

**Cheshire Rail Trail South Planning Project
Working Group Meeting #2**

Meeting Summary

February 24, 2021

Present: Matthew Bachler, *Town of Swanzey*; Andy Bohannon, *City of Keene Parks & Rec Department*; Rick Brackett, *Monadnock Conservancy*; Craig Della Penna, *The Murphys Realtors*; Tom Duston, *Wantastiquet-Monadnock Trail Coalition*; Paul Kotila, *Town of Fitzwilliam*; Mike Kowalczyk, *Swanzey Rail Trails Advisory Committee/Monadnock Region Rail Trail Collaborative*; Bridget Likely, *Appalachian Mountain Club*; Kathryn Lynch, *Town of Hinsdale*; Charles Redfern, *Pathways for Keene/NH Rail Trails Coalition*; Larry Robinson, *Town of Marlborough/Southwest Region Planning Commission*; Rowland Russell, *City of Keene Bicycle Pedestrian Pathway Advisory Committee/Antioch University New England*; Will Schoefmann, *City of Keene*; Bruce Tranter, *Monadnock Sno-Moles*; Rick Ward, *Town of Winchendon, MA*; Shelley Winters, *New Hampshire Department of Transportation Bureau of Rail & Transit*; Kevin Woolley, *Town of Fitzwilliam*.

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

I. Welcome & Introductions

Henry Underwood welcomed attendees to the meeting at approximately 12:00 p.m. Using presentation slides, he reviewed the goals of the project, study area and estimated timeline. He invited individuals who were not able to attend the first project meeting or did not have time to share their top goals for the next ten years to share them with the group.

- Chuck Redfern shared that rehabilitating the 216-foot Prowse Memorial Bridge and installing it along the trail over NH 101 in Keene was among Pathways for Keene's top priorities.
- Rowland Russell added that in addition to safe crossings over both NH 101 and Swanzey Factory Road an additional Keene priority was establishing wayfinding and branding along the entire trail. Another priority was adding amenities and services at key points and parking areas – things like bike repair stations, directions to water and bathrooms or even providing these amenities along the trail.
- Paul Kotila shared that priorities in Fitzwilliam include improving trail surfaces in areas. In some cases areas are impassible in the summer due to drainage issues. One section exists between Royalston Road and NH 119. A second section exists south of NH 12 to Massachusetts. Improving crossings and safety at NH 12 and NH 119 are also priorities.
- Mike Kowalczyk added that in the future the trail connection to Winchendon, MA should be restored to take advantage of other improved trails in that area (e.g. River Trail and Mass Central Rail Trail). He also pointed out that there are a couple of areas where roads or drainage issues (and the lack of a bridge or tunnel) require trail users to bypass the original corridor and scenic parts of the corridor.

II. Updates on Existing Condition Assessment and Public Outreach Activities

Henry Underwood updated attendees on the results of the online survey and thanked them for their help promoting the opportunity in their networks. He said over 700 responses were received that would be used to inform priorities and projects and even serve as an outreach tool for future planning or volunteer efforts.

He said a complete summary would be published on the project website in the spring and provided selected findings:

- Just over half of respondents worked within walking or biking distance of the trail (51.2%) and closer to two-thirds live within walking or biking distance (63.8%).
- When asked about use of the trail during the last year, the most common trip purposes were recreation (87.6%) and exercising (62.8%). A small minority of respondents indicated they used the trail for their work commute (3.8%) or shopping/errands (3.5%).
- The most popular modes of travel by respondents were on foot (62.8%), bicycle (45.4%) and snowmobile (34.7%).
- Most respondents indicated they did not have safety concerns related to the trail (55.0%) however many respondents identified uneven surfaces (20.1%), vehicle traffic at trail crossings (13.4%), dogs or other animals (10.9%), encountering unauthorized motorized vehicles (10.2%) and other potential concerns.
- A demographic analysis of the age of respondents and U.S. Census Bureau data for Cheshire County indicated that younger individuals (under the age of 24) were underrepresented in the survey responses and individuals ages 35-64 were overrepresented when compared to the population as a whole.
- Overall, the top three potential improvements for the trail were: Improving Trail Surface Condition with Packed Gravel (39.5%), New or Improved Trailheads/Parking Areas (32.7%) and Directional Signs and Maps (28.1%).
- Almost half of the participants (355) indicated they would be willing to participate in a range of volunteer activities like clean-up days, construction, trimming vegetation, and more.

Henry Underwood listed and briefly summarized one-on-one interviews conducted thus far by Todd Horner of SWRPC staff. The list of interviewees included:

- New Hampshire Department of Transportation (NHDOT) Bureau of Rail and Transit.
- Monadnock Regional Rail Trail Collaborative (MRRTC). The interviewee is also a member of the Swanzey Rail Trail Advisory Committee.
- The Town of Fitzwilliam. Interviewees included municipal staff as well as members of the Conservation Commission and Recreation Commissions.
- Monadnock Conservancy.
- The Town of Winchendon, MA.
- Montachusett Regional Planning Commission (MRPC), whose service area includes Winchendon, MA.

Craig Della Penna addressed questions and concerns related to improving the trail surface in Massachusetts. In the 1990s, communities as well as the State transportation agency (MassDOT) understood that a paved surface was required. That has since been changed to allow for stone dust. Stone dust is the recommended surface treatment in other states. Craig Della Penna further commented that the Mass Central Rail Trail (south of Winchendon, MA) is the longest rail trail in the northeast and there is a large opportunity for New Hampshire, Massachusetts and Vermont to look at making trail connections on a much larger scale. Henry Underwood responded that SWRPC's planning project was intended to be a parallel and complementary effort to the State of New Hampshire's own planning projects.

III. Discussion on Draft Goals & Objectives, Implementation Plan

Henry Underwood introduced the next discussion around a vision, goals and objectives that would be included in the Cheshire Rail Trail Plan. Mike Kowalczyk suggested the vision be revised to include an element about connecting the trail to other destinations outside of the State. Some attendees provided a

“thumbs up” to indicate the draft vision was satisfactory. Henry Underwood encouraged participants to submit additional feedback and comments in the chat following the meeting.

Attendees reviewed and provided feedback on six draft goals and objectives. First, attendees pointed out missing items and the need for clarification with respect to the goals:

- Rowland Russell commented that there needs to be a goal about connectivity to other trail systems.
- Tom Duston asked about where use of all-terrain vehicles (ATV) fit into the discussion about goals and objectives, specifically Goal 5 mentioning “all user groups.” Henry Underwood replied that this phrase refers to existing permitted user groups. Shelley Winters commented that this corridor was acquired through funding from the Federal Highway Administration’s Transportation Enhancements program and that it does have a motorized use restriction that prohibits ATVs. It would be a very cumbersome process for this to be changed and would require action by each municipality. She further commented that to her knowledge no community in the nation had successfully achieved this status change. Henry Underwood commented that at this point there have been survey responses in favor of a change, however, it has not come up in discussions with municipal officials.
- Mike Kowalczyk added that a goal and/or objective dedicated to maintenance is needed. Paul Kotila agreed and said funding, including funding for maintenance should also be addressed in a goal and/or objective.
- Paul Kotila commented that the list of goals and objectives was very long and not prioritized. He said in terms of implementation, prioritization will be needed and may have differing results depending on where trail stakeholders are geographically (e.g. priorities for Keene versus priorities for Fitzwilliam). He said to be successful, the plan should provide guidance in this area. Henry Underwood responded that this context can be provided in the final Plan deliverable as well as through guidance at the third meeting.

Attendees reviewed and provided feedback on objectives related to **Goal 1: Increase awareness of the trail, among both local residents and visitors.**

- Chuck Redfern commented that the [Granite State Ambassadors](#), recognized by the State of New Hampshire, hosts an event each year at [The Big E](#). They have asked for promotional materials (e.g. “rack cards”) related to rail trails to distribute at the event. He also asked if the State was working to develop standard trail signs. Shelley Winters clarified that since this trail is managed under a cooperative agreement with Bureau of Trails that they would have the responsibility to lead this effort. Henry Underwood stated that this new information could be used to adjust Objective 7.
- Craig Della Penna shared a story of a [New York report](#) that showed one trail was so busy that it impressed the governor to the extent that the State took on 400 miles of additional trail improvements in 4 years and completed them in December of 2020. In Massachusetts, this led to meetings of the *Trails Team* by Governor Baker and agencies with trails in their jurisdictions. The outcome resulted in “silos” being removed and funding being increased.

With respect to **Goal 2: Increase use of the trail as an alternative for trips made by car**, attendees provided the following comments:

- Mike Kowalczyk asked about the role of businesses to provide facilities to encourage people to walk or bike (e.g. lockers, showers, bike parking, storage).
- Rowland Russell spoke in support of calling out bike parking and bike garages as specific amenities.

- Tom Duston reminded attendees that “mixed mode” trips were important to think about (for example, a commuter driving some distance and using the trail for a part of their trip). These users will benefit from improved parking areas and new navigation signage.

Attendees reviewed and commented on **Goal 3: Expand opportunities for physical activity and outdoor experiences.**

- Bridget Likely commented that the Metacomet-Monadnock Trail should be added to the list of connecting trails.

Attendees reviewed but did not provide comments on **Goal 4: Enhance regional and local economies.** With respect to **Goal 5: Create an on-trail experience that is accessible, safe and welcoming for all ages, abilities and user groups,** attendees offered a number of comments:

- Rowland Russell suggested specifying amenities within the objective (bike repair, map kiosks, seating, etc.).
- Bridget Likely pointed out that although the goal area mentions accessibility there isn’t an objective that address Americans with Disabilities Act (ACT) standards or related needs directly. Henry Underwood commented that resources related to accessibility provided in a separate project will be beneficial in drafting a new objective.

Attendees reviewed and commented on **Goal 6: Facilitate communication and collaboration among trail stakeholders** and its related objectives:

- Chuck Redfern said that an issue in our region was that smaller towns were often fiscally constrained, making it difficult for large project funds. He mentioned that communities may be able to creatively fund such projects. As an example, he shared that the large solar array planned for Fitzwilliam would be operated by a large national company that may have ways to fund improvements in such “host” communities through grants or donations. Hinsdale’s cooperation with Brattleboro on the Connecticut River Bridge projects may be another opportunity to present funding needs. Otherwise, local match requirements will be an issue. He also commented that trail improvements take time – Keene’s project took 20 years to develop.
- Mike Kowalczyk contributed that Goal 6 was a good “home” for an objective specific to maintenance, funding maintenance, and collaboration on maintenance.
- Paul Kotila said there was a need to address ways of achieving the objective that could be measured over time. Additionally, terms such as “enhance” lack clarity on what actually needs to happen. He suggested replacing the objective about joining efforts of Monadnock Region Rail Trail Collaborative with “continuous, ongoing interaction with the variety of groups that relate to the trail in order to...” Henry Underwood noted one of SWRPC’s previous trail planning efforts featured a variety of potential performance measures, however, the current project would not allow time to develop and agree on specific measures for each objective.

Henry Underwood encouraged attendees to continue to contribute to and promote the project’s Challenges and Opportunities interactive map as a way to identify specific projects that would be listed in an implementation plan.

IV. Other Matters

Henry Underwood asked if attendees had general questions about the project or updates related to the trail to share.

- Rick Ward updated the group that the Town of Winchendon requested assistance from the Montachusett Regional Planning Commission with help performing a feasibility study to connect the North Central Pathway to New Hampshire as well as other points westward in Massachusetts.
- Tom Duston advocated for the need to add restrooms or privies along the trail which can often be low maintenance.
- Paul Kotila asked about the composition of the Working Group and SWRPC's experience with other cross-town efforts. Henry Underwood explained that this varies depending on the project and that the current effort is less formal than other efforts.
- Andy Bohannon advocated for the continued focus on connecting to Massachusetts trails and that the City of Keene was becoming more and more a destination for mountain bikers. He impressed upon attendees the need to brand and market the trail system in its connectivity would be critical in attracting people to the area and especially to local downtowns. He said he was in the process of requesting technical support from the University of New Hampshire's [Downtowns & Trails](#) program related to this objective. He expected discussions to continue following the pandemic.

V. Next Meeting

Henry Underwood said he would initiate a meeting poll for the third and final project meeting.

VI. Adjourn

The meeting was adjourned at approximately 1:15 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted,

Henry Underwood
GIS Specialist/Planner