

Hadley backs the completion of the 104 mile long Mass Central Rail Trail



Bikers check out a map along the Mass Central Rail Trail stop near South Maple Street in Hadley. The town's Select Board on Wednesday endorsed a complete build-out of the 104-mile long trail that would link 26 communities across the state. GAZETTE FILE PHOTO

HADLEY — Hadley officials are endorsing the complete build-out of the Mass Central Rail Trail, a 104-mile long trail that would link 26 communities across the state, extending the 11-mile Norwottuck Rail Trail that already connects the town with Northampton, Amherst and Belchertown.

Following an appeal from Craig Della Penna, president of the nonprofit Norwottuck Network and a longtime booster of the rail trail, the Select Board Wednesday voted unanimously to send a letter of support to the state's Department of Transportation.

The board is joining other elected leaders, including the Northampton City Council, in this advocacy for a project that could cost well over \$100 million. "Hadley has already seen tremendous public benefits from the MRCT since it was first constructed in 1993," the letter states. "Once fully completed, the trail will offer remarkable economic, health and environmental benefits to Hadley and the Pioneer Valley."

The board voted for the letter with little discussion, with board member David J. Fill, II observing that he prefers to ride his bicycle on the rail trail as opposed to Route 9.

"Doesn't cost the town anything to support this," said board member Jane Nevin Smith. Della Penna explained that a 2023 report commissioned by his organization showed that if the trail is completed, it could generate more than \$200 million per year in revenues from those biking and walking along it, with the possibility of attracting 5 million new visitors to Massachusetts and creating nearly 1,000 jobs. "We thought that's a winner," Della Penna said.

Currently, the Mass Central Rail Trail has 63 miles open, and a 3-mile stretch was recently added in Waltham. An additional 12 miles are under construction, with those expected to be completed by the end of 2025. In addition, Della Penna said 96.5 miles of 104 miles are in some kind of public protected status.

But Della Penna cautioned that it will be a big commitment to move beyond what already exists. "Right now, we are 63 miles open, once we get the

75 miles open, there's a problem, because there are three big bridges missing," Della Penna said.

On top of the need to rebuild the bridges, which were removed and turned into scrap metal when the original 19th century Massachusetts Central Railroad was decommissioned, investment from the state will also include renovations to a 1,000-foot tunnel in Clinton.

Other work includes paving, adding fences and laying stone dust pathways. Della Penna said that Massachusetts owns more miles of dead steam rail lines than any other state, so opportunity is there. "This is the longest rail-to-trail project in New England, one that actually connects with 18 other shared-use paths," Della Penna said. Those other shared-use paths are part of a 273-mile trail network.

Already, the 325-mile Erie Canal Trail in New York is bringing \$250 million a year to that state, and New York's leadership has been so encouraged by the economic benefits that the push is build another 400 miles there.

Della Penna also spoke to the Hadley Planning Board this week. He noted that the Federal Highway Administration designated the Norwottuck Rail Trail as a prime example of a great trail around the turn of the 21st century. That allowed progress to continue, with improvements made from Northampton through Hadley and Amherst into Belchertown by 2018.

In recent years, the Norwottuck Network, first formed in the late 1990s, has expanded board membership to be along the entire 104-mile corridor and all 26 communities will be asked to write letters of support.

He said the 501c3 nonprofit has an e-newsletter that goes to over 15,000 policymakers and advocates in eight states.

Besides Hadley and Northampton, Weston is supporting the initiative, and Della Penna said they will be meeting with officials in Somerville and Cambridge in the next two weeks, and will be approaching Belchertown for buy in too. More information is at the website finishttherailtrail.org.

Andy Morris-Friedman, who has been Hadley's member of the Norwottuck Network and put forward the letter, said that in October the first Mass Central Rail Trail Ride: Northampton to Boston took place, with 15 riders riding as much of the 104 miles as they could, though some had to be done on public roads.

"I used to say that one day in the future we'd be able to ride from Williamstown to Provincetown in our electric wheelchairs, but it looks like the project will be finished long before then, and we'll actually be able to do it on bicycles," Morris-Friedman said. Scott Merzbach can be reached at smerzbach@gazettenet.com.