

## STREET BEAT: A plan for a path in Norton

BY KASSMIN WILLIAMS SUN CHRONICLE STAFF | Posted: Sunday, March 31, 2013 11:16 pm

**NORTON** - A proposed bike path in town went down in resounding defeat about a decade ago in the face of stiff resistance from residents and town officials.

But now, a group of residents who want to see the multi-use trail become a reality have banded together and are making a serious stab at bringing back the proposal.

Norton residents Bettylou Parker, Kevin O'Neil, Karen Kenter, Andrea Henry, Wells Whooten and Sandy Ollerhead are looking to form a bicycle committee to advocate for the project and are preparing to approach selectmen to approve the committee.

The path would connect with and extend the Mansfield World War II Memorial Trail, and include a 5-foot equestrian trail and a 10- to 12-foot paved bicycle path.

During an informal presentation last month, Adam Recchia, a former principal transportation planner for the Southeastern Regional Planning and Economical Development District, told interested residents that forming a committee would be the best approach toward getting the project completed.

Other planning professionals agree.

"If you're advocating by yourself, it's a bit difficult. But if you advocate in a group, there's more support," said SRPEDD senior transportation planner Jacqueline Schmidt, who has taken over the project.

A committee would be in charge of further investigating having a trail in town, raise awareness and possibly raise funds for the project, Schmidt said.

During last month's hearing, some residents and officials raised concerns about backyard security, safety and maintenance of the trail, which would be left up to the town.

But to those rallying for the path, the pros outweigh the cons. And, they say, some of the cons don't make much sense.

"I think it's going to improve safety," O'Neil said. "We're talking about safety concerns for the path, but where are (bicyclists and runners) now. They're on the side of North Washington Street and South Washington, crossing Route 123 wherever they want. They aren't funnelled into any kind of path."

O'Neil, who rides his Huffy twice a week in nice weather, finds himself looking over his shoulder and worrying about approaching cars.

"You're not enjoying your bike ride as much as you would on a designated path in the woods," he said.

Other proponents agree.

Henry says she lives on Island Road in the Grove section of town, a densely populated area without sidewalks.

And, Ollerhead called biking with her children "a big production" of loading bikes into her car and heading to Rhode Island or Cape Cod because once she leaves her safe but small cul-de-sac on Tipping Place, she is faced with dangerous conditions on Burt Street.

The trail in Mansfield hasn't placed any extra burden on the police department, according to Mansfield Police Chief Arthur O'Neil who uses the trail often.

"We haven't had any problem. I think it's a benefit to the community, and I'm sure it would be a benefit to Norton," he said.

Henry says it also would be an alternate way to get to the train station in Mansfield, which is along the path.

"It would be a couple of miles, but in nice weather it'd be terrific to hop on a bike, head to the train and ride into Boston," she said.

Whooten, whose back porch is just 200 feet from the trail, thinks the path would actually increase home values.

He says bike paths often are listed as an amenity in real estate listings.

Whooten also hopes that a paved path would discourage dirt bike riders who, he says, often disrupt him while he tries to enjoy a cup of coffee and a good read on his back porch.

Kenter, a former equestrian, often walks her dog on the the existing dirt trail, but says that's not practical in wet weather.

"When we have weather like we've had lately, it gets muddy and gross. If it was a nice paved path, it would be accessible all the time," Kenter said.

The group will hold an unofficial meeting to move forward with committee plans at 6 p.m. Thursday at the Norton Public Library.

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