



Northampton Rail-trail News

Friends of Northampton Trails and Greenways, Inc. (<http://www.fntg.net>) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization that supports the expanding network of rail-trails in Northampton, Massachusetts. Volume 3, Fall 2008

“State of the trails” lecture on 10/18

Please join the Friends of Northampton Trails and Greenways (FNTG) on Tuesday, November 18th for a talk by Wayne Feiden, Director of the Northampton Office of Planning and Development entitled “Transforming Northampton’s Rail Trail to a regional Rail Trail Network”. The talk will take place at 7:00pm during our Annual Meeting of the at the Florence Civic Center on Park Street.

It’s an exciting time for trail development in the City of Northampton. Construction is ongoing for two important projects that are bringing trails into the heart of downtown Northampton.

The Manhan Rail Trail extension from the Roundhouse parking lot downtown to Earle and Grove has a first coat of asphalt. This path, which connects to Veterans Field and the Felt building by West Street, is beginning to garner foot and bike traffic from Smith College to what was formerly “the wrong side of the tracks”. The project is contractually obligated to finish in June of 2009, with the long anticipated completion of the bridge over the Mill River parallel to West Street.

The Manhan Rail Trail and Norwottuck Trail extension from the Roundhouse parking lot to the Francis Ryan Section, Norwottuck Rail Trail at Stop and Shop has begun. The path has been cleared in most places as it proceeds to cross Pleasant Street, make the turn to Union Station, cross Main Street then continuing north paralleling the active rail line. Two new bridges will be installed, one crossing Main Street and the other crossing North Street. The connection to the Norwottuck Rail Trail heading west to Florence and Leeds will include a new pedestrian crossing of King Street at Church Street.

It is anticipated that this project will be substantially complete in 2009.



Three important links are in the advanced planning stages. These include the extension of the trail network to Leeds and the Williamsburg town line, the tunnel under the active rail line heading eastbound to Hadley and Amherst, as well as the extension of the trail from Earle/Grove to Easthampton and the existing Manhan Rail Trail.

As always, these projects involve a tremendous amount of vision, dedication, and funding to turn from dreams into reality. While construction costs are primarily paid for by Transportation grants and contracts funded by the gas tax, design costs are primarily borne by the City of Northampton. Even though final plans are submitted and approved by Mass Highway, there

Contents:

“State of the trails” lecture on 10/18	1	How we came to love living on the trail	2
Trail neighbor award	2	News from Northampton and Beyond	4
		Your dollars at work	4

are continuing costs as projects are constructed, due to surprises and needed changes.

Northampton is a wonderful community, and I believe that these trails will make it even better. Others agree. The City of Northampton was one of three communities to receive a 2007 Massachusetts Healthy Motion Award. It honors Northampton for "significant commitment to health and mobility by increasing walking and bicycling." They were impressed with our existing rail trails, planned rail trails, bicycle lanes, planned bicycle lanes, bicycle racks and lockers, Pace Car Pro-

gram, and other efforts.

We hope that you can come to Wayne's lecture to hear more about these important projects, review where we've come as well as peer into the future. In addition, the Mayor and City Council, as well as Wayne and the Office of Planning and Development deserve thanks for their continuing support for these investments in the future of Northampton. Finally, we invite you to contribute to our annual holiday appeal (enclosed), which has helped to defray some of the design costs for these important projects.

Trail neighbor award

FNTG is proud to announce the winner of our Trail Neighbor award for 2008. The award is being given to Kathy and Craig Della Penna of Florence, for their outstanding and tireless local and regional efforts on behalf of rail trails. This is the second year for the award, with last year's honors going to the residents of 6-8 High Street in Florence.

In the mid-1990's, Craig and Kathy were living in a suburban community in western Massachusetts that

right after WWII, went from farms to sprawled-out subdivisions. They now jointly operate Sugar Maple Trail-side Inn located on Chestnut Street. Craig was the New England Representative for Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, and today is a realtor specializing in the sale of residential property next to or near to rail trails and other greenways all over Massachusetts.

We asked Craig and Kathy to share some of their experiences and reflections on their varied advocacy efforts, which they've done in the following article.

How we came to love living on the trail

We were so smitten by the healthy life style possibilities that came with living near a rail trail, that we started to look for a new place to live that was near a rail trail. Besides, as advocates, it was important for us to not just "talk the talk," but to actually "walk the walk" so to speak. We also were looking to live in a community that still had a vibrant and functioning downtown. Hmm... A house close to a trail and a decent downtown nearby too? A tall order to say the least.

Well, one night while coming back from a meeting of embryonic group of rail-trail organizers in New Hampshire, we decided to stop off in Florence. We wanted to see if any houses were for sale near the rail trail. Low and behold, there was. We stumbled upon the old revival style farmhouse that was barely visible from the street, hidden behind years of neglected brush and overgrowth. The best part was that it sat only eight feet from the rail trail.

We called the realtor the next morning, toured the place and found it to be in even worse condition than it looked from the outside. Nevertheless, we saw the potential and jumped right into a bidding war with three

other bidders. We prevailed and in September of 2001, we moved in and started to restore the 1865 house.

We (and a slew of contractors) spent the next fourteen months restoring not only the interior and exterior of the house, but also the grounds outside. This landscape work included the installation of "period gardens" with plants and themes that were common to the Civil War era. Although we had many surprises in the restoration, most of them unpleasant, there was one interesting oddity.

It seems that in 1868, three years after this house was built, the railroad came to Florence. The railroad was built so close to the house that the railroad officials offered a creative mitigation for the homeowners who were wary of cracked ceilings from the shaking the house was sure to experience. The railroad came in and reinforced all the plaster ceilings in the house with lathstrips nailed every few inches. Below that, they installed canvas ceilings. The thinking was that if the passing trains cracked the ceilings, they would not be noticeable since they would be above the taut, but flexible canvas. When we came onto the scene 130 odd years later and restored the house, two rooms still had these canvas ceil-

ings.

The village of Florence is like many others in southern New England. It was laid out in a grid pattern in the mid-19th century with houses close together. As you get further from the village center, the feel is suburban with typical 1950s to 1970s era housing. One different feature in our community is that shortly after the railroad stopped running in 1969, some local visionaries suggested that the derelict and trash strewn corridor become a linear park.

At that time, the corridor was filled with trash and neer-do' wells that spent all day drinking or drugging. The idea of converting something bad, into something good, like a bike path (the term "rail-trail" wasn't even invented back then) was a "new fangled idea" and something that not too many people could grasp.

In fact, the woman who owned our house at that time was the leader of the opposition to the idea of a bike trail. She would regularly trot out her then toddlers before the TV cameras and say that their lives would be endangered by the proposed conversion into a trail. She was not alone in that thinking. Most of the neighbors also thought that the construction of a formal path would only invite more bad guys. Well, after several years of discussion, it opened in 1984 and things have not been the same since.



One of the most notable things about New England that most people do not realize is the super-abundance of unused former railroad corridors. There are about 200 rail-trail projects underway right now within a 100-mile radius of Northampton. In fact, since the 1960s, there has been over 70,000 miles of former railroad corridor taken out of the nation's inventory and the majority of this mileage is here in the northeast. The network of off-road paths that can be built in eastern New York and New England is simply unmatched anywhere else in the U.S. and they connect where people live, work and play.

Each day begins with pretty much the same scenario. Starting at around 5:30 a.m. or the crack of dawn, joggers and power walkers pass by. By 7:30 a.m., the dog

walkers are out and by 8:00 school kids pass by. In fact, scores of kids. Most are walking, but a substantial number are on bikes and even a smattering use roller blades. So many kids here walk/bike/blade to school that I hazard a guess and say one or two school buses aren't needed because of this safe route to school.

Around 8:30 a.m., a number of utilitarian bikers ride by: people biking to work. In the mid-day, the users are mostly retirees and mothers pushing baby carriages. The dog walkers are back out late in the afternoon. Finally, the evening strollers, joggers, and walkers pass by. Kathy, a dedicated power-walker, is on the trail twice a day for a two-mile walk with our Scottish Terrier, Ivan.

On weekends the complexion of the path changes. There are more bicyclists, who tend to be tourists, but the local joggers, power-walkers, strollers, and dog walkers remain out in force. To call these facilities bike-paths is a misnomer. In fact, to call them recreation trails is a misnomer too. They are true transportation facilities. The city has come around to this realization as well because a few years ago they began plowing the trail in the winter, so it can be used for the transportation use as a "Safe Route to School."

After the restoration of our house, we were honored when we received both the city's Historic Preservation Award and shortly after that, our work was featured on House & Garden Television's (HGTV) acclaimed series, "Restore America."

During the restoration, we decided to go one-step further and open a bed and breakfast. We call it Sugar Maple Trailside Inn. SMTI is the first bed and breakfast in New England that sits next to a rail trail—and also heavily markets to the bicycle tourism industry.

Our house was one of the closest houses ever to have a railroad built next to it—and it is certainly one of the closest houses to sit next to a rail trail. In addition, as an advocate, it is a perfect place to offer up complimentary room weeknights to people fearful or concerned about the rail trail in their community. We make only weeknights available to trail opponents however because we want these people to wake up to the laughter of children biking to school. Many remember this from their past, but probably don't hear it anymore in their community.

Many people living in suburban-style developments, as we used to, probably feel a longing that cannot easily be explained. I think it is the longing for neighborhoods like those many of us grew up in. Places where you knew your neighbors, places with porches, certainly places with sidewalks.

This longing can also be explained by the lack of quality "third" places in society today. The first place is your family life. The second place is your work place. The third place is the place where people meet out-

side of the first two places. This concept was brought forward by Ray Oldenburg—an urban sociologist from Florida—who wrote about the importance of informal public gathering places. in his book *The Great Good Place*. The third place experience in many lucky communities

today is the pathway known as a rail-trail. This longing for the third place is why these projects are so successful. And it is one of the reasons we love living next to our rail trail.

Craig and Kathy Della Penna

News from Northampton and Beyond

There continues to be a lot of trail activity in and around Northampton. FNTG reprinted and distributed a large number of maps and brochures these are also available on our website: <http://www.fntg.net>. We remain thankful for our sponsors (Bidwell ID, Serio's, Cooper's Corner, Hott Productions, Northampton Bike, F.J. Rogers, Sugar Maple Trailside Inn, Construct Associates and Craig Della Penna, Realtor) and encourage you to acknowledge their support.

The Broad Brook Coalition (<http://www.broadbrookcoalition.org>) continues to organize a number of tours, lectures, repairs and work parties in the Fitzgerald Lake Conservation area.

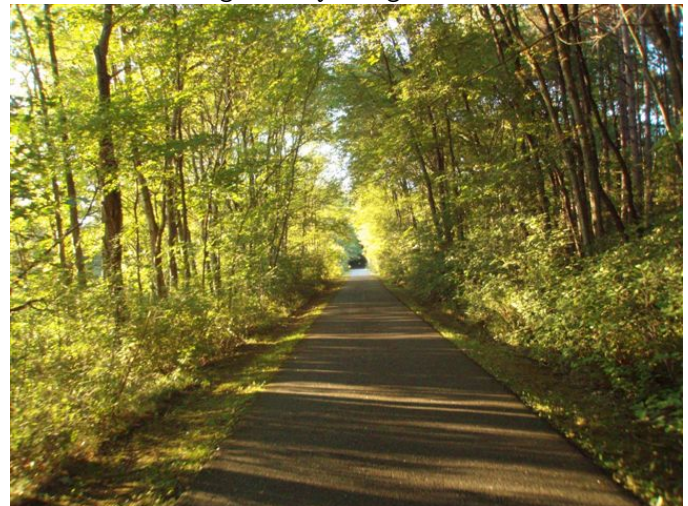
In Southampton, the Town Meeting voted to approve funding for a comprehensive Southampton Greenway feasibility study and appraisal.

In Easthampton, The Williston Northampton School has been seeking submissions of uniquely designed outdoor furniture to decorate a new public garden adjacent to the school's campus next to the Manhan Rail Trail. Other borders are the town's former train station, a commercial street, and a side street. On a less positive note, a 20 foot diameter sinkhole has developed on the Manhan near Fort Hill Road (photo available at <http://manhanrailtrail.org>).

There's also been long-awaited changes on the Norwottuck Rail Trail. A comprehensive renovation of the trail from Damon Road to Belchertown will be undertaken, with design plans to be finalized in 2009, and construction to be begin afterwards. In the interim, a spot-repaving project has dealt with a huge number of short-term tree root and glass problems. Kudos to the Norwottuck Rail Trail Advisory Committee and the De-

partment of Conservation and Recreation for making this happen.

There is progress towards building out the 104-mile long Massachusetts Central Rail Trail from Northampton to Boston. The tireless volunteers at Wachusett Greenways paved four trail sections in Holden and Rutland. More details can be found at their website: <http://www.wachusettgreenways.org>.



Finally, in September, a state-wide meeting of more than 80 people took place in Leominster. Most were leaders of either existing or developing rail trails in Massachusetts and over 45 trails were represented. Discussions were held about the creation of a state-wide trail advocacy organization. Such an organization will be important to educate people about the benefits of having such pathways and leading discussions over transportation funding for the future. The beginnings of a website has been set up at <http://masspaths.net>.

Your dollars at work

Later this spring we will anticipate having the opportunity to ride your bicycle into the heart of Northampton on beautiful new trails free of cars and traffic. The experience is likely to change your view of the city, and

reorient you to our city as you travel on former railroad lines and over bridges all the way from Look Park to King Street to Union Station, behind the roundhouses to Earle and Grove Streets (near Route 10, heading to Easthampton).

These new routes are the result of years of planning and action by the City of Northampton, with the encouragement of citizens like you who asked for better options for biking in the city. Your donations and your yearly membership to FNTG has helped the City of Northampton to continue dreaming, planning, building, and improving our access to walking and biking trails in our wonderful community.

Did you know that your donation to Friends of Northampton Trails and Greenways helps to make future bike paths and trails possible? These charitable contributions have been used to publicize the trails, organize activities as well as help fund city efforts to design and construct new trails. Without completed detailed plans, the city cannot apply for state and federal funding to build these new path and trails. Relatively small amounts of these targeted donations leverage funds allocated by the Mayor and City Council, and then turn into major capital projects through transportation dollars. Collectively, with our giving and memberships, we send a powerful message in support of these trails, and speed up the process of getting more built.

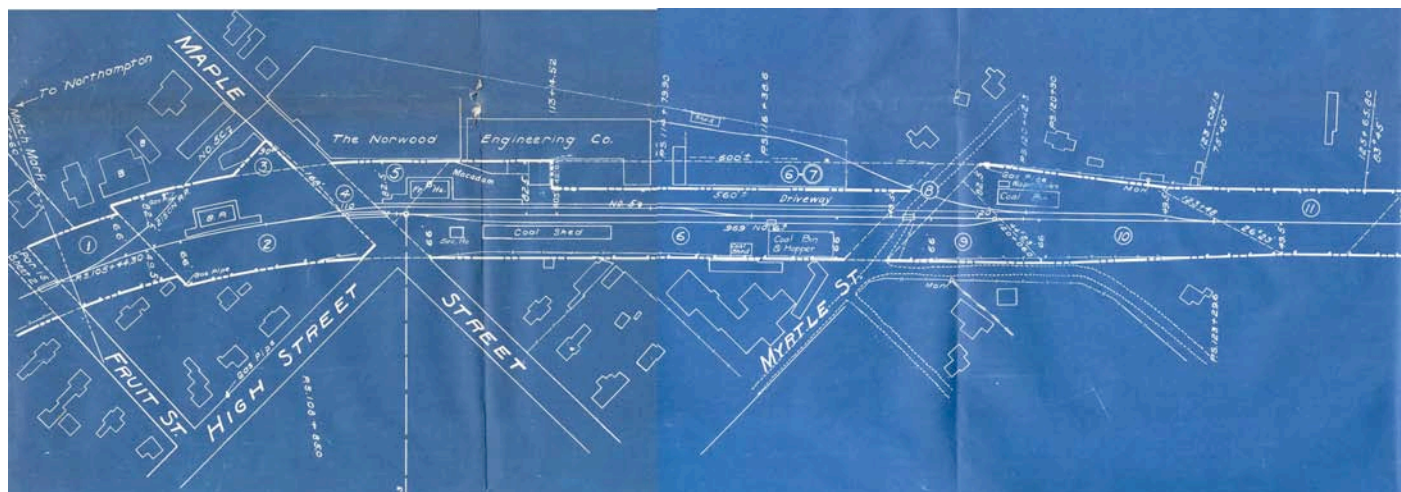
Global warming, raising gas prices, hard economic times all point to the benefits of biking and walking over car use. I strongly believe that investment in rail trails in Northampton is an investment in a sustainable future for our city. Thank you for your support for the development of great new paths throughout Northampton that will make our biking and walking easier, safer, more convenient, and truly enjoyable.

As part of our annual appeal, please consider a gift of any amount to Friends of Northampton Trails and

Greenways. As in previous years, these donations can be earmarked for City of Northampton Trail Design efforts.

It's even easier to support FNTG. Donations can now be made online using a credit card through our collaboration with <http://www.justgive.org>. Information is available on our website.

Contributions of \$50 or more to earmarked donations to City of Northampton trail design efforts will also renew your membership for next year, while allowing trail design and improvements to proceed.



Credits: photos by needfire and mighty stina Flickr plus Craig Della Penna, logo Trace Meek FNTG Officers for 2008-2009, Nicholas Horton (President), Julia Riseman (Vice-President), Susan Voss (Treasurer), Judith Cardell (Secretary)



ANNUAL MEETING REMINDER: Tuesday, November 18th talk by Wayne Feiden "Transforming Northampton's Rail Trails to a regional Rail Trail Network", 7:00pm at the Florence Civic Center

Friends of Northampton Trails and Greenways, Inc.
351 Pleasant St., Suite B #117
Northampton, MA 01060

Address correction requested