

Cheshire Rail Trail South Planning Project Working Group Meeting #1

Meeting Summary

December 1, 2020

Present: Matthew Bachler, *Town of Swanzey*; Sherry Bean, *Montachusett Regional Planning Commission*; Rick Brackett, *Monadnock Conservancy*; Michael Branley, *Town of Swanzey*; Jesse Creedy Powers, *Division of Parks and Recreation, NH Department of Natural and Cultural Resources*; Tom Duston, *Wantastiquet-Monadnock Trail Coalition*; Steve Fortier, *Greater Keene Chamber of Commerce*; Mary Guild, *Town of Troy*; Paul Kotila, *Town of Fitzwilliam*; Mike Kowalczyk, *Swanzey Rail Trails Advisory Committee/Monadnock Region Rail Trail Collaborative*; Don Lussier, *City of Keene*; Tracy Murphy, *Town of Winchendon*; Charles Redfern, *NH Rail Trails Coalition*; Frank Richter, *Pathways for Keene*; Larry Robinson, *Town of Marlborough/Southwest Region Planning Commission*; Avis Rosenfield, *NH Horse Council/NH State Trails Plan Stakeholder Advisory Committee*; Rowland Russell, *Antioch University New England*; Will Schoefmann, *City of Keene*; Laura Susmann, *New Hampshire Horse Council/Monadnock Happy Trails Association*; Bruce Tranter, *Monadnock Sno-Moles*; Rick Ward, *Town of Winchendon*; 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 4:00 p.m. and introductions were made. Referring to a map and PowerPoint presentation, he explained that the intent of the Cheshire Rail Trail South Planning Project is to plan for the Cheshire Rail Trail from its intersection with the Ashuelot Rail Trail at Emerald Street in Keene south to the Massachusetts state line. Connections to the former railbed in Massachusetts and other trails would also be of interest.

Avis Rosenfield provided an introduction to the [New Hampshire State Trails Plan update](#), a parallel and related effort.

II. Project Scope & Timeline

Henry Underwood explained that the current NH State Rail Trails Plan identifies over 300 miles of State-owned trails, with approximately 90 miles in the Monadnock Region, including the Cheshire Rail Trail. He said the Plan refers to the “Cheshire Branch” as having a total of 42 miles between the Massachusetts state line and a point near the intersection of NH 12 and NH 123 East in Walpole. According to the Plan, the railroad opened in 1849 and was abandoned in 1972, featured right-of-way widths between 82.5 feet and 99 feet, and includes 36 bridges. He said the corridor was purchased using federal funds by the State in the 1990’s and wintertime use by snowmobiles is allowed throughout the majority of the corridor (the exception being portions of the trail in the City of Keene).

Henry Underwood said the purpose of bringing a working group together is to develop a 10-year plan (Plan) for the trail, including a vision, goals, and objectives as well as specific projects. Attendees reviewed a tentative timeline for the planning project, which aims to conclude by May of 2021. He pointed out that throughout the timeline, memos and other products would be sent to the group for review and feedback. He further summarized individual components and descriptions of tasks within the project, including potential roles and responsibilities of the Working Group, which includes representatives from the five host

communities: Keene, Swanzey, Marlborough, Troy, and Fitzwilliam. He noted that the Working Group is scheduled to meet three times over the course of the project to cover the following topics:

1. Project scope, a vision for the trail, the online survey, and project promotion.
2. A presentation on the results of SWRPC's existing conditions assessment, as well as a discussion about draft goals and objectives, and an implementation plan.
3. A discussion about the final draft of the Plan, project prioritization, and next steps relating to Plan promotion and implementation.

Henry Underwood then described the proposed existing conditions assessment, public outreach approach, planned needs analysis, and other Plan components.

Tom Duston asked how current ideas like a bridge over NH 101 in Keene or improving the section near Eastern Avenue in Keene would appear in the Plan. Henry Underwood said these were examples of projects that would appear in the Implementation Plan. Mike Kowalczyk confirmed that connections to other trails like the North Central Pathway in Winchendon, MA would be part of discussions and project ideas in the Implementation Plan.

Frank Richter asked about the next steps beyond completion of the Plan. Henry Underwood said that it would be up to individual communities and others to consider formal adoption or inclusion of the Plan as part of an existing planning document such as a master plan. Implementation of the project ideas themselves would vary based on ownership and maintenance responsibilities in an area, the type of improvement, available funding, and other factors.

III. Your Vision

Henry Underwood asked attendees to think about their top goals related to the Trail. These initial priorities would be used to assist staff in developing draft goals, objectives and strategies. Construction ideas as well as projects around things like signage or public awareness would be beneficial. The following comments were made:

- City of Keene:
 - o The proposed connection and overpass of NH 101 (locally referred to as the Transportation Heritage Trail Project).
 - o Partnering with the Town of Swanzey in the area near Joslin Station Road and the larger upcoming trail improvement project (funded through the NHDOT's Transportation Alternatives Program).
 - o Improving the integrity and safety (railings and other features) of the Stone Arch Bridge.
 - o Improvement of the section of trail between the existing Eastern Avenue trailhead south to the future overpass location (currently Phase I of the Transportation Heritage Trail Project).
 - o Swanzey Factory Road trailhead parking and a potential trail overpass.
 - o Partnering with the Town of Swanzey on ideas for branding, signage and funding sources that could be utilized regionwide for consistency.
- Town of Swanzey:
 - o Support for the Transportation Heritage Trail Project improvements already mentioned.
 - o Improved access such as through parking areas to make it easier for people to get onto the trail.
 - o Creating an easy-to-navigate funding guide to jump-start implementation.
- Mike Kowalczyk:
 - o Swanzey Factory Road overpass.
 - o Connection with the North Central Pathway in Winchendon, MA.
 - o Improving parking.

- Larry Robinson:
 - Establishing a parking area near Webb Depot Road near the overpass.
 - Protecting the historic bridge that passes over Webb Depot Road.
 - Looking in the vicinity of the NHDOT Troy Patrol Shed (164 Monadnock Highway) for an additional access point.
 - Improving the former Brnger property (304 Monadnock Highway, Swanzey, Map 16 Lot 4) – currently abandoned.
- Paul Kotila:
 - Improving the crossing on NH 119. The crossing was formerly a tunnel that was filled in. The former railbed leading to the crossing is unusable due to drainage issues.
 - Addressing the slope issues at the at grade crossing at Royalston Road resulting from the removal of the stone arch bridge.
 - There is a difficult crossing and connectivity issue at the southern end of the trail at NH 12.
 - There is a need for more information to be provided to the public about finding and navigating the Trail as well as cultural and historical information associated with sections of trail.
- Kevin Woolley:
 - The Trail condition is in need of improvement (there are areas that are excessively sandy and not passable with normal bikes).
 - Clean-up along the Trail is needed (e.g. he noted a washing machine on the side of the Trail).
- Laura Susmann:
 - Equestrian access is very important, including large enough parking areas for horse trailers (the Chamberlain Conservation Area in Fitzwilliam is a good example). The Trail would benefit from a number of these areas throughout the length of the Trail.
 - Ensuring bridges are safely built for horses (esp. width and weight).
 - A printable, pocket-size trail map in addition to trailhead kiosks would be beneficial since many areas do not have adequate phone or GPS reception.
 - Any opportunities to head south into Massachusetts from the Chamberlain Conservation Area.
- Avis Rosenfield:
 - Promoting good etiquette on the Trail by various users (e.g. who yields to whom).
 - Signage to indicate mile marker, town name, street name.
- Rick Ward:
 - Connecting the Cheshire Rail Trail would effectively extend the Trail to an already “excellent” connection from Winchendon, MA to Gardner, MA.
- Tracy Murphy:
 - A trail connection to New Hampshire would be a major asset to a large population in town that snowmobiles use.
- Tom Duston:
 - Improving but at the same time avoiding excessive signage (including advertising).
- Bruce Tranter:
 - Connecting the Cheshire Rail Trail to the Ashuelot Rail Trail just south of Keene would benefit snowmobiles, equestrians and others. Groomers currently have to turn around just south of the Keene City line. Chuck Redfern suggested Senator Jay Kahn and the Swanzey-affiliated snowmobile club as partners to explore an east-west connection to the Ashuelot Rail Trail.
 - Discussing the potential for snowmobiles to continue into the City of Keene to reach a connector trail (for the purpose of going around Keene).
 - Working with Bureau of Trails/snowmobile clubs to approve signage.

- Continuing to improve safety at highway crossings (the Sno Moles were successful in having signage installed on NH 119 and US 202, but pedestrian beacons and a marked crosswalk were denied).
- Examining routes to navigate through or around Winchendon, MA by snowmobile that avoid busy streets.

IV. Online Survey, Resources and Project Promotion

Henry Underwood reviewed a variety of online resources and requested help from attendees to promote the [project webpage](#), [online survey](#) and [Challenges & Opportunities Map](#).

V. Next Meeting

Henry Underwood said he would initiate a meeting poll for dates in January or February and alert participants of the time via e-mail and the project webpage.

VI. Adjourn

The meeting was adjourned at approximately 5:00 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted,

Henry Underwood
GIS Specialist/Planner