

BUILDING MANCHESTER'S TRAIL NETWORK



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Herb Scott of Pichette Bros. Construction in Manchester runs an excavator yesterday on the Piscataquog Trail on the West Side.

Connecting the dots

Work almost complete on 1-mile stretch

By KATHRYN MARCZOCKI
New Hampshire Union Leader

MANCHESTER — Little victories have marked the piecemeal process of converting the city's abandoned rail lines into walking and biking trails during the last dozen years.

That will be the case later this month when a major leg of the Piscataquog Trail is set to open.

The approximate one-mile link that connects South Main Street to Electric Street near the West Ice Arena took about seven months and cost about \$725,000 to build.

But don't expect any big to-do or ribbon-cutting ceremony.

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Four rail trails for the city

HERITAGE TRAIL follows the Merrimack River through downtown.

ROCKINGHAM TRAIL connects to the existing trail that runs from Auburn to Newfields.

PISCATAQUOG TRAIL links the Hands Across the Merrimack Bridge to the Goffstown/New Boston trail.

SOUTH MANCHESTER TRAIL would ultimately link the Millyard to Salem.

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◆ **The hub:** Public invited to June 17 forum on developing trails in the city.

By KATHRYN MARCZOCKI
New Hampshire Union Leader

MANCHESTER — In the heyday of the Iron Horse, railways that ran through the Millyard churned with steaming locomotives hauling cars filled with passengers from Nashua, Concord and Lawrence, Mass., and materials needed to keep the mill spinning.

Now mostly idled, the rail beds are hidden graveyards of overgrown brush and occasional trash as they course behind backyards and silent corners of the city.

A group of trail enthusiasts wants to put these approximate 10 miles of abandoned rail beds back on track — at a potential price tag of nearly \$24 million.

Only this time, the lines

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Trails

would carry a new kind of cargo: walkers, bikers, commuters, young couples out for a stroll, senior citizens without cars, kids and families heading out to the park.

"Our goal is to get those already-finished biking and walking trails and have them connected to surrounding communities. Manchester is a huge hub. Right now, you can get to the area, but you can't go anywhere when you get here," said D. Dean Williams, who co-founded the nonprofit Manchester Moves Inc. in April 2008 to promote development of recreational trails within the city.

The abandoned rail lines follow the four points of the compass as they criss-cross Manchester and run to the city limits, connecting with Hooksett to the north, Goffstown to the west, Auburn in the east, and Bedford and Londonderry to the south. From there, outlying regions already have some impressive trails, including the Rockingham Trail, which links Auburn to Newfields, Williams said.

Sleeping giant

The expected completion of the Piscataquog Trail in spring 2010 will be the first step within the city. Even so, that trail and an approximate one-mile link in south Manchester mark the development of just three of the total 10 miles of abandoned rail corridor, acting director of the city's Parks and Recreation Department Chuck R. DePrima said.

"There are bike groups, trail groups and hiking groups ... who have done a wonderful job of putting together bicycle and walking trails, but when

"Right now, you can get to the area, but you can't go anywhere when you get here."

D. DEAN WILLIAMS
Manchester Moves Inc. co-founder

you get to the city of Manchester, they kind of end," said Williams, a city resident who is vice president and operator of Martignetti Companies of New Hampshire.

The concept of converting abandoned railways to recreational trails is decades old. Yet Manchester remains something of a sleeping giant in this area, falling well behind other cities of similar size and scope in terms of trail development, Williams said.

As a result, the city not only loses out on the substantial health and environmental benefits trails offer, but also the competitive edge they would bring the city in terms of economic development, Williams said.

"We hire young people coming out of law school into this firm," said Robert E. Dastin, a partner with Sheehan, Phinney, Bass & Green law firm in Manchester and co-founder of Manchester Moves. "They are now inquiring about what kind of a community is Manchester? Do you have a trails program?"

He said potential recruits are ranking these amenities on par with health and retirement benefits.

June 17 forum

Williams and Dastin are the driving force behind several upcoming events they hope will change this.

The nonprofit organization's

goal is to work to convert the still high-quality network of abandoned rail lines into trails that will connect the city with surrounding communities.

It will host a forum on June 17 to update the public of progress made so far and to encourage community, business and volunteer involvement.

The public is invited to the session, which begins at 7 p.m. in the University of New Hampshire at Manchester auditorium at 400 Commercial St.

There they will present the results of the first comprehensive engineering study of the city's abandoned rail trails, projected construction costs to convert them to trails and potential obstacles.

Manchester Moves focuses on developing the four major trail systems within the city. They are:

- The Heritage Trail/Riverwalk, which follows the Merrimack River in the city and ultimately would connect the Massachusetts and Canadian borders.
- The Piscataquog Trail, which would link the Hands Across the Merrimack Bridge to the Goffstown/New Boston trail.
- The Rockingham Trail.
- The South Manchester Rail Trail, which now has a one-mile stretch that links South Beech and Gold streets and eventually would connect Salem to the city's Millyard.

Follow the money

Estimated cost of completing all four trail links is \$23,982,000, according to the engineering study Manchester Moves paid for with a \$10,000 donation from Williams' company and a \$12,000 donation from the former Manchester Sports Council Inc.

Funding would come from a mix of federal, state, local and private sources, Dastin said.

Of the total \$23.9 million, engineers estimated \$10 million alone would be needed to complete the complex work required to extend the Riverwalk through the Millyard, where in some cases the trail would be built out over the river on cantilevered supports attached to the rear of the former mills.

Meanwhile, the city of Manchester is one of 40 communities nationwide that the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy will promote before Congress this year as worthy of receiving \$50 million each in federal transportation funds to complete their proposed trail programs, said Tom P. Sexton, director of the national nonprofit group's northeast office.

"Each of the communities did a case statement. Manchester's was a very good one," Sexton said.

Progress

nies when the final touches are made and the trail officially opens by month's end.

That will wait until next year when work on the final section of the trail is done, which will bring the 10-foot-wide, paved trail over the Piscataquog River railroad trestle and to the Goffstown line, acting Director of the city's Parks and Recreation Department Director Chuck R. DePrima said.

"This will be the first (trail) that has been developed in its entirety within the city," he explained. "It will be the first trail in the city that links the east and west sides of the city together."

The trail ends on the east at the Hands Across the Merrimack Bridge, which goes over the Merrimack River and connects with the Riverwalk and Millyard.

At the city line, the Piscataquog Trail ultimately will continue through Goffstown Village to New Boston. These towns already completed some sections of this trail, he said.

The next and final stage of the Piscataquog Trail is moving quickly given the expe-

ditioned release of \$250,000 of the \$847,300 state transportation grant that will enable the city to begin design and engineering on rehabilitating the railroad trestle and connecting the trail from Electric Street to the Goffstown line, DePrima said.

The funds were released about two weeks ago in part because of the efforts of Manchester Moves Inc, a trail advocacy group, DePrima said. The project should be ready to go out to bid this summer, construction should begin in September, DePrima said. It currently is slated for completion in spring 2010.

The one-mile trail that connects South Main and Electric streets was funded by a state transportation department grant of \$725,000 of which the city put up 20 percent in matching funds.

The abandoned rail corridor on which the Piscataquog Trail runs belonged to the Boston & Maine Railroad and was transferred to the state in 1996, DePrima said.

The state gave the city the rail bed for free in 1998 on the sole



The Piscataquog Trail in Manchester is scheduled for completion in spring 2010.

THOMAS ROY/UNION LEADER

condition it be converted to a recreational trailway, he said.

Work on the trailway began shortly after with the removal of a railroad trestle over Second Street, installing a new bridge

in its place while restoring the original granite abutments and connecting the trail from the Merrimack River to South Main Street. That work was done in 2002.

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