

Norton slows down trail plan

BY HEATHER BRISSETTE / SUN CHRONICLE STAFF | Posted: Friday, July 9, 1999 12:00 am

NORTON — Norton selectmen are looking to put the brakes on the proposed Old Colony Multi-Purpose Trail until residents' concerns for public safety, sanitation, and maintenance are addressed by trail proponents.

Selectmen voted to ask the state office of environmental affairs to extend its July 30 deadline for public comment on the document known as the Environmental Notification Form.

The plan, selectmen said, is to buy Norton enough time to figure out how to proceed on the issue.

Even though many of the town's questions have not been answered, state officials have the plan on the fast track and plan to begin construction this spring, selectmen said.

A delay would give officials from Norton and Mansfield a chance to meet and work out some important details, selectmen said.

Selectmen said they are concerned because more than two thirds of proposed trail is located in Norton but Mansfield owns all of the property and seems to be in charge of making all of the decisions.

Norton must investigate, selectmen said, how much actual responsibility for the trail and its users the town will have.

Selectwoman Patricia Graney said the board should speak with town counsel and its state representatives to find out what its options are in case the town decides it does not want to go ahead with the project as proposed.

“I don't want to sound like a NIMBY,” she said. “But we may want to stop this, at least temporarily.”

The plan, as currently proposed by the state, is to pave approximately 5.5 miles of trail along the rail road tracks running between the Mansfield commuter rail station and the waster water treatment plant in Norton to allow for bicycles, Rollarblades, horses, and other non-motorized recreation modes of transportation.

The \$500,000 project will be paid with state transportation enhancement funds and is sponsored locally by the Norton and Mansfield recreation commissions.

Selectmen Chairman Robert Kimball said Mansfield residents are further ahead with there end of the project and Norton needs time to get in sync.

“We like to move slowly here in Norton,” he said. “We want to take our time and make sure that everyone's questions get answered.”

Kimball said he attended the so-called Rails to Trails workshop meeting held last Tuesday at the Norton American Legion and was concerned that so many of the questions posed by Norton residents went unanswered by project leaders.

Selectman James Brown said the Norton police and fire chiefs, as well as the town's highway superintendent are all worried about the extent of services their departments will be expected to provide once the trail is built.

Fire Chief George Burgess and Interim Police Chief Bruce Finch have registered their concerns over three dangerous grade crossings, one on Route 123 at the hump and two on North Washington Street.

Also the chiefs said they have concerns about whether their departments have the proper equipment to respond to any emergencies that happen on the trail.

The highway department employees are concerned that they are responsible for collecting rubbish left behind by trail users and maintaining the condition of the pavement.

Brown said he is uncomfortable that the concerns from “the town's three major departments” have not been addressed.

Other residents expressed concerns about trail users using their private property as outdoor toilets, vandalism, and the exclusion of all terrain vehicles.

Heather Graf, Norton's representative to the Southeastern Regional Planning and Economic Development District, said she is concerned that the state will not give the town a straight answer regarding how many people are expected to use the trail.

Some reports have indicated “that the trail will have more visitors than Disney World” while other sources say it will be used mainly by the community, she said.

Graf said the state's long term plan to connect the trail to other trails along southeaster Massachusetts and into Rhode Island is being purposefully down played to prevent further opposition from residents.

She asked the board to draft a letter stating their concerns for her to present at the next SERPEDD meeting on July 14. Letters from other town department heads should also be written, she said.