

A Trail Network based in Newton

By Gil Woolley; Special to the TAB
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In Newton the framework already exists for a citywide pedestrian and bicycle trail network, although currently there are gaps between these trails. The Charles River Path, a hard surfaced multi-use path, passes through Newton, and there are suitable paths in several city parks and conservation areas. The Aqueduct Trails provide pedestrian routes from Newton Centre to Wellesley, and there are two disused railroad tracks that could link Newton trails with those of Weston, Needham and Wellesley.

Closing the gaps would enable residents to get healthy outdoor exercise by using bicycles instead of cars. Some people are ready to give up the second car, to save money while reducing traffic congestion, air pollution and CO2 emissions. Students could safely cycle to school, and everyone could cycle to the T station, the library and other local destinations. There is growing interest in bicycle tourism, which would be enhanced by setting up a regional trail system in cooperation with neighboring towns (Wellesley, Needham, Waltham and Weston).

Sustained heavy usage of the Minuteman Trail, from Cambridge to Bedford, has shown that bicyclists, skateboarders and in-line skaters will take advantage of trails that are safe, that is, free from automobile traffic. According to the "Regional Bicycle Plan", published by the Metropolitan Planning Agency (MPO) in 2007, an internet survey of 2500 people showed that "danger" was the greatest deterrent to bicycle use for most respondents.

We can encourage more use of existing bicycle trails in many ways:

- Where trails pass through private property, city records should be examined to establish ownership. If indeed private, it may be possible to devise ways to facilitate public passage while respecting owners' privacy.
- Mark trails clearly with signs, especially if it appears to be on private property, because otherwise people will be reluctant to use it. Where it is necessary to use public streets for short sections (to link trail segments) the points where trails enter and leave streets must be clearly marked.
- Volunteers can be recruited to clear brush from paths.
- Side streets are sometimes used to provide safe routes to schools, libraries and T stations. Volunteers can often help identify these routes and assist in building and maintaining trails created on these quieter streets.
- Making unused railroad beds suitable for walking and cycling require more than volunteer labor. The Rails to Trails Conservancy is making this transition all over the US, including New England. The MPO Plan gives an estimated cost of \$720,000 per mile for a ten-foot wide asphalt surfaced trail, but stone dust is much less expensive and may be adequate in some places.

Newton's current financial situation would tend to discourage the use of city funds for constructing trails, but state reimbursement under Transportation Enhancement,

Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality programs can limit the city's share of the cost to 10% or less. And Regional Transportation Demand Management Programs like "Safe Routes To School, require that the federal government provide full reimbursement for the cost of a trail-building.

Walking and bicycling trails are sometimes opposed by abutters on the grounds that they will reduce property values and increase the risk of criminals having access to their homes. There is no evidence to justify this fear. Realtors listing properties adjacent to the heavily used Minuteman Trail, and many other trails, have found that proximity to a trail adds value to properties, often significant value. Trail users are typically law-abiding citizens, while criminals (at least in the US) seem to prefer automobiles.

Newton's roadways are very congested. Improving roads to reduce congestion is expensive, and usually ineffective, as traffic tends to increase when capacity increases. To coax even a few hundred travelers to use bicycles instead of automobiles would not require more infrastructure and would certainly reduce congestion. It's worth trying.

On May 18, 2008, Green Decade Coalition is sponsoring "Bike Newton. Make Newton a Bicycle Safe City" at Newton City Hall to demonstrate grassroots support for improved bicycle safety in Newton. Residents can take this opportunity to make a statement to the city that bicycling should be a larger part of the transportation equation here.

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