



FINISH THE RAIL TRAIL?

Here's some updates about the Mass Central Rail Trail—104+ miles long. Running from Boston to Northampton and why we think a tipping point is near.

We are about 60 miles open right now and we'll likely be about 75 miles open by the end of 2025. Of the 104 miles, we currently have 94+/- miles under some kind of public protected status. During the pandemic, MassDOT commissioned a three volume feasibility study to see if it is even possible to reassemble the corridor <https://www.mass.gov/lists/mass-central-rail-trail-feasibility>. It says that it is possible, but it will be complex.

Complexities will include: 3 long RR bridges that were removed and will need to be replaced with bike-ped bridges. Several smaller bridges will need to be replaced as well. A 1,000-foot tunnel needs to be renovated. A few miles of corridor needing to be acquired along with other complications. All this begs the question, what would a completed 100+ mile long trail mean to the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. A trail that intersects with 17+ other trails. This is a question never before asked in New England.

In the spring of 2022, Norwottuck Network put out a Request for Proposals (RFP) searching for a consultant to produce the report that answered that basic question. What would a completed 100+ mile long trail mean? <https://www.nnnetwork.net/rfp> The RFP went out and a nationally known consultant, Kittelson & Associates was chosen in the fall of 22.

In the summer of 2023, their report came out and it produced some compelling numbers. Here's main metrics. 4-5 million users a year, 960,000 users a year, just in Worcester County. 400,000-500,000 overnight visitors a year. And up to \$200 million a year in economic impacts. Here's the report. <https://www.nnnetwork.net/the-report>

Within 150 miles of Northampton lies the densest network of dead steam railroad corridor in North America. The network here led to huge antediluvian mill complexes that are no longer producing heavy things. They are now converted to apartments, condos or startup businesses. Over the past few decades, the conversion of former RRs into local trails has led to a rediscovery of a way to get around town without a car.

But when gaps in trails get filled, longer distance trips are now possible as ways to explore a neighboring community or even the possibility of longer, multi-day journeys are on the horizon. That last facet—multi-day, long-distance journeys, off-road, is largely unknown here in southern New England. Thousands of people each year leave the region for multi-day, bike touring vacations in NY, Canada, or other places in the U.S. where long trails have been operational for a while now. Nearly underheard of here.

We know that the usual way a long trail gets finished is by an entity commissioning an extensive report that predicts what the benefits of a fully completed trail would be in terms of economic impact, health impacts, transportation, community development, climate impacts, etc. etc. We know that we are at the tipping point here.

For a live, scalable map of all the open section of the MCRT along with the closed, and under-construction sections, along with other developing trails in the region, go to this link: <https://masstrailtracker.com/>

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The Mass Central Rail Trail is a project of the  a 501c3 non-profit corporation.