

Ashuelot Rail Trail Plan Advisory Committee Meeting

Minutes

September 13, 2018

Present: Larry Antonuk, *Swanzy Rail Trails Advisory Committee*; Bruce Bohannon, *Swanzy Rail Trails Advisory Committee*; Rick Brackett, *Monadnock Conservancy*; Chris Collins, *Antioch University New England*; Beth Giannini, *Franklin Region Council of Governments*; Christine Hadlow, *Greater Keene Chamber of Commerce*; Mike Kowalczyk, *Swanzy Rail Trails Advisory Committee*; Alan Rumrill, *Historic Society of Cheshire County*; Rowland Russell, *Antioch University New England*; Will Schoefmann, *City of Keene*; Margaret Sharra, *Town of Winchester*; Barbara Skuly, *Ashuelot River Local Advisory Committee*; Herb Stephens, *Town of Winchester*; Tricia Wadleigh, *Cheshire Medical Center*.

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

I. Welcome and Introductions

The meeting began at 10:00 a.m. and introductions were made.

II. Minutes of May 3, 2018

Rowland Russell pointed out that his name was correctly spelled on the sign-in sheet but not on the minutes. Will Schoefmann made a motion to accept the minutes with the change mentioned by Rowland Russell. The motion was seconded by Margaret Sharra and passed by unanimous vote.

III. Project Background

Along with a PowerPoint slide show, Henry Underwood provided a recap of the focus of the first meeting, including the four major works tasks of the project. Project meetings include the 4-5 meetings of the Advisory Committee over a one-year period. An Existing Conditions Assessment of the trail includes subtasks primarily taken on by SWRPC staff that will be reviewed today. Public Outreach components include the currently-available online survey, reviewed at the first meeting as well as an Open House event to be held later in the fall. The Needs Analysis component involves a review of the information collected through the Existing Conditions Assessment, Public Outreach, and developing a plan, including specific projects for consideration. He said that today's focus involves updates and discussion on various tasks that make up the Existing Conditions Assessment. Specifically, SWRPC is requesting advice and guidance as well as help with identifying and addressing gaps in information that stakeholders around the table may be able to assist with.

IV. Project Updates & Discussion

Henry Underwood explained that for each task, staff would explain why the task was included, what was done so far, if there are planned follow-ups in addition to what is presented, and where specifically staff

need input. Since there will only be a few minutes for each topic, He said that a supplemental sheet provided in the packet may be used to write in comments and feedback. He reminded participants that information and comments are always welcome outside of a meeting.

a. Literature Review

Todd Horner provided attendees a summary list of the documents collected as part of a literature review related to the project entitled “Plan for Ashuelot Rail Trail – Literature Review Summary Sheet.” He reminded attendees that a plan specifically for a section of rail trail is a new initiative. The purpose of this task is to collect information from other plans and documents that speak directly to the trail when it comes to management and development. He said these include state agencies, municipalities, and various user groups, among others. A review will allow the plan to better identify the extent there are opportunities to connect or intertwine various efforts to improve the trail. Todd Horner provided a summary of files, including agreements, cooperative agreements, planning documents, administrative rules, and other content. He highlighted the fact that each community along the trail has adopted to Complete Streets policies, which shows a commitment and opportunity to think about how the trail ties together this network of safe pathways for people walking and biking. He said between now and the next meeting, a detailed memo will be provided to document additional information about each source. Todd Horner added that he anticipates that additional documents will be identified as part of outreach activities tied to the project, such interviews or surveys targeting the four municipalities. He prompted attendees with discussion questions relative to the task and handout:

- Are there plans, laws, reports, or policies that we’ve missed?
- Are there particular documents that you are especially interested in hearing more about?

Rowland Russell suggested historical documents as an important source of information, including an inventory of assets located in the Antioch Library. He also suggested available natural resources inventories. Tricia Wadleigh asked if plans that show alignment would be helpful, and suggested the [State Health Improvement Plan](#), [Greater Monadnock Public Health Region Community Health Improvement Plan](#), and [Cheshire Medical Center Community Health Needs Assessment](#) as additional sources due to their emphasis on physical activity, recreational opportunities, and active transportation.

b. Base Mapping

Henry Underwood explained that this activity is focused on utilizing map data, including mainly digital information, also known as GIS (Geographic Information Systems) data to make a basic map to inform the project, staff, and anyone considering trail improvements. He said rail bridges and information from the town-specific map posters marked up at the first meeting would be identified in a future version. Henry Underwood prompted attendees with two discussion questions relative to the task and printed “strip map”:

- Are corrections needed?
- What would help your community or stakeholders understand the trail or your relationship to the trail?

Mike Kowalczyk said it would be helpful if the map could identify where people could get on and off the trail, both current locations and what would be proposed. Henry Underwood commented that staff hope to add the locations of Bureau of Trails gates, which should be helpful for this purpose. Mike Kowalczyk

noted that areas where parking was available would be helpful, as would bike-specific access points. Bruce Bohannon commented that the current data does not reflect Swanzey street name changes related to E911 addressing. Rowland Russell suggested adding a theme of “amenities” like bike repair shops, bathrooms, biking trails, hiking trails, and other assets near the trail. Rick Brackett suggested adding recreational uses like ballfields and the State’s Conservation Lands layer. Beth Giannini suggested adding information from the Tri-State Scenic Bikeway map, including designated routes, signs, and points of interest. Henry Underwood commented that he was also working to obtain information on snowmobile trails (beyond the rail trail itself). Mike Kowalcyzk suggested including historical assets, especially railroad-specific ones like depots, mile markers, and signal towers. Henry Underwood said SWRPC was limited in its ability to collect new data so for each theme it would be beneficial to locate sources where the information discussed has already been digitized.

c. Programs Analysis

Todd Horner said that as part of the project, SWRPC is conducting fairly straightforward research to primarily understand what specific events or programs made use of the trail, and to some extent start to identify potential ideas for future events and programs. So far, SWRPC staff have reached out by phone and e-mail to municipalities, user groups and others. There are some large events that utilize the trail such as the recent half marathon in Swanzey ([Elija’s Race](#)). Schools utilize the trail for cross country training and outdoor education. The Monadnock Cycling Club and equestrian clubs utilize the trail for organized rides. Organized programming in other areas have included Safe Routes to School “walking buses,” breakfast on the trail during National Bike Month, birding, tourism excursions and more. Todd Horner prompted attendees with two discussion questions relative to the task:

- Are there current programs on the rail trail that the committee would like to bring to our attention?
- Are there events or programs that have occurred on other rail trails that the committee thinks could enhance programming on the Ashuelot Rail Trail?

He asked attendees to share programming they are aware of relative to the trail, or going on outside of the area. Alan Rumrill said he has done historic hikes in Harrisville, Hancock, and Keene but not on this trail. The hikes have featured information about the loss of passenger service and other implications of the closure of the railroads. Rowland Russell brought up the idea of a “railway relay” as an end-to-end run. Tricia Wadleigh commented that there is an ultramarathon event in Brookline and Milford called the Ghost Train Rail Race. Rick Brackett added that the [Source to Sea Cleanup](#) is using the rail trail as access points to accomplish their work. Mike Kowalcyzk mentioned Path Less Pedaled, an organization that markets bicycle tourism as an organization to look to for ideas.

d. Collisions Analysis

Henry Underwood said looking at safety of the trail was a key data collection aspect of the project, specifically at the trail’s intersections with public and private roads. Speeding, visibility, and crossing distances are common concerns. To learn about any incidents at these locations, SWRPC reviewed data from the NH Department of Safety relative to motor vehicle crashes at 27 trail/road crossings. Henry Underwood emphasized that this represents a historical look at incidents, over a 10-year period starting from the most current complete year of data. He said that a provided technical memo would communicate the findings and limitations of the dataset. Henry Underwood prompted attendees with two discussion questions relative to this task:

- What other sources of data could be considered to obtain information relevant to safety?
- What safety concerns are you hearing about from your community, stakeholders, etc.?

Todd Horner commented that looking at incidents in the general area of a trail crossing is important because often, these areas and intersections are what connect someone's home, work, or other trip origin to the trail. Herb Stephens expressed an interest in learning about the accidents happening outside of the intersections, directly on the trails (including bicycle crashes, becoming lost while using the trail, or other injuries sustained on the trail). Bruce Bohannon added that NH Fish & Game becomes involved if the incident is located on the trail itself. Rowland Russell commented that anecdotally he has heard of a number of assaults. Police data on homeless encampments and sexual assaults may be another source of information to inform safety concerns and improvements. Mike Kowalczyk recognized the need for information about incidents involving all-terrain vehicles. Of the safety concerns he hears, this is one of the most common.

e. Bicycle and Pedestrian Counting Activities

Henry Underwood explained that SWRPC has conducted both automated and manual counts of people biking and walking on the trail at 9 locations. The activity will also involve looking back at previous counts of people riding bikes. Rick Brackett commented that the Monadnock Conservancy has access to a trail counter that is not currently being used. A two-page handout provided a map of the count locations as well as a preview of summarized data for the location in Keene north of Winchester Street. Margaret Sharra asked about the influence of not just population, but trail condition on the number of users in a given area. Henry Underwood prompted attendees with two discussion questions relative to this task:

- Do you feel there are gaps in the distribution of counts that we should be aware of?
- Should SWRPC consider conducting wintertime counts? Where?

Attendees spoke in favor of continuing counts on the trail, including permanent counts.

f. Preliminary Results of Online Survey

Todd Horner provided a recap of the questions that appear in the survey and how it has been distributed (including via press release, e-mail lists, and webpages). He said the goal today is to talk about who we have reached so far and to target groups we have not yet heard from. Todd shared a map of home zip code responses, many of which were throughout the State, as well as Vermont and Massachusetts. He commented that it does suggest there is regional interest. He also pointed out that the survey could benefit from more college age respondents as well as those over 75. Todd pointed out that based on the trail uses indicated so far, it does not appear that snowmobile clubs have been reached at this point in the project. The survey does not have a defined close date and will be open through the winter. Todd Horner prompted attendees with two discussion questions relative to this task:

- Any feedback on the survey? Ease of use? Question content?
- Any suggestions on future survey outreach?

Margaret Sharra observed that there is no question about whether or not someone would use the trail more if improvements were made. Rowland Russell suggested running some of the ideas about marketing by people who indicated they had not used the trail before to gauge their receptivity. He suggested utilizing

social media to the extent possible. Todd Horner said SWRPC can help by providing “canned” content. Henry Underwood also encouraged organizations with social media accounts to create their own “pitch.”

g. Condition Assessment

Henry Underwood summarized information from the Keene State College Geography Department project – The Ashuelot Rail-Trail: The ART of Commuting. As part of the project, a “rideability assessment” was conducted based on surface material, texture and moisture. He added that SWRPC is currently working with the Keene State College Geography Department to convert the report data into a format more suitable for mapping and analysis. Bruce Bohannon suggested that an update on trail conditions would be beneficial.

V. Next Meeting

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

VI. Adjourn

The meeting adjourned at 11:30 a.m. Several people stayed at Whitcomb Hall to look at Ashuelot Rail Trail maps and provide initial feedback on challenges and opportunities.

Respectfully submitted,

Henry Underwood
GIS Specialist/Planner