

Norton keeps trail plan on track

BY HEATHER BRISSETTE / SUN CHRONICLE STAFF | Posted: Tuesday, July 20, 1999 12:00 am

NORTON — Rails to Trails and its proponents cleared one major road block but appear to be about to run head on into another.

Norton selectmen voted Monday night, during a special joint meeting with the Mansfield selectmen, to drop their request to extend a comment period on the environmental impact of the project by 60 days.

Norton selectmen said they would direct their concerns about public safety, maintenance, and liability to the project engineers and keep the environmental side of the proposal moving ahead “in a spirit of cooperation” — as requested by the Mansfield selectmen.

Mansfield officials have criticized the Norton board for jeopardizing the trails funding by raising concerns at the “11th hour.”

Chairman Robert Kimball said “respect” was going to be the key word of the standing-room-only meeting. Knowing that recent statements traded by the boards of selectmen about the issue have been controversial, Kimball urged everyone in the room to be respectful of each other's opinions and “to keep the tone down.”

Residents from both towns on both sides of the issue packed into the Norton selectmen's meeting room, spilling out into the stairwells, hallways, and lower offices. There were also several residents who could only find room in an upstairs meeting room and were forced to peer over a row of filing cabinets to watch the proceedings.

Kimball opened the meeting by saying that he is “in many ways” in favor of the trail and does not want to jeopardize its standing with the state. He said many people have worked hard on the trail for almost 10 years and that it was unfair to undermine their commitment.

Kimball said he would still prefer to have at least an extra 30 days to review the impact of the project on the environment but urged fellow selectmen to change their minds about delaying the comment period. He said it is the quickest way for the engineers to move on to the next step in the design process — finding out how much it is all going to cost.

Kimball said the Norton town manager's office learned this week that the \$525,000 project is already over budget. The Massachusetts Highway Department revealed that the amount of money that it committed to the project last year will likely not be enough to build the entire 6 mile multi-purpose trail that will connect Mansfield and Norton along the former Old Colony railway. Kimball said that

information may make all of the Norton's other worries moot — at least until additional funding can be found.

VHB transportation engineer William DeSantis said it is true that the project is under-budgeted and that no one involved knows by how much at this point. How much the trail will cost will not be known until the end of the summer when 25 percent of the design is submitted to the state for approval, he said.

The price tag has risen with normal inflation and also with the "extras" that are being considered, such as possible road improvements and privacy fences.

DeSantis said there is a chance that the state will come through with the additional funding, an increase in the transportation enhancement grant received by Mansfield for the project, but there is no guarantee. If the state does not pay the difference it will be up to the towns to either pay the balance or abort the project, he said.

Meanwhile, DeSantis said it is important that the comment period not be extended and the state environmental protection agency be given enough time to decide whether a time intensive environmental impact report is necessary.

Every day counts, he said. If the project is not 100 percent ready to go out to bid by October 2000 then there is a chance the state highway department will give away their money to some town that is ready, he said.

The Old Colony Multi-Use Trail would go to the bottom of the transportation enhancement grant list, DeSantis said.

Mansfield Selectmen Chairwoman Diane Royle said her board was not prepared to return to Mansfield town meeting and ask for money and suggested that Norton's officials might be equally unwilling to come up with additional funds.

Royle said Mansfield has already spent \$80,000 towards the project and couldn't say whether residents would be willing to spend any more to pave the existing trail way.

Norton anted up 15,000 at last year's annual town meeting to pay for initial design and engineering reports. The majority of the money was expected to come from the state. Norton Selectwoman Patricia Graney said nearly all of Norton's concerns are with public safety and not with the environmental impact of the proposed trail.

Therefore it would be appropriate for the town to allow the Massachusetts Environmental Protection Agency to move ahead with its study of the project and keep the project on track, she said.

Selectmen James Brown said he was not in favor of rescinding the town's request for a delay and feels strongly that Norton should record all of its concerns with the EPA as soon as possible.

“Public safety, in its own special way is part of the environment” Brown said. ” It's all related.” Brown said VHB has given Norton residents' two options, to widen the roads where the trail comes out of the woods and onto public roads or ” to live with it.”

Brown said Norton is still waiting for DeSantis to explain how the engineering firm is going to make three dangerous at-grade road crossings safe for trail users.

There are going to have to be ” large red signs that say Danger: Go Back” at the crossings so that people know they are not safe, Brown said.

He is especially concerned that the width of the roads in several places does not meet state standards for combination uses.

DeSantis said it is true that the road are too narrow in some sections and that it will have to be decided by town officials whether to ask the state for waivers. It is unlikely, he said, that the state will grant waivers and suggested that officials consider changing the description of the trail on the application to the state.

The trail has a better chance of being approved, he said, if it is listed as a ” discontinuous off road bike path” project.

DeSantis said safety is the first priority at VHB and that the crossings at North Washington and East Main streets were definitely challenges. However, he said, they are not unmanageable and can be crossed safely.

Kimball said he has a problem with misrepresenting the project that way and said he would try to stop any design plan that did not include a responsible attempt at improving the safety at each of the at-grade crossings.