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LETTER: The Rail Trail is being overdeveloped

Submitted Content August 25, 2026

To the editor: The Marblehead Conservancy believes that the railroad bed is both an historic and natural treasure. However, we also believe current design plans, recently presented for community input, are overdeveloping it

In our minds there is an important difference between a trail and a street. A walk or bike ride on a trail allows one to briefly escape our busy world to enjoy an experience that reminds us of the stillness, beauty and wonder that is nature. A street (or sidewalk) presents an entirely different environment: concrete, asphalt, manicured lawns and buildings.

The Marblehead Conservancy has been maintaining Marblehead's 150 acres of Conservation Lands including trails, removing invasives, and planting native trees, shrubs and flowers for 25 years. We were invited to participate in planning for remediation of the Rail Trail to better serve pedestrians and bicyclists resulting in the November 2020 report.

We believe the results of the November 2020 Rail Trail plan revealed that it should be more like a trail than a street. For example: From page 9 of the November 2020 plan: "The trail has a distinctive rustic, nature-trail character, which is highly valued by trail users. Passing through many of Marblehead's conservation areas, the trail provides access to woodlands, wetlands and coast, and the dense vegetation along the corridor provides a sense of seclusion. The trail is widely used and well-loved by the community."

This occurs in the report before any specific design trail features are listed — in other words it is "overarching." As the "Summary of Community Engagement Themes" reiterates (p. 11), users value the "natural character and feel" of the trail. We believe if you remove the suggestions from the November 2020 report that had low levels of support (p 10), you will find the desire for the Rail Trail to be a "trail."

We have had at least two meetings with the manager of Community Development to express this view, and suggested, among other things, expanding the steering committee from three town department heads to include stakeholders. We have not heard back regarding any of those suggestions, so we assume they have been rejected but we have reason to believe that the "street" design is moving on.

Some examples of overdesign (as done between Clifton and Rockaway):

— Removal of nearly all vegetation and replacement with manicured planting beds and "lawn" grasses which are frequently mowed. We do support selectively removing invasive plants and replacing with native ones and use of native "meadow" grasses. We think the vegetation should be mowed a few times a season, maybe as much as monthly, primarily to remove "overgrown vegetation that narrows the trail's usable width" (p. 12).

— Concrete pads along the railroad bed with benches, trash barrels, bicycle racks, bicycle pumps and bicycle repair stations.

— We believe any signage should occur at street intersections, not along the railroad bed itself, unless it is to identify plants or historical features (e.g. railroad appurtenances).

We agree with the plan to treat the trail with aggregate which makes the trail durable, appears somewhat like gravel and is somewhat permeable. However, we believe a recent suggestion to use asphalt not only changes the entire feel of the railroad bed to feel like a street but would also assure runoff to adjoining Conservation areas — a very bad idea.

One suggestion for dealing with this is for the Select Board to appoint an oversight committee with at least as many stakeholders as town department heads. Don Morgan, for the Marblehead Conservancy

In support –

The Marblehead Conservancy Board of Trustees has reviewed Don Morgan's letter regarding the over-improvement of the rail trail under the current plans. The board is unanimous in its support of and agreement with the concerns outlined in Don's letter.

As established caretakers of Marblehead's natural open spaces, the Marblehead Conservancy was included as one of the original stakeholders in the rail trail planning process. We speak with that same voice now. The Conservancy urges the various town departments and personnel to evaluate the current plans in light of the community's strongly expressed desire to maintain the natural feel of this valuable asset.

Sincerely,

Robert French, president
Don Morgan, treasurer and secretary
Nina Robertson, membership and accounts receivable
Maureen Ashley
Kathy Breslin
Jim Caplan
Jody Howard
David Krathwohl
Elaine Leahy

PS – We have also noticed that the railroad bed vegetation is growing in and coming close to blocking several sections. The agreement the former town planner made giving the Select Board an easement to the railroad bed states that the Select Board is responsible for mowing it. We think this needs your immediate attention.