

Weston's New Rail Trail and Park

*by Paul Penfield Jr.
Member, Rail Trail Advisory Committee
September 14, 2017 Town Crier*

People in Weston should be aware that there will be a rail trail through town before too long. Construction will likely be completed sometime in 2018.

As a result Weston will have a new recreational park, consisting of both the trail and the rest of the abandoned railroad right-of-way. Some people will welcome the trail and the park, and some will not. And some may be concerned today about various aspects of the plans.

The Rail Trail Advisory Committee (RTAC) will host a town-wide meeting at Town Hall, 7:00 PM, Tuesday, September 19, to discuss these developments. Who should attend?

- Those with concerns about the plans.
- Those with possible answers to those concerns.
- Those who favor the new park.
- Those who do not favor the new park.
- Those who want to learn more.
- Those with ideas for how the park can best serve Weston's needs.

Two articles in recent issues of The Weston Town Crier have mentioned this upcoming meeting. The article on August 24 (online at weston.wickedlocal.com/news/20170828/input-wanted-on-new-weston-rail-trail) discussed the background of the trail, the Committee, and the need for community input. The article last week, September 7 (online at weston.wickedlocal.com/news/20170908/rail-trail-is-coming-to-weston), gave examples of questions focused on Weston's needs. Both of these articles are available in the Rail Trail Blog on the Town website, www.weston.org/railtrail.

Below are details on the upcoming meeting: how it will be organized, what discussion topics are appropriate, what decisions have already been made (and therefore do not need any more discussion), and what design options are still open to the town.

Agenda

The meeting will be organized and run on behalf of RTAC by Utile, Inc., a Boston-based architecture and planning firm that has experience introducing long-range planning to a general audience and then harvesting the ideas that pop up. As Tim Love of Utile puts it, "We find that exciting new ideas arise out of community conversations."

To set the stage, Utile will describe the status of the rail trail project. Then people can mill around, visiting one or more of four “Breakout Stations.”

Those concerned about or interested in a specific region of the park can go to these stations: “Jericho” for the Gun Club Lane area and points west; “Sunday Woods” for the territory between that and just east of Concord Road; “Conant” for the regions surrounding Conant Road with its special requirements; and “Sears” for the eastern portion of the park, from Church Street to the Waltham border.

People can stay as long as they want at each station. There will be one Utile person and at least one RTAC member at each. Both RTAC and Utile want to hear what people say. Somebody will take notes. Appropriate topics include location-specific concerns, public access if any, the nature of the right-of-way there, the neighboring town assets, the kind of activities that would be most suitable there, and any other ideas that come into peoples’ minds. Ideas involving more than one region could be discussed at any of the stations.

A report will be read from each station. Then the audience will have another opportunity to be heard. Ideas from the various stations will be put up on big boards where people will be able to record their opinions and other new ideas.

Concerns shared by an entire neighborhood could be brought up at the appropriate station, but individual abutters concerned about their property should contact RTAC directly. That way the general discussion at the meeting can be used for concerns of general interest.

Already Decided

Several decisions about the trail either cannot be made by the town or have already been made. It’s useful to review those here to remind folks that there is no point in bringing up these matters during the meeting, which should instead be focused on what the town is still able to affect.

The biggest question of this sort is about the trail itself. The trail will be built in Weston by a combination of Eversource and the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation. Those organizations have the right to make the result suit their needs and aspirations, so the town’s input is limited to making suggestions. The trail will be ten feet wide, paved, along a route that avoids wetlands. It will have two-foot-wide shoulders and, where needed, safety barriers to keep trail users from tumbling down an embankment.

In most places the trail will have enough space next to it for an informal dirt trail suitable for runners or horses. Exception: horses will probably not be able to use a section near Cherry Brook but a parallel trail through Sunday Woods is available. Also, it is not yet known whether the planned Conant Road underpass can be tall and wide enough to accommodate horses.

Motorized vehicles will not be allowed on the trail (exceptions: motorized wheelchairs, emergency vehicles, and repair and maintenance vehicles). People will not be allowed to enter the trail at night, but those already on the trail can continue to their destinations.

In some places the off-trail part of the right-of-way is not usable by the town because it contains wetlands. For safety reasons tall plants, trees, and structures cannot be placed near the high-voltage transmission lines. Aside from concerns of this type, the part of the park not used by the trail can be landscaped or set up for activities wanted by the town. And the town can recommend the style of some of the required items, such as fences, signs, gates, and safety barriers, to express the town character.

The Historical Commission has identified, evaluated, and requested the preservation of about a dozen historic objects related to the railroad and to the town's history. This was done before the access road was fully designed. Eversource and DCR agreed to every preservation request. "Some of these objects may need restoration or repair" according to Phyllis Halpern, Historical Commission co-chair. "Educational signs describing them can make the park more interesting, and will help people learn more about the town's past."

Park Design

There may be time at the meeting to think about how the park, including the trail, can be designed to best serve the town. Some people may arrive at the meeting with ideas in mind. Others will think of things if they are curious and open to possibilities.

Such ideas may be more relevant if they take advantage of the park's attributes:

- The park is long and narrow (about 3 miles by 100 feet). It's nearly linear, or one-dimensional.
- The park will be safe because of the lack of vehicular traffic.
- The park is not uniform. It has different topographies, vistas, and habitats at different places.
- The park has some areas with fertile soil, and other areas where nothing seems to grow.
- The park is, in places, far from the nearest building and so may have very low ground light.
- The park has no trees to block the sky view.
- The park has some stunning vistas.
- The park has a trail down its spine, wheelchair friendly and relatively flat.