

SUNCOOK VALLEY TRAILS MEETING

Town of Pittsfield

April 17, 2019 | 6:00 PM, Pittsfield Town Hall Large Meeting Room | 85 Main Street

Meeting Summary

In attendance: **Ralph O'Dell**, Pittsfield Master Plan Steering Committee (walk, bike); **Louis Houle**, Pittsfield Community Development Committee (motor bikes, multi); **Paul Ripplinger**, Pittsfield Resident (ATV, snowmobile, walk, bike); **Shea Ripplinger**, Pittsfield Resident (ATV, snowmobile, walk, bike); **Kevin Riele**, Barnstead Resident (ATV); **Mark Brodeur**, Epsom Fort Mountain Trail Winders Club (snowmobile); **Bruce Blye**, Epsom Fort Mountain Trail Winders Club (snowmobile). CNHRPC Staff **Craig Tufts** and **Stephanie Alexander**.

Craig (CNHRPC) led introductions and asked everyone to describe their interest in Pittsfield trails. Ralph and Louis described their work with the Town of Pittsfield, trying to increase recreation and community development opportunities. Paul and Shae wanted both places to ride motorized vehicles as well as having safe walkable and bikable trails for their children. Kevin liked riding ATVs and wanted a nearby trail that was longer than the short rideable sections now available in Pittsfield-Barnstead. Mark and Bruce are working on grants to help maintain and improve the Epsom FMTW Club trails and are looking for multi-jurisdictional opportunities to expand and improve the local trails.

The group wanted a designated set of motorized trails that they could take pride in maintaining. They noted the Town tried 30 years ago to get the former rail trails established again as a trail, but people were not interested at the time.

Craig began with the story of the beginning of the Concord to Lake Sunapee Rail Trail, which started with property owners who slowly began building rail trails years ago. As a result of the hard work and coordination, the rail trail has grown into a potential trail system that stretches from Newbury to Concord. He emphasized trail building begins at the local level.

He said CNHRPC's purpose in developing the Suncook Valley Trails Plan (SVTP) is to encourage local and regional discussions, reviewing maps, and determining opportunities. CNHRPC assists Towns, Economic Development Committees, and others to consider the importance of Town trails, how they bring a community together. The SVT Plan can help the Suncook Valley Towns, Committees, and clubs develop a vision for a potential future for trail system. Craig said their focus is specifically about the former railbed, discussing challenges, opportunities, a couple projects to move forward with, but that connections are important for a local and regional trail system. Conservation lands and Class VI roads are good places to start. Snowmobile trails are developed as a result of years of hard work and the SVTP want to ensure that work and use is respected, so we are inviting everyone to the table to encourage all trails use interests are represented.

The group reviewed the Suncook Valley Trails overview map of the five communities plus surrounding Towns. People noted the popular, newly constructed Hooksett Head's Pond Rail trail. Pembroke is examining a section of the railbed along the Merrimack River to use as a recreational trail. Craig said CNHRPC held an Epsom Trails Meeting on April 2 and said the group in attendance had identified areas from the center of Town to Tarleton Town Forest and a section from Depot Road/Goboro Road to the Pittsfield Town boundary.

Where do you ride and what are your trails experiences? Paul said most of snowmobile trail connect in the vicinity of the Wildwood subdivision in northern Pittsfield between the Schools and the Youth Athletic Park ballfields. Louie described local trails history, where someone hit a tree on snowmachine and sued the landowner as a result. The landowner shut down the property access as a result, and although the property has since changed hands and the laws are better, the story and stigma are often repeated. The property noted is the former railbed located south of the Wastewater Treatment Plant. Craig explained liability laws protect landowners, trails usage is more of a possibility now. Mark said sometimes landowners not too sure about opening their property to the public, so the FMTW provides a brochure published by State to the landowners they talk to. He said the property liability laws now state if a party sues and loses, they become responsible for the other party's attorney fees. Fewer people are worried about being sued and this is a great selling point to landowners.

Some property owners are fine with friends and neighbors using their trails. These locations are a good example of where to hold a conversation to determine ways to circumvent these properties to respect landowner wishes. Trails Committee agreements can be formal or informal. The informal agreements with landowners can get people out using the trails sooner, but when spending more money on the property or building infrastructure such as a bridge, a more formal agreement such as a trails easement should be undertaken. The Concord to Lake Sunapee Rail Trail developed standard trail agreement language that can be shared.

Bruce said the State has funding for legal costs to change the deed that include a trails easement onto the property (not indicated which program). He described when Bow has new landowner on a property where a trail exists, the regulations state the trail must be kept and the new easement is recorded into the deed. We discussed how the Subdivision and Site Plan Regulation can help keep the trail available to people, could lose the forever without protection, and how it could be easy for a Planning Board to adopt these types of regulations than a purchase or Zoning Ordinance change.

We discussed trail protection options such as how developers used the selling point of the Windham rail trail by paving the first section and attracting housing development as a result. Conservation land or easements can be purchased by the Town or donated to the Town.

The group reviewed the Pittsfield SVT Map. From the Epsom town line, they evaluated the rail trail section the Epsom group identified coming into Pittsfield. The former rail trail was noted as usable, including the bridges, from Depot Street in Chichester to Webster Mills Road, except for brush. The rail ties are mostly gone. Craig mentioned a potential Chichester transportation improvement project at the Main Street intersection, which would be a good opportunity to try to get a trails project included.

Louie said the trail narrows by the Pittsfield Wastewater Treatment Plant, but the close fencing could be pulled back; this section is owned by the Town. The Whites Brook Apartments is using footrail, old railbed access to walk or bike into the Town Center. Louie thinks the Town has a right of way for the main sewer line easements along this section. The group agreed this would be a good opportunity to look into.

Louie said trails could provide an economic boost from Epsom to Barnstead. In the Town Center along the industrial properties, Louie indicated the Town received a brownsfield grant. The group discussed how a Town trail can make a case for improving property values, right through the Village where the people are located. A different trail follows along Tilton Hill Road to the ball fields behind the High School. This could be a good area to pursue for a loop, or a straight segment. From the ballfield on Tilton Hill Road, the railbed goes north up to the Barnstead town line. Craig said our region ends at Barnstead town line, which is the end of our SVT Plan study area, so our assistance options are limited beyond the Pittsfield border.

Paul said the snowmobile trail crosses lawns in many places, with a deep gully in the way, so rerouting may be necessary. They noted a property closed off on Will Smith Road because the landowners had some kind problem from the trail use. Kevin said landowner permission is often granted person by person.

Paul compared his ATV experiences in northern New Hampshire where trails are open for users, locations are very convenient to restaurants and inns. He suggested they could be a great possibly to look at in Pittsfield. Craig said every Town has a different policy on ATV use and explained organized ATV clubs have more riding success, as they are often blamed for erosion and trails need regular monitoring. Some Towns prefer non-motorized trails, some prefer motorized. The SVT Plan project is staring this conversation. Different sections of the former rail trail could be allocated for different uses.

The following areas were designated as the best or easiest trails opportunities to pursue in Pittsfield:

- 1) Depot Street to Wastewater Treatment Plant (Chichester Depot Street/Epsom Goboro Road to Pittsfield Webster Mills Road to Wastewater Treatment Plant).** This section begins near a beautiful historic bridge over the Suncook River. Talk to property owners and find routes around closed sections. Bruce stated a parking trailhead is necessary, there is room but a study needs to be conducted to determine the best location and the number of spots needed. Possible areas noted for parking includes Town property near Public Works garage, gravel excavation pits on both sides of the trail. Discussion with landowners to get an easement.
- 2) Center of Town to Tilton Hill Ballfields.** The biggest challenge is getting to Tilton Hill Road behind Elementary School for snowmachines, which cannot trail on sidewalks. Craig noted this Village to Ballfields trail segment was noted in the Safe Routes to School Plan.
- 3) Downtown Pittsfield Loops and Connections.** The rail bed passes right through downtown. Trails may be part of an economic development strategy for the downtown. Craig will provide Ralph and Louie a downtown map for town boards and committees to mark up for trail ideas.

The group reviewed the opportunities outside of the Pittsfield former rail corridor.

Bruce mentioned that a lot of snowmobile trail are located out there in the hilly, hard to access areas. Ralph said the area between Goose Pond to Barnstead contains many BearPaw Regional Greenways and Town conservation easements not shown on the Pittsfield SVT Map, and suggested trying to obtain access for trails in this vicinity. Paul said the snowmobile trail in northern section has scenic vistas and may be able to be opened with existing landowner agreements.

Bruce said snowmobile trails cross Tan Road to Derry Road, noting one to Northwood and the other to Suncook. It is not possible to travel from Pittsfield to Epsom using the old railbed because there are houses on the land now. Snowmobiles do not travel under the bridge. In Epsom, the bridge was washed out during Mother's Day Flood. Craig suggested a case could be made for reestablishing trails infrastructure using long term documentation of trails use and the \$200,000 bridge. Bruce mentioned the new Leighton Brook rehabilitation on the brook does not help the erosion occurring beyond the project location.

Ralph said a possibility is connection from the Town Pool to ballfields, no sidewalks around that, and the Suncook River is also a potential for future recreation and business (canoe rentals). The focus of downtown improvement in Pittsfield includes greenspaces and walking spaces. Craig asked if he could provide Ralph and Louie a zoomed map of Pittsfield Center for them to mark up the existing and possible trails and locations, and they said yes. Ralph wants to see trails connection with conservation parcels, add new trails. He said good trails use sets a positive image for the Town.

Bruce said the Town has a historic walk downtown (Historical Society). Paul the downtown used to be a destination, and the group agreed potential is still there.

Louie said the Community Development Committee (CDC) has a meeting on June 17 for businesses, which CNHRPC will add to its Suncook Valley webpage, to talk about what kind of businesses to attract. Then, the Committee will hold a public meeting to ask what public wants to see Downtown. The Committee applied for and received a US RDA grant to fix up Main Street building facades. They are working with RSA 79-E to improve apartments. Louie said he needs feedback from people, his small group doing a lot of work. The CDC partnered at UNH with Tilton to analyze each other's towns and came up with good, objective ideas. Tilton indicated Pittsfield's sidewalks and roads need improvement. In this year's budget, more sidewalk improvement funding was allocated this year. The Tilton CDC recommended kiosks and trash containers downtown, and the Pittsfield CDC will look for local organization grants for kiosks. The group noted 10% of people do 90% of the work.

Bruce said the Recreational Trails Program (RTP) grants are now so competitive, NH DRED scores collaborative and multi-jurisdiction projects higher. Bruce hoped to work with Town of Epsom for projects. Letters of support should be collected from anyone who will provide them and those applications with more agencies signed on would likely score higher.

Bruce asked whether CNHRPC planned to hold a wrap up meeting after the Plan was completed. Stephanie replied that, since there is interest, we could sponsor a meeting in the middle of June. It was asked when Pembroke and Allenstown are holding their meetings. She said Allenstown opted to incorporate their date into two official Board meetings instead of open discussion meetings. Craig said the ideas in Pembroke are coming through the Master Plan process. The meeting dates will be posted on the project webpage <http://cnhrpc.org/suncook-valley-trails-plan/>.

Stephanie stated our CNHRPC commitment to the Suncook Valley Towns after the SVT Plan has been completed, and encouraged people to stay in touch with us as we can help provide technical assistance or guidance on some of these projects.

The meeting adjourned at 7:50.

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