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FEATURED

Littleton: Rails To Trails Plan Has Some Concerned About ATVs

Plan To Add 7 Miles And Extend Ammonoosuc Recreation Trail From Littleton Industrial Park To Bethlehem

Robert Blechl Nov 1, 2019

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Chris Gamache, head of the New Hampshire Bureau of Trails, facilitated a state Rails to Trails program informational meeting Wednesday about the plan to add 7 miles of new recreational trail from Littleton to Bethlehem. (Photo by Robert Blechl)

LITTLETON — A plan that has been eight years in the works is, after fits and starts, about to commence - the addition of 7 new miles of trail, from the Littleton Industrial Park to Bethlehem, to be added to the existing 19.2-mile Ammonoosuc Recreation Trail.

“Discussions have been about continuing all existing uses north,” Chris Gamache, chief of the New Hampshire Trails Bureau, said during an informational meeting Wednesday at the Littleton Area Senior Center that drew about 100 area residents, including abutters, local business owners, and town and state elected officials.

Existing uses include walking, biking, horse riding, snowmobiles, All-Terrain Vehicles (ATVs, also called OHRVs), though several in the non-motorized group voiced concerns about noise and other impacts from ATVs that would share the trail with bicyclists, runners, and walkers.

They asked how the rules of the trail will be enforced and how conflicts between users can be avoided.

“I use the river walk almost daily,” said Littleton resident Mike Dickerman.

The area along the Ammonoosuc River is beautiful and quiet and those walking it can enjoy the peace and soft sound of running water, he said.

“I don’t want to hear ATVs,” said Dickerman. “Look at how much money we are spending on the river walk and then we put those noisy, polluting machines on it.”

Wednesday, said Gamache, is only the first of a number of meetings that will be held where input will be gathered from all residents.

“This is not the only night and opportunity to discuss this,” he said. “This is only the beginning.”

Abutters in Littleton have not yet been notified, but they will be, he said.

The project is part of the state Rails to Trails program.

The Plan

It began with a meeting between the town of Littleton and the state in 2011 and was followed by the federal railroad abandonment in 2012.

Railroads are governed by federal law and not state law, but the state will be the owner of the corridor and it reserves the right to reverse the trail back to a railroad if the need arises, said Gamache.

The current 19.2-mile segment of the year-round Ammonoosuc Recreational Trail, an aggregate path that hugs the Ammonoosuc River and Route 302 stretches from Woodsville through Lisbon to Littleton, is maintained by the New Hampshire Division of Natural and Cultural Resources.

Last week, the state received word that the line has been formally abandoned and it hopes to begin the work of pulling up the rails and ties - each mile has 5,000 ties - some time this month, a job that will continue toward Whitefield to prepare for snowmobile season, said Gamache.

To develop the trail, improve its surface and make connections between Cottage Street and Industrial Park Drive, the town of Littleton was awarded, in 2018, a \$110,000 grant from the Northern Border Regional Commission.

The state has \$50,000 to spend.

The NBRC funds are available for the next eight months for phase 1, extending from the industrial park to Cottage Street, and will involve paving at road crossings, scenic vistas for views of the river and downtown, and additional signage near intersections and businesses.

The goal is to have phase 1 completed by the late summer or early fall of 2020.

Phases 2 and 3, which will take one to two years for full build-out, will extend from Cottage Street north toward Wing Road in Bethlehem, where the trail will end just before the road and where there will be a small park with picnic tables and a turnaround.

The railroad right-of-way runs from 33 to 66 feet wide. The recreational trail plan is for a 12-foot-wide completed surface.

Concerns, Enforcement

The Lane House in Littleton recently put up an outdoor patio with chairs and that could now be impacted with machines buzzing nearby, said Littleton resident Jeanne Dickerman.

“There have to be some places for people who don’t want noise,” she said. “I don’t understand putting the two together ... Why can’t we have some good, natural places around downtown?”

Littleton Selectman Chad Stearns suggested routing the motorized traffic around the river walk and town center.

The number one complaint the state hears is not about motorized recreational vehicles but about horses, with bikers not liking horses on the trail and walkers not wanting to be behind a horse, said Gamache.

Since the trail will be state property, town ordinances do not apply to it, but if the town helps enforce regulations, such as speed limits, it is entitled to one-half to two-thirds of the fine revenue, said Gamache.

The snowmobile speed limit is 45 mph on the straightaways and the maximum ATV limit is 25 mph, with a 10 mph limit near gates and town centers.

No machine larger than 2,000 pounds or 65 inches wide is allowed on the trail, said Gamache.

There are no nighttime restrictions for snowmobiles, but ATV riders must stop a half hour after sunset.

Littleton resident George Morgan asked how both non-motorized and motorized uses can be accommodated.

“A lot of it comes down to enforcement, early signage, and regulation,” Gamache said of motorized use. “Word spreads fast among users.”

As for enforcement by town police officers, the state will not be asking them to do more than they do now and the town can receive revenues, he said.

“What about noise?” asked Easton resident Kris Pastoriza.

“Speed limits have a huge impact on that,” said Gamache. “Here, we are keeping the limit to 10 mph or less, and that would cut noise emissions.”

The ATV speed limit reduction from 35 mph to the current 25 mph cut out a lot of noise, he said.

In the majority of the neighborhoods the trail goes through there is also a degree of separation, he said.

Lancaster resident Lucy Wyman noted the lawsuit filed against the town of Gorham and the state by a dozen Gorham residents who seek to close an ATV gateway on Route 2 that they say has created a nuisance near their homes.

The 2006 Jericho Mountain State Park Plan Riding Area Master Trail Development Plan, for the area near Gorham, calls for setbacks of 500 feet between trails, but the actual setbacks are much shorter, said Wyman.

Until that lawsuit is resolved, Wyman said, “I think people here should be very wary of promises the state makes.”

Rebecca Brown, executive director for the Ammonoosuc Conservation Trust, asked about the volume of use now on the Ammonoosuc Recreation Trail and what would be expected from a trail extension.

“My guess is a significant increase in bike use, mountain bikes and e-bikes,” said Gamache.

“There will be some increase in OHRVs, but I’m not expecting a huge explosion here. It’s not tied into a huge trail network.”

Littleton resident Bryan Hadlock said there isn’t much ATV traffic now along the Ammonoosuc Recreation Trail from Littleton to Woodsville and a dead-end trail in Bethlehem is not likely to increase it.

“Everybody does not have to fear what you see up north,” said Hadlock. “We don’t have the side trails.”

Maintenance on the rail to recreational trails is paid for through ATV and snowmobile registration fees.

Future discussions will involve use management, such as possibly rerouting ATVs or horses in some areas, the possible use of private land or roads, and coordinating and communicating between the town and state on regulations, enforcement, marketing, and signage, said Gamache.

“We really need to treat this as a partnership,” he said.