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A vision coming true: Study finds 104-mile rail trail connecting Northampton-Boston would generate millions, increase health



Arian Pilja, left, and Claire Kirkhus of Belchertown run down the Norwottuck Rail Trail on Thursday in Belchertown. STAFF PHOTO/DAN LITTLE » Buy this Image

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By the end of this decade, if not sooner, bicyclists will be able to hop on the rail trail at the J. Elwell Conservation Area in Northampton, cross the Connecticut River, and travel across the state 104 miles on the same path all the way to Boston.

As they traverse the Massachusetts Central Rail Trail (MCRT), users might stop at a local restaurant for a meal, shop for souvenirs from small businesses, and stay the night at a bed and breakfast or campground.

Why you're not losing weight

WAKE UP TIME	6 AM	7 AM	8 AM	AGE	18-25	
DAILY MEALS	1	2	3	4+	DAILY WATER INTAKE	
HOURS OF SLEEP	<input type="range" value="7"/>				YOUR BMI	40+
AGE	18-25	26-35	36-55	56+	FASTING SCHEDULE	16:8

“In a perfect world, my high altitude, high in the blue sky estimate is that it could be done in five years,” said Craig Della Penna, a longtime rail trail proponent and president of the Norwottuck Network, a nonprofit that supports the construction and operation of the MCRT.

Once the entire stretch is complete — to the tune of between \$100 million to \$150 million, though the state Department of Transportation has yet to provide an estimate — it would bring with it a wealth of health, wellness and economic benefits in the amount of \$87 million to \$182 million annually, according to a recent report released by Norwottuck Network.

Norwottuck hired Kittelson & Associates Inc. for \$75,000 to evaluate the potential impact of the trail’s completion. The resulting report, “Envisioning a Statewide Connection: Mass Central Rail Trail Benefits Study,” was released in mid-May.

Among the highlights, the report found that the bicycle and pedestrian trail, which runs along the Massachusetts Central Railroad corridor, has the potential to quadruple annual trail usage to between 4 and 5 million, leading to increased overnight lodging, new job opportunities and reduced health costs as a result of more people getting physical activity.

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“When [the trail] becomes long enough for overnight visitors, like families with little kids who may be able to go 20 or 30 miles, then go overnight camping or a bed and breakfast or small hotel, that’s where the numbers really jump,” Della Penna said.

As of now, 59 miles of the trail are open, nine miles are under construction, and another 94.5 miles are owned by protecting agencies such as municipalities and land trusts. The trail starts on Pleasant Street in downtown Northampton and ends in the Paul Revere Park in Boston.

In mid-July, the Healey-Driscoll administration announced over \$11 million in grant funding for trail improvements across the commonwealth, including funding for the MCRT which will allow for further construction on the trail. The project has also received substantial grants from a host of other groups, including communities, land trusts, conservation departments, and more.

Straightforward areas of construction will involve paving, adding fences, and/or laying stone dust pathways. Other sections of the corridor have greater barriers, including missing bridges, privately-owned trail segments, and a 1,000-foot tunnel in need of repairs.

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If completed, the trail would not only open up the entire 104-mile MCR corridor, but it would also connect the trail to 18 other existing and under-development rail trails in the state, including several in this region, creating a 273-mile trail network.

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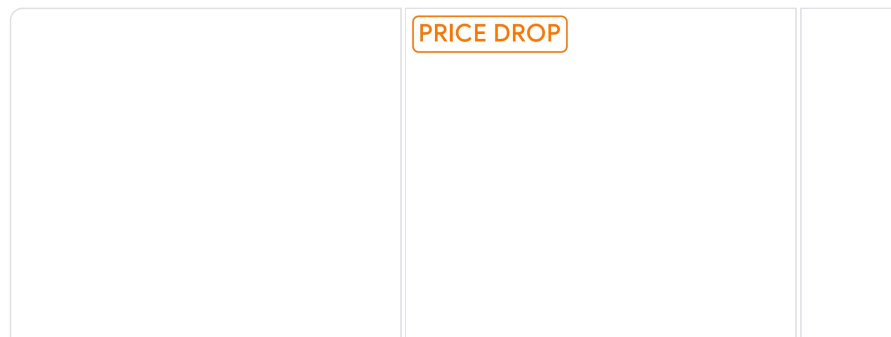
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The entire state trail system will be within one mile of nearly a quarter of Massachusetts residents, compared to 7% of residents who currently reside within a mile of the existing sections. Once complete, the network would generate upward of \$200 million in economic activity and support

over 1,000 jobs, the report found.

In the west section alone, which goes through Hampshire and Hampden counties, a completed trail would mean over a million annual daily visits and up to 135,000 annual overnight visits. That increased use would result in higher economic activity of up to \$64 million annually for this region, the report estimated.

On the health front, because the MCRT creates a safe and enjoyable exercise environment, increased physical activity on the rail is estimated to reduce annual health care expenditures by \$6 million to \$7.7 million, according to the study.



Della Penna pointed to “gateway communities” — or cities with social and economic challenges but assets with “unrealized potential,” as defined by the state — including Easthampton, South Hadley, Southampton and Hatfield that will benefit most from the trail.

“This is a way to create reinvestment in places that are somewhat forgotten,” Della Penna said. “If we’re really serious talking about environmental justice, well this will be part of the discussion.”

“To have these off-road sections that don’t just go to cute vistas but go right to the heart of communities ... it’s very important to build them out,” he said, adding that a common thread between gateway communities are dead railroad corridors.

History of the trail

The Massachusetts Central Railroad first opened in 1881, 12 years after it was chartered by the state Legislature, and provided service from Boston to Hudson. In the ensuing years, westward expansion of the railroad reached Northampton by 1887.

But in 1938, the Great New England Hurricane destroyed several bridges along the railroad, and it was split into western and eastern branches, marking the beginning of its decline.

The MCRT began to form in 1980 when the MBTA and the Department of Environmental Management bought unused sections of the MCR corridor for a shared-use path. The first section, the now-11-mile Norwottuck Rail Trail, was completed in 1993, and is still a popular path that runs through Northampton, Hadley, Amherst and Belchertown.

Those opposed to expanding rail trails often cite the trails’ proximity to their residencies as unwelcome. To that, Della Penna, said, “I live 8 feet from one... the trail is good,” and added that he operated the Sugar Maple Trailside Inn and guests love the sound of laughter coming from children biking to school.

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