

Ashuelot Rail Trail Plan Advisory Committee Meeting

Minutes

May 3, 2018

Present: Larry Antonuk, *Swanzy Rail Trails Advisory Committee*; Bruce Bohannon, *Swanzy Rail Trails Advisory Committee*; Chris Brehme, *Keene State College*; James Duffy, *Pathways for Keene*; Chris Gamache, *New Hampshire Bureau of Trails*; James Holcomb, *Transport NH*; Mike Kowalczyk, *Swanzy Rail Trails Advisory Committee*; Rowland Russell, *Antioch University New England*; Margaret Sharra, *Town of Winchester*; Will Schoefmann, *City of Keene*; Barbara Skuly, *Ashuelot River Local Advisory Committee*; Tricia Wadleigh, *Cheshire Medical Center*.

Staff members present were Henry Underwood, *GIS Specialist/Planner* and J.B. Mack, *Principal Planner*.

I. Welcome and Introductions

Henry Underwood started the meeting at 10:05 a.m. and gave an introduction to the Plan for Ashuelot Rail Trail: A Pilot Project. He explained that the Ashuelot Rail Trail (ART), as defined by this planning effort, extends from the ART's intersection at the Center at Keene in downtown Keene to the trail's intersection with NH 63 in Hinsdale. He noted that this planning effort is a pilot project, because it will focus on the ART and will hopefully inform future rail trail planning efforts in the Monadnock Region.

Attendees were asked to introduce themselves, state their affiliation and answer at least one of the following:

1. Based on your affiliation, what are your interests related to the Ashuelot Rail Trail?
2. What are your thoughts and observations about the trail today and in the future?

Will Schoefmann stated that he was interested in the ART because the City of Keene is at the end or middle of the trail, depending on where you are starting a trail trip. He said he wants to get more people using the trail because it is important to the City's economic vitality. Chris Brehme said that one thing he likes about this area is that there is a good active trail network, and the trails provide an excellent way to connect to regional service hubs. He noted that he has worked with Keene State College students on a capstone project that looked at the conditions of the ART as well as opportunities for promoting tourism with rail trails. Jim Duffy said that Pathways for Keene has always been very interested in upgrading and expanding the rail trail system. He said that growing collaboration outside of Keene would be helpful, and because the rail trails are well built, they wouldn't be too difficult to expand. He noted that he was also interested in finding ways for people with limited economic means to use the trail as a less expensive form of transportation.

Margaret Sharra said that the trail from Hinsdale to Keene is a great recreational draw. She's ridden horses and snowmobiles on the ART and she asked why the study area stops at Rt. 63 in Hinsdale. Henry Underwood responded that from his understanding, this is where public access ends. Margaret Sharra noted she goes fishing off the ART and it has beautiful views.

Rowland Russell said that he is interested in the intersection of the environment, arts and history and believes rail trails are an example of where these themes intersect. He noted that he is also affiliated with the Friends of Public Art and the Historical Society of Cheshire County, both of which are interested in transportation. He noted that he collects old maps and has some of the ART. James Holcomb said that he is looking forward to exploring the ART as a commuting resource as well as learning more about other ideas for the ART. Tricia Wadleigh said that she is attending the meetings to look at the health side of things - getting people to use the trail to improve public health. She also thinks that the rail trails offer an opportunity to improve community social interaction. Bruce Bohannon stated that he has a long history with rail trails in Swanzey. He noted he lives adjacent to the ART and has worked on several projects improving the rail trails and bridges. He added that he has worked with Keene and Swanzey on a Transportation Alternatives Program project that improved part of the ART. Chris Gamache stated that he represents the trail landowner, the State of New Hampshire and he noted that at the Trails Bureau, they manage the trail as a recreational resource. Barbara Skuly stated that a good deal of the ART parallels the Ashuelot River and she is interested in looking at connections between the trail and the river. She mentioned that long ago she was part of something called the Ashuelot Rails to Trails Coalition, before the State purchased the ART. Mike Kowalczyk said that as the Chair of the Swanzey Rail Trails Advisory Committee, his objective is to maintain the ART and Cheshire Rail Trail. Larry Anotuk said that although he lives in Marlborough, he is also interested in the ART. He said that there are interesting historical artifacts associated with the rail trails in the area and he wants to live in a place that has great bike access. Rowland Russell mentioned that he also coordinates trail cleanups for Cheshire and ART and has an interest making interpretive signage available on the trail.

Henry Underwood noted that there are other stakeholders that have expressed interest but were not able to attend today's meeting, including Alan Rumrill from the Historical Society of Cheshire County, Herb Stephens from the Town of Winchester, Mike Darcy and Wayne Gallagher from the Town of Hinsdale, Sarah Bomba from the Pisgah Mountain Trail Riders, Chuck Redfern from the NH Rail Trails Coalition, Rick Brackett from the Monadnock Conservancy, and Drew Bryenton from the Monadnock Cycling Club. He stated that he has also reached out to neighboring RPCs in Massachusetts and Vermont to coordinate their potential participation.

II. Project Background

Henry Underwood gave a presentation providing background on the project. A copy of that presentation is attached to the minutes.

Henry Underwood requested clarification regarding the use of all terrain vehicles (ATVs) on state owned rail trails in the winter and Chris Gamache responded that ATV's are not allowed on the ART at any time.

III. Project Scope and Timeline

Henry Underwood continued with the presentation that provided information about the project scope and timeline. See the attached copy of the presentation for more details.

Online Questionnaire

Henry Underwood noted that public involvement and input is a large part of the Plan for the ART project, and that SWRPC has developed a draft online survey to solicit feedback from the general public. He noted that the survey is based on review of other trail user surveys and explained that the goal is to keep the survey short in order to promote participation. Committee members reviewed and discussed potential changes to the draft survey:

- Barbara Skuly asked if question #4 was needed and Bruce Bohannon suggested it be taken out.
- Chris Gamache questioned whether question #5 was needed. Barbara Skuly said that perhaps #5 could say “Is the community doing enough to maintain its bike/ped infrastructure?” Rowland Russell suggested encouraging people to answer this kind of question in question #12. Margaret Sharra said that the question should be specific to the rail trail and should be after question #10.
- Mike Kowalczyk asked if there was any value in targeting businesses to participate in the survey? He noted that a realtor contacted him who was selling property along one of Swanzey’s rail trails and she wanted to know the status of any trail improvements as a way to market the property. Henry Underwood responded that perhaps the project could partner with the Greater Keene Chamber of Commerce to do a survey.
- Mike Kowalczyk said that the survey doesn’t really address family use of the trail.
- Chris Gamache said that the survey should be broad enough to inform future recreational or transportation improvements to the trail, so that it can be eligible for future Bureau of Trails, NH Department of Transportation grant opportunities.
- Barbara Skuly suggested that it would be good to have the survey identify whether the respondent is an abutter to the trail, and if they have any feedback about the trail. They may be sensitive to impacts like litter, noise, etc. She said that she was involved in doing a survey in the early 1990s prior to the State purchasing the trails, and there were some property owners that were concerned, but perhaps that has changed now.
- Margaret Sharra noted that the survey appears to focus on existing users, but what about future users? She stated that it would be helpful to know that if the towns were to improve the trail, would that make a survey respondent more likely to use the trail even if they aren’t using it today? Chris Brehme suggested that this could possibly be addressed through question #11.
- Bruce Bohannon noted that the survey doesn’t identify types of users, only types of trips. He suggested there might be a question #9b that would differentiate between types of users such as snowmobilers, horseback riders, walkers, bicyclists, etc.

Henry Underwood thanked the Committee for their initial thoughts and encouraged them to take it home with them and send any additional feedback. He said he would appreciate responses within one week with any feedback on the survey.

IV. Discussion

Henry Underwood opened a discussion about the project and provided the Committee with the following question prompts:

1. Why is this project important to you?
2. What are your goals for this project?
3. How can this project and its outcomes be most useful?
4. Are there specific issues or opportunities you would like to share?

The following observations were made by Committee members:

- Mike Kowalczyk asked if Cheshire County should be involved. He also asked why this was a pilot project. Henry Underwood responded that the project is a pilot project because this is SWRPC’s initial attempt in developing a rail trail plan and the ART was selected due to the amount of on-going momentum. He stated that this planning process should help inform other future rail trail planning projects in the region. He confirmed that Cheshire County did not currently have a formal

role as part of the project, it would be a good step to let them know what work was being undertaken.

- Margaret Sharra asked Henry Underwood to share the presentation with her so she can share it with the Winchester Board of Selectmen.
- Rowland Russell asked if this would be linked at all with the Ecovation Hub activities happening between Cheshire County, Windham County, Vermont and Franklin County, Massachusetts. He explained that there might be some funding opportunities associated with that effort that could benefit this project. Henry Underwood responded that SWRPC is involved with the regional planning commissions from those areas and are discussing transportation planning collaboration opportunities. He noted he's invited the regional planning commissions to be involved in this process.
- Will Schoefmann said that his goal is to build relationships with other stakeholders and build a coalition so that we have stronger regional rail trails.
- Chris Brehme stated that the Keene State College students are a huge potential user base for this trail and the College has a responsibility to embrace this trail. Over 3,000 students can use and enjoy this trail.
- Rowland Russell discussed his fundraising idea for the trail to have a "railway relay half marathon" event and it would encourage carsharing as well.
- Barbara Skuly asked how this project will get publicized? Henry Underwood indicated that methods will include press releases, a project website and an open house. J. B. Mack added that we would be asking the Towns to provide information about the project on their websites, in town newsletters and possibly in their libraries. Margaret Sharra said that the Town of Winchester could include information about the project (including the survey) as part of their tax bills which are sent out during the last week of May. Rowland Russell said that surveys could be handed out at Board of Selectmen meetings and could be laminated and posted at trail heads with a weblink to the survey. Chris Gamache said that he has mailing lists of snowmobile clubs, trail riding clubs and others that could be used to get the word out.
- Bruce Bohannon asked about the maps at the back of the room. Henry Underwood responded that he created maps and if people have time they can draw on the maps to show challenges and opportunities associated with the trails. Chris Gamache said knowing about encroachments would be helpful.

V. Next Meeting

Henry Underwood asked if Whitcomb Hall was a good venue and everyone agreed that it was. He 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 ART maps and provide initial feedback on challenges and opportunities.

Respectfully submitted,

J. B. Mack
Principal Planner