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Norwottuck backs completion of Mass. Central Rail Trail system



An aerial view of the Mass. Central Rail Trail in Western Massachusetts. Photo Credit: Submitted photo

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From the Norwottuck Network

A study initiated by the Norwottuck Network to assess the benefits of the completion of the Massachusetts Central Rail Trail system predicts that general health and wellness would improve, and annual trail usage could quadruple, creating opportunities for overnight visitation, new jobs, increased local small businesses and an overall economic benefit ranging from \$87 to \$182 million annually.

The Norwottuck Network, a nonprofit, raised \$75,000 to commission the study by Kittelson & Associates Inc. of Boston and Cambridge Econometrics of Northampton to evaluate the potential use and health and economic benefits of completing the 104-mile, multi-use bicycle and pedestrian trail system that runs between Boston and Northampton along the historic Massachusetts Central Railroad corridor.

Findings outlined in “Envisioning a Statewide Connection: Mass Central Rail Trail Benefits Study,” released in mid-May, indicate that completion of the trail would result in increased usage of up to 4 to 5 million people annually and reduced health costs from \$4.1 to \$5.8 million per year. On the economic side, a completed trail would create \$87 to \$182 million per year in new economic activity according to the study, including \$55 to \$114 million in new spending by trail users and up to 1,250 new jobs.

Leaders of the nine-member Norwottuck Network board, founded in 2000, will now ask the state Department of Transportation to evaluate construction costs and create a timeline for completion.

Currently, 55 miles of the trail are officially open, with roughly 20 miles in the planning or construction stages. Challenging sections of the trail to be completed include areas where bridges are missing, trail segments that will need to be purchased from private owners, and repairs to a 1,000-foot tunnel near the Wachusett Reservoir.

A completed Mass Central trail would eliminate those barriers and open those sections, and link the rail trail system to 18 additional existing and under-development rail trails, creating a 273-mile trail network within Massachusetts.

Craig Della Penna, president of the network board, said the DOT conducted a study to evaluate the feasibility of reassembling segments of the MCRT into a unified trail system and released findings in 2021; no action was taken because the benefits had yet to be assessed.

“This report is the next step,” Della Penna said. “And we are not surprised by these findings. These long walking and biking trails produce a lot of benefits. The question was, ‘Is it worth spending public money?’ This report unequivocally says yes, it will be worth it.”

Kittelson & Associates noted that the completed network would be within 10 miles of 64 percent of all Massachusetts residents, and would offer a boost to 19 cities and towns defined by the consultants as Gateway Communities — those that face social and economic challenges but retain assets such as infrastructure or major institutions.

These Gateway Communities would benefit: Barre, Billerica, Clinton, Easthampton, Hardwick, Hatfield, Lunenburg, Marlborough, New Braintree, Oakham, Palmer, Saugus, South Hadley, Southampton, Southwick, Ware, Warren, West Boylston and West Brookfield.

“This is a way to focus on making these communities better,” he said. “The state can’t help you improve your house, but it can help you improve your community.”

Trains running along the Massachusetts Central Railroad traveled between Boston and Northampton, serving residents and industry through the early 1900s, until struggles with maintenance, negotiations over ownership and damage from the Hurricane of 1938 led to the railway’s decline.

The MCRT began to form in 1980 when the MBTA and the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Management each purchased unused sections of the railroad corridor from the Boston & Maine Railroad.

The first section of the MCRT was a segment called the Norwottuck Rail Trail. Completed in 1993, the Norwottuck Rail Trail segment between Northampton and Amherst was instantly popular.

In 1995, community leaders and volunteers in several Central Massachusetts communities formed the Wachusett Greenways, a nonprofit with a goal to develop the MCRT segment in the Wachusett region, including Sterling, West Boylston, Holden, Rutland, Oakham and Barre.

Kittelson & Associates said investments in multi-use trails throughout Massachusetts have provided meaningful economic and health benefits, and long-distance continuous trails have greater impact. They attract through-cyclists and overnight visitors, which, in turn, results in increased spending on lodging and restaurants.

As part of its study, Kittelson & Associates surveyed current Mass Central Rail Trail users, receiving responses from more than 2,000 participants. These are among the findings:

- If completed, 26 percent of current users would use the MCRT for shopping; 16 percent to commute to work; 5 percent to commute to school; and 86 percent to access parks and other features.
- Ninety-three percent of respondents anticipate using the MCRT more frequently and traveling on the trail for longer distances.
- Almost 50 percent would take a multiday trip.

Other findings were based on economic and health results associated with use of the Erie Canalway Trail in New York and the Great Allegheny Passage in Maryland and Pennsylvania. These trails generate \$253 million and \$121 million per year, respectively, so the planners on the consultants team estimate the MCRT could generate \$117-212 million annually.

“The MCRT shares many characteristics with these two trails, including similar tourism opportunities,” the report says. “It would connect historic towns and improve access to outdoor destinations, such as rural areas outside of the Quabbin Reservoir area and in the Connecticut River Valley.”

The MCRT has an additional benefit in that it connects numerous rail trails in the Boston metropolitan area as well as Northampton and Amherst, which provide a second population anchor that will encourage travel along the completed route.

To read the report detailing the benefits of linking the undeveloped segments of the Mass Central Rail Trail into one unified multi-use trail across Massachusetts, and to learn more about the MCRT, visit masscentralrailtrail.org.

To learn more about the Norwottuck Network, visit nnnetwork.net/about-us.

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