

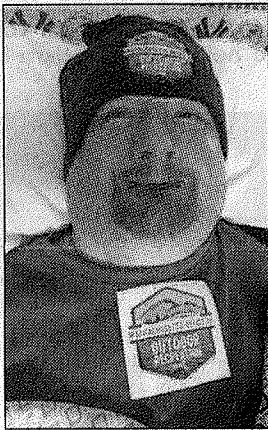
THURSDAY, DECEMBER 15, 2022

# Rail trail user advocates for accessibility

*Editor's note: Steven Hawk has been an advocate for outdoor accessibility in his hometown of Ware and beyond. Rail trails have given Hawk the ability to visit a nearby shopping center and achieve a level of independence he didn't think was possible 20 years ago, when a car accident left him a quadriplegic.*

I am Ware resident Steven Hawk.

At age 18, I suffered a catastrophic accident that left me without use of my hands or legs. A rehabilitation nurse encouraged me to advocate strongly for myself.



(Courtesy Photo)

Steven Hawk is wearing Massachusetts Office of Outdoor Recreation apparel that was given to him by his friend Elizabeth Johnson, board member of the Norwottuck Network. Hawk said he is proud to wear it, saying it shows that he is part of the team.

Over the past 20 years I have polished that skill, becoming an effective advocate for rail trails - a safe way for everyone to travel and to protect wildlife.

My friend Elizabeth "Liz" Johnson, Norwottuck Network board member, recalled my

speech at the July Golden Spike 2022 conference in Gilbertville, in which I stated that the Ware segment of the Mass Central Rail Trail had "opened up the world to me." We became Facebook friends, and she noticed my posts about being able to do my own shopping now.

At the Mass Trails conference, Liz was excited to find the strong emphasis on Equity and Access, reducing barriers and sparking interest in underserved children. She offered to team up with me to write this letter advocating for people who use assistive devices such as wheelchairs, walkers, canes, and even baby strollers to live fuller, healthier lives, as well.

Access to an old dead-railroad public path in Ware required persistent advocacy on my part and work with the Town of Ware to make needed improvements. I learned that my old shortcut path was in fact part of the incomplete MCRT.

Norwottuck Network Board Chair Craig Della Penna provided information and support for paving the trail and making it wheelchair accessible. It needed a paved surface and improved grades for people using wheelchairs.

Via Facebook, I keep the public informed about the trail, publicly acknowledging the town for making needed repairs and volunteer groups for upkeep and improvements. For my efforts, I received a Golden Spike award at the GS2022 Conference in Gilbertville this past summer.

All public spaces in Massachusetts, by law, reserve special parking spots and other accommodations for disabled people. But it is in fact rare to see any disabled people use the rail trails.

We want to advocate for improvements in this form of Equity and Access, too.

People interested in helping make these improvements can email [stevenhawk813@yahoo.com](mailto:stevenhawk813@yahoo.com) or find me on Facebook.