

SUNCOOK VALLEY TRAILS MEETING

Town of Pembroke

May 28, 2019 | 5:30 PM, Pembroke Town Hall | 311 Pembroke Street

Meeting Summary

In attendance: **Ayn Whytemare**, Pembroke Conservation Commission (walk/bike), **Carolyn Cronin**, Pembroke Town Planner, **Carol Bertsimas**, Pembroke Conservation Commission (all non-motorized), **Ammy Heiser**, Pembroke Conservation Commission (non-motorized), **Kevin Gagne**, Chichester NH Trail Dawgs Snowmobile Club (all). CNHRPC Staff **Craig Tufts and Stephanie Alexander**.

All attendees knew one another. Craig (CNHRPC) said this Suncook Valley Trails project began after another regional rail trail organization, Concord to Lake Sunapee Rail Trail (CLSRT), began successfully reconnecting old railbeds into trails from Concord to Newbury. So far in this Suncook Trails project, priority trails use emphasis is biking and walking, but Craig said trail uses also depend on what the Town wants. Several snowmobile clubs and equestrian groups have been participating in other towns for this project. As a result, the different user groups have the potential to pool their resources and knowledge and work together to complete a project. Trails create opportunity for economic development and tie into the culture of a community, which was agreed to apply to Pembroke as well.

Ayn (Conservation Commission) said connectivity to the Range Roads would be of major importance for a local trail system. Craig described how Chichester wanted to connect the Elementary School and Carpenter Park in addition to review options along Depot Road and the old railbed. Craig said the draft Suncook Valley Trails Plan will summarize what each Town wants to do with respect to rail trails and connectivity and the Plan will present an overall vision for the entire Suncook Valley region.

Ammy (Conservation Commission) asked how Pembroke can we contribute to further the potential rail trail along the Merrimack River, tentatively named the proposed Pembroke Rail Trail. She asked what has worked in other communities? Craig said having Carolyn (Town Planner) as a resource is critical, and a go-getter is needed to excite people. Because of the CLSRT success in Warner, the Suncook Valley area should be able to copy what has worked. He said the CLSRT had a pro bono attorney develop language for a permanent easement. **Craig said he will check into whether the document is sharable and will get back to the Conservation Commission.**

Ayn said recently, an oral history event on the Blueberry Express was held. People spoke about what it was like to grow up in the 1940s and 1950s. In school when the kids saw the train going by and the small fires started, the bell was rung, which signaled the kids needed to go outside to stomp out the little fires started by the train. She suggested a possible rail trail supporter with knowledge on the history of the railroads could be Armand Verville of Allentown, whose home is one of the old depots. Craig said we met Mr. Verville when he attended the May 8 Allentown Trails Meeting.

Ayn acknowledged ATV use in Pembroke is difficult in Town, no one wants them on trails unless they own one.

The group had a brief discussion about potential trail easements along the potential Pembroke Trail. Ayn requested an example of a trail easement that she might be able to present to her family members and neighbors as well as a map. **At Ayn's request, Stephanie will email to Ayn the PDF map of properties along the Merrimack River the group was referencing for discussion.**

Craig suggested a permanent trail easement for each property comprising the Pembroke Rail Trail would provide the necessary trail protections in perpetuity for the continued use of the trail. The group said PSNH/Eversource indicated a few years ago they were not opposed, and that they would need access to the lines, and did not want to be held responsible if there was damage to the trail while doing maintenance. The group agreed more talking needs to be done related to Eversource.

To get started on the Pembroke Rail Trail, the group discussed building positive relationships with property owners. It was noted two bridges are missing on either end, crossing the Soucook River and the Suncook River. The question of where the trail should run was discussed. Options included around Memorial Field or through Suncook Village. The group thought the Meet Me in Suncook non-profit would be very interested and supportive since several attendees have spoken individually with their Board members. The initial thought was having the Pembroke rail Trail head through Suncook Village. Stephanie (CNHRPC) said once the Suncook Valley Trail Plan is completed, CNHRPC are still available for technical assistance and to serve as cheerleaders.

Ammy suggested a connection to the Granite State Rail Trail would be a great alternative way to commute from Manchester to Concord, and people are always looking for a better route. Craig recommended finding commuter groups to help promote the trail. He said promotion and networking is a big part of what a local Trails Committee would have to do. The Granite State Rail Trail has several other non-profits promoting the trail and is also trying to market tourism as a benefit of the rail trail. The CLSRT in the Central NH region is successful by having both a non-profit arm (which can own easements, conduct fundraising, advocacy etc). and a municipal arm (to apply for grants, to provide the use of town equipment for labor, etc) and is a good model to follow. After Ayn mentioned ice cream stands along trails, Craig mentioned that the unofficial motto of the CLSRT is "ice cream every 45 minutes" as a way to promote tourism within each of their rail trail towns. He said that all of us should be thinking strategically about who would hold the easements, the Town, Conservation Commission, or non-profit trails group? Before the group talks with property owners, the Town would want to have this answer ready. It would also need an answer to the question of the easement being in the same location of Eversource utility easements.

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

- 1) Railroad bed parcels along the Merrimack River from White Sands to Memorial Field and the Suncook River, as the "Pembroke Rail Trail."** The group reviewed the potential likelihood and difficulties parcel by parcel, noting that it appeared possible to get support from each property owner. The group noted the value in having an easily accessible trail connecting White Sands, the Bow Ln neighborhood, and Suncook Village and Memorial Field.

- 2) **Railroad bed parcels along the Merrimack River heading north from White Sands to the Plausawa Development and beyond.** This section of the old railbed is currently walkable, but permission would be needed for public access. To extend the Pembroke Rail Trail north toward Concord and the Granite State Rail Trail, the trail needs to cross several parcels that are privately owned or owned by Eversource and would need to bridge the Soucook River to Concord.
- 3) **Build hiking trails on an upcoming conservation parcel off Third Range Road behind Center Road.** This property is in close proximity and walking distance to a lot of residents and would probably prove popular. Trails could connect into Third Range Road. A boardwalk or some type of trail work could help continue recreation access along Third Range Road north of Brickett Hill Road.

The group reviewed the potential likelihood and difficulties of the rail trail parcel by parcel. The group should talk to Eversource to determine how a trail easement could fit on top of their utility easement. Carolyn said they would want to have vehicular access, probably a gate with a key that Eversource (formerly PSNH) has access to similar to the gate at White Sands. Kevin (NH Trail Dawgs) suggested permission is necessary from both Eversource and the landowners both involved. **Carolyn will work to set up a meeting with Eversource, asking Bob Bourque on the Planning Board, who had worked for PSNH, who might be the best person/Department to talk to.** Craig said the discussion should include finding out what features and/or deed language are necessary and what the needs are for the utility company to maintain their lines.

Discussion was held as to what types of trail uses are desired in Town and along the rail trail. Universally, attendees preferred bicycle and pedestrian trails (non-motorized). They agreed equestrian usage is appropriate, and other winter uses such as cross-country skiing and snowshoeing are also desirable. The group thought snowmobiles may be an appropriate use for the trail if they can be a strategic partner in getting the trail built. The group noted that any negative impacts of snowmobile use are far less than ATVs. The group stressed just one motorbike or ATV can wreck a trail, such as making ruts, exposing roots and rocks, enabling standing mud pools, and eroding the trail base, while deterring bicycle/pedestrian users from using the trails. Ammy said on the Range Roads, one seldom sees a bicycle because the Class VI roads are now impassible, and the ruts would bury a bike. ATVs are making ruts and exposing roots and rocks, and the group expressed dismay that most Town trails and Class VI roads are impassible because of improper ATV usage. Horses are often spooked by ATVs. Massive mudholes 1-2 feet deep do not completely freeze in the winter and are dangerous for skiers and snowshoers.

The group had less of a conflict with snowmobiling. Although the snowmobile clubs will make repairs to trails, ATV enthusiasts sometimes go out shortly after the repairs are completed, and then again damage the Range Roads for winter use. A discussion began about placement of gates and bars on the Class VI roads. Stephanie asked who would pay for the gates, and Ammy and Carolyn suggested donations from local organizations.

The following areas outside the Suncook Valley Rail Corridor were identified as potential trail connections to pursue in Pembroke:

- 1) **Construct trails in the Center Road property easement soon to be received by the Conservation Commission is in proximity to Pembroke Hill Elementary School, private schools and housing developments.** This property is within walking distance of a lot of residents and students and would probably prove popular. Trails could connect into Third Range Road. A boardwalk or some type of trail work could help continue recreation access along Third Range Road north of Brickett Hill Road.
- 2) **Convert some Class VI Town non-maintained Range Roads to Class A trails.** The group agreed that the Class VI Range Roads in Town are a historic and recreational treasure, but that they are in terrible condition due to ATV/OHRV/motorized overuse or improper use. An effort to restore these trails to a condition that is safe and usable to a wider range of users is highly desirable. Conversion of Class VI roads to Class A trail status may be a tool to help achieve this.

Carol said there are informal trails through the Center Road such as logging roads. Discussion was held about potential connections to Third Range Road through the boggy wetland which used to be accessible. The Conservation Commission would have to find a way to replace the former raised area to enable a permanent crossing for different trail users.

From Church Road, a trail user can walk or bike on trails and Class VI roads all the way to Seventh Range Road. Craig suggested GPSing the trail(s), obtaining trails use agreement with landowners, and posting the maps on Town websites. The group reiterated the substantial ATV activity on the Range Roads. Enforcement and usage signage is often removed within a day of placement. The Range Roads are posted as closed for half of the year (open May 31-Oct 31), but there is little law enforcement on the Range Roads. The Police Department is aware of the situation and say they regularly chase ATVers, sometimes giving tickets to offenders, but are very limited in their enforcement capability. It was noted that plated vehicles are permitted to use the Range Roads, but most cannot use them because of the surface condition. Craig noted Pembroke seemed to have difficult ATV problems that may require additional steps to help solve.

Kevin suggested the Town look into converting some of the Range Roads to Class A trails. This would require the vote of the townspeople to enable passage at Town Meeting. He said Chichester is looking to designate some Class VI roads as Class A trails, and this has occurred successfully in Northfield. He said the NH Trail Dawgs is working with the towns on this project. Stephanie read the first half of RSA 231:A-1 Municipal Trails. Among other things, Class A trails limit the types of vehicles that travel on the roads while preserving existing landowner access rights. She felt it was likely that most community members would likely support such a change in order to better manage the Range Roads. Kevin said a good example is along NH 28 in Pembroke where ATV parking was used as a trail head. NHDOT allowed for snowmobile crossing and no OHRVs, and they and NH Department of Natural and Cultural Resources posted the area. As a result, the location is no longer being used as ATV access to trails and the concept has worked successfully. **The group supported the idea of Class A trail designation and decided to research further.**

It was noted when the gates were placed at White Sands beach by PSNH, out of state day trippers no longer made the trek because the gates necessitated walking to the riverside beach. The out-of-town usage dropped off tremendously when the gates were placed.

Craig asked if anybody in Town was ready to start a non-profit group for the Pembroke Rail Trail. Ayn suggested perhaps the Conservation Commission could hold the easements instead of establishing another non-profit organization. Ammy said they would need to consider for how long a new non-profit could be viable and whether the Conservation Commission would remain active over time, as there have been periods of dormancy in the past. Ayn said she would feel more comfortable and it would be easier using the Conservation Commission than having another non-profit in Town that does not run well. The Conservation Commission members felt they could monitor easements and expressed confidence they could do this project for the long run.

Craig asked, what happens when people donate money? Ammy said donations have been placed in their Conservation Fund previously. When a property is donated for fee simple, is a good tax advantage not to have restrictive language. The group suggested contacting Tom Masland at 5 Rivers Trust, who provided the Center Hill parcel information so they could hold the easement. An appraiser had to assign a value for the parcel, and this step costs money. Ayn said her most people who are donating an easement would not want to pay their own money to get an appraisal. Craig said at CLSRPC, appraisals are typically not done. He asked if there is an existing non-profit organization the Conservation Commission could partner with to establish a bank account? **Ammy will look into the Conservation Commission having a partnership with a non-profit to determine if the idea is plausible.** The group said the Meet Me In Suncook non-profit is able to raise the money and obtain donations to receive funding. The Kiwanis sponsored the Head's Pond Trail in Hooksett. There is a possibility Associated Grocers of New England, situated nearby the proposed Pembroke Rail Trail, could be approached as a donor. Kevin said NH Trail Dawgs is a 501-C3 organization with bank accounts and said the club has wanted to work on a rail trail for a long time. **He will speak with the Directors to obtain their input on the idea.** Craig said an issue for snowmobile clubs to consider might be that the owner might want to give a permanent easement only for walking/biking but not snowmobile use.

Craig discussed a town decision on whether the rail trail should be paved or stone dust. Having an answer may help with discussions with Eversource. The Master Plan Transportation Subcommittee preferred a paved surface, noting increased usage and accessibility. Equestrian user would prefer the stone dust, but stone dust shoulders would work if the trail were paved. Craig said plans along the Granite State Rail Trail are to pave from Manchester southward, and Concord will also pave their section.

The powerlines are over the old railroad bed in most locations. Some sections are different, near the Merrimack River and the along the sewer line easement. Ammy said there were problems with drainage and slope on some areas of the former railbed. The group agreed an important next step is an engineering study that considers utility access, guard rails, drainage, and more. They also need to determine whether to pursue a non-profit status or not. Once the Conservation Commission has spoken with property owners and have a better idea where the easements might be located, (a potential Littlefield property easement was mentioned), progress can be made to determine the rail trail's location. **Craig said he would talk with CNHRPC staff to determine whether we could provide some engineering design services.**

Craig said in Allentown, an easement from one property owner will be needed for most of their trail, along with the China Mill property and bridge and Suncook River. Options for bridging the Suncook and Soucook include purchasing a prefabricated bridge or relocating an existing bridge in need of a home. The Town must know the situation for the abutments and be ready to fundraise. Kevin said he has access to steel beams and is working with an engineer. There are resources available, people just have to know people who have equipment and knowledge. He would like to see the Pembroke Rail Trail developed even if it is not a snowmobile trail.

Craig said CNHRPC is planning a June wrap up meeting when the final draft Suncook River Trail Plan will be presented. The group asked Carolyn to organize a meeting with Eversource discussed the need to hold meetings monthly to get organized. Getting the word out on social media and the internet, such as the Pembroke Taxpayers Facebook page, can help motivate residents and provide information and support for the Pembroke Rail Trail.

The meeting adjourned at 6:45.

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