Keene function very differently and users have different expectations.

Goal 3: Expand opportunities for outdoor experiences.

- Consider how Ashuelot Rail Trail could be connected to other rail trails specifically (including the Cheshire Rail Trail via Winchester and Richmond, and the Fort Hill Branch).
- Create a more comprehensive inventory of recreational areas near the trail.
- Consider appropriate connections between the trail and the river.

Goal 4: Enhance regional and local economies.

Attendees had no comments on the draft language for this goal and its objectives.

Goal 5: Create an on-trail experience that is accessible, safe and welcoming to a variety of users.

- Bike parking is needed.
- Unpermitted motorized users are a concern that requires appropriate enforcement.
- Other enforceable issues include people camping on State trail property.
- Trail adoption would benefit community engagement around the trail as well as a cleaner trail environment.

Active safety-related signage like rectangular rapid flashing beacons was discussed.

Goal 6: Facilitate communication and collaboration among trail stakeholders.

Attendees pointed out that a memorandum of agreement would be needed with the NH Bureau of Trails for trail maintenance and improvements and discussed various models for coordination and collaboration. It was also commented that such a group would be needed to ensure implementation of the Plan.

V. Next Steps

Todd Horner said SWRPC would send a follow-up communication with an additional opportunity and timeline to provide feedback on the draft vision, goals and objectives.

VI. Next Meeting

Henry Underwood said that he would be in contact with Committee members for the purpose of scheduling the next meeting.

VII. Adjourn

The meeting adjourned at 4:30 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Henry Underwood
GIS Specialist/Planner