

Georgetown Rail Trail Update

December 2020

Background of the Trail Project

Georgetown is in the process of converting the old railroad right-of-way that runs through town into a “rail-trail” that will be a multi-use recreational path.

The right-of-way (ROW) is part of the historic Boston and Maine railroad right-of-way running from Newburyport to Danvers. It was abandoned for railroad operations in 1941 and use of the ROW was taken over by the electric company. The trail, currently used by National Grid for power distribution, is 4.5 miles long running from the Boxford town line through the center of Georgetown to the Byfield town line.

The idea of developing a shared-use recreational path has been seriously considered for many years. Committees to develop the railroad corridor into a linear park were formed as early as the 1970’s. The Parks and Recreation Commission attempted to secure federal rail-trail funds in the mid-80s but lacked sufficient criteria to be selected. This idea has been part of the Georgetown Master Plan, Recreational Plan and Open Space plan for many years and remains an integral part today.

Georgetown created the current Recreational Path Committee, commonly known as the RecPath Committee (RPC), in 2004. It has worked to eliminate roadblocks and promote development of the trail since then. Two key objectives have been to obtain a 99-year lease for the right-of-way from National Grid and to obtain funding for the design and construction of the trail. As time passed, an additional goal of opening an interim “as-is” trail evolved, as we continued working on construction funding.

Funds to be used toward the goal of opening the right-of-way as a trail were obtained at Town Meetings in 2004, 2008 and 2010 through Community Preservation (CPA) funding. These funds have allowed the committee to make the progress we have made with the engineering study, legal and other aspects of the work necessary to achieve the overall objective of a community trail.

In 2004 the town surveyed residents to see what people thought about the idea of a Rail Trail and received a 90% favorable response.

In 2006 the selectmen signed a resolution for Georgetown to become a member of the Boston to Border (B2B) Coalition. It includes the towns of Salisbury, Newburyport, Newbury, Georgetown, Boxford, Topsfield, Wenham, and Danvers. Each town has opened their trail or is in the process of developing their portion of the ROW and creating a continuous shared use trail through Essex county.

The engineering company Fay, Spofford and Thorndike (FST) did a Feasibility and Conceptual Design Study for the Georgetown segment that was completed in July 2007. The study confirmed the feasibility of the trail and is available for review on the town web site.

The four towns of Boxford, Georgetown, Newbury, and Salisbury joined together in 2010 to obtain funding for the design of the trail and were awarded a total of \$1.25 million to complete the 100% design that would make the project “shovel ready”. Each of the four towns is now proceeding on their own to develop their trails.

Design Projects

The Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MDOT) has divided Georgetown's trail into two projects. The Southern project runs from Georgetown Road in Boxford to West Main St., while the Northern project continues from there to Church St. in the center of Newbury (Byfield).

Stantec, the engineering firm awarded the design contract has completed the 25% design plan, which is an important milestone for the project. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic the 25% Design Public Hearing for the southern project, scheduled for May 2020 was postponed. The State will reschedule when it is practical and safe to do so. If final (100%) design, which includes environmental permitting is completed by the fall of 2021, it will allow construction of the southern section to happen in 2022. The Northern Project will follow the same steps and be ready for construction in 2024. Dates are subject to change.

Construction Funding

The Committee, working with the Merrimack Valley Metropolitan Planning Organization, which manages and plans all road and trail funding in this area, secured federal and state funding of \$6.1m for construction of both trail projects.

The Interim Trail

To make use of the trail while waiting for design and construction, the RPC worked with National Grid to develop a license agreement in 2013, which allows for the use of the right-of-way in its existing condition. The RPC also worked with the Georgetown Conservation Commission (ConCom) to develop a plan to open sections of the trail for public use, which was approved by the ConCom in 2013. Since then, mowing and trimming of the trail has been done by volunteers. Any other changes to the trail are controlled by the National Grid License and agreement with the ConCom.

How to Use the Trail

Portions of the trail are open for people to walk, run, bicycle, and enjoy. As we gain a smoother surface, it will be possible to use wheelchairs, in-line skates and skateboards. No motorized vehicles or horses are allowed. The hours of operation are from dawn to dusk. To connect between the northern and southern sections of the trail you can follow Moulton St and Nelson Ave. Access is available at American Legion Park, 103 Central St, Camp Denison, road crossings, other designated locations and Georgetown Road, Boxford. We have created a Facebook page where you can check in and see what is happening at <https://www.facebook.com/Georgetown.Railtrail>.