

# Wellfleet residents divided on rail trail extension in their town

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By Mary Ann Bragg

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WELLFLEET – For the residents who live along the old railroad bed, there’s been a sense of privacy and quiet for decades, where kids can build a fort and dog owners can walk in peace among pine needles.

But that may soon change as state plans for a northward extension of the Cape Cod Rail Trail move forward.

“We love the idea just not the approach,” said Peter Noble, a bicycle shop owner who lives with his wife, Rebecca, off Route 6 where the bicycle and walking trail extension would end at the highway.

On Oct. 22, state officials laid out the initial designs of the 10-foot-wide hardened trail at a public meeting, and then opened a public comment period from Oct. 23 through Nov. 8. The Nobles were among about 85 commenters, of which about one-third were listed with Wellfleet addresses.

An environmental notification form has been filed with the state Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs by the state Department of Conservation and Recreation due to the potential disturbance of habitat for rare species. A public site visit is scheduled for 11 a.m. Monday starting at the bike trail parking lot off LeCount Hollow Road in South Wellfleet.

The two-mile extension north from that parking lot to Route 6 would be along an old railroad bed that is owned by the state. Railroad service from Boston first reached Wellfleet and ultimately Provincetown around 1870, but fell out of favor after World War II with the increasing use of automobiles. The tracks were removed in the 1970s.

The current 22-mile Cape Cod Rail Trail is among the most popular state parks, and the northward extension would connect Nickerson State Park in Brewster with a 28-acre South Wellfleet campground that the state purchased this year. State officials also announced this year the \$2 million investment for the Wellfleet extension, adding to a \$9.9 million extension west from South Dennis.

Among the comments made to the state, supporters of the extension into Wellfleet said tourism would be boosted, overall bicyclist safety would increase and traffic congestion along Route 6 would be reduced, along with the environmental benefits of encouraging use of fewer vehicles. Opponents argued there would be more traffic gridlock, greater risk for death or injury, loss of the town’s charm and beauty, overcrowded natural areas, drainage problems and abuse of designated rail trail parking along Route 6.

“It’s a real step forward,” said Paula Richman, a bicyclist who lives with her husband across Route 6 from where the extension would end. “I don’t have any concerns that it’s going to be a bad thing, or that property values will go down.”

The project, part of a larger plan to bring the rail trail another 20 miles to Provincetown, is expected to be completed by the summer of 2020, state officials said.

Richman said she welcomes the opportunity to hop on the rail trail with her family and visitors and not have to bicycle on the highway, which “is not that safe.”

“I worry anytime I have to cross Route 6 on foot or bike,” she said.

For the Noble family, there are personal concerns such as a new 35-car parking lot for bicyclists planned next to their house, with all the headlights pointed in their direction.

But they also have a front-row seat for potential traffic safety concerns, observing motorists on a daily basis trying to enter the highway at their house. Where the old railroad bed empties onto Route 6 is a traffic bottleneck of business curb cuts, out-of-town drivers, foreign-born bicyclists riding on the wrong side of the road, school and public buses, and more, the Nobles said.

The flatness of the railroad bed, compared to the hilly alternative routes nearer the ocean, are good for family cyclists, people with disabilities and inexperienced bicyclists, Peter Noble said.

“But why would you dump them into the highway?” he said.

“It feels to me like dumping someone off a cliff,” Rebecca Noble said.

The Noble family would like to see the rail trail diverted at Old County Road to go along a power line right of way, as a way to avoid the Route 6 congestion.

Across from the Noble property, where the railroad bed continues toward downtown Wellfleet, is a white “ghost” bike in memory of Miles Tibbetts, a 16-year-old bicyclist killed Aug. 17, 2013, as he crossed Route 6.

The white bike is mentioned in a handful of the public comments.

“It’s a reminder of the reality,” said Shannon Bertrand, a homeowner off Old County Road.

At the Bertrand property, the old railroad bed is a raised berm running along the backside of her woods. As she understands the design, the berm will be lowered to allow for a more gradual bicycling slope onto Old County Road.

“I’ve been spoiled,” Bertrand said. “There’s worse things than having a bike trail in your backyard.”

But among her concerns, she said, is the haste with which state officials seem to be moving and a lack of planning.

Timothy Stevens, who owns a home on Bertrand’s street and also has a high berm in his backyard from the old railroad bed, said he bought the property knowing the rail trail could become a reality.

“I actually have no concerns with the rail trail,” Stevens said.

But he wants more information about what trees will be cut, and where the trail would go in relation to his lot.

“My biggest concern is if they start to take away trees,” he said.

For Amy Rosenzweig, who co-owns a house on Woodlot Road, next to the old railroad bed, noise and privacy are concerns.

She would like more than the stockade fence in the state’s design, either a bigger fence or landscaping, she said.

“When people are walking their dogs, we can hear everything, the people talking, the dogs barking,” Rosenzweig said. “It’s that close.”

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