

Mass Central Rail Trail Continues Expansion

By John Dieckmann

Progress continues on the Wayside section of the Mass Central Rail Trail (MCRT) from I-495 to Boston. Two paved segments were recently completed: five miles, from the Waltham-Weston town line to Route 20 in Wayland at Russell's Garden Center, and approximately three miles from Brighton Street in Belmont to Lowell Street in Somerville.

In addition, two major segments are under construction. The Somerville-Cambridge section being constructed along with the Green Line Extension will open in late summer and will complete the MCRT from Brighton Street to Boston in the vicinity of the TD Garden. Construction has also begun on the central Waltham section, 2.75 miles from Beaver Street to Main Street near the Market Basket shopping center at 1265 Main Street. Waltham has funded the approximately \$9 million cost of construction of its segment from city revenues.

This construction will leave three gaps in the overall section from Russell's Garden Center in Wayland to Boston. They are:

- Belmont, a little over two miles
- East Waltham, about three-quarters of a mile from the Belmont-Waltham line to Beaver Street
- West Waltham, about three-quarters of a mile from Main Street to the Waltham-Weston line

Belmont's progress

In Belmont, detailed design work on Phase 1 is moving along slowly. Pending Mass Department of Transportation approval of the 25% design, expected this fall, the design should advance to the 75% stage rapidly. At the May 26 meeting of the Boston Regional Metropolitan Planning Organization,

construction funding was included in the 2022-2026 Transportation Improvement Plan (TIP) for FY2026. With anticipated completion of the detailed design by late 2023, it is possible for construction to move up to FY2025 if other projects on the TIP aren't shovel-ready at that time.

At the June 6 session of Belmont Town Meeting, \$200,000 of Community Preservation funding was approved to begin detailed design of Phase 2. Additional funding for Phase 2 is anticipated from the state and from the recreational trails program.



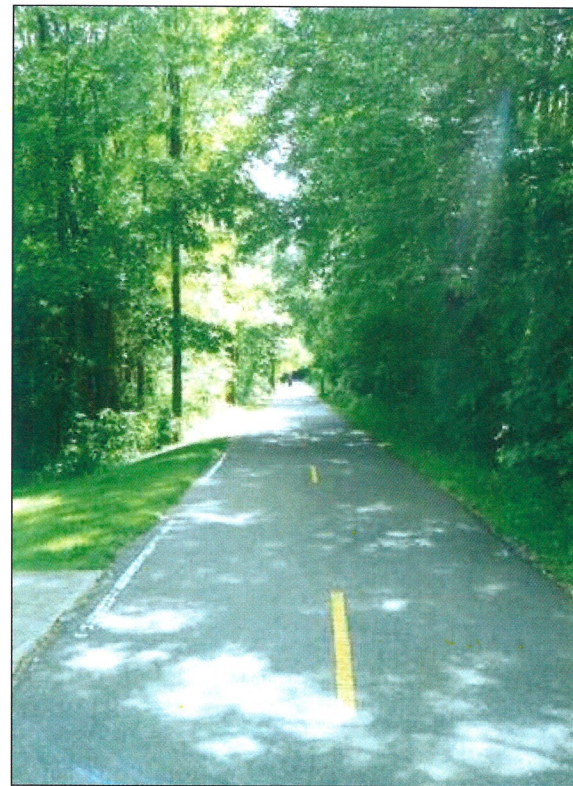
JOHN DIECKMANN

The Mass Central Rail Trail right of way west of Horse Pond.

While Waltham is focused on the central section, the three-quarter mile eastern section will be getting some attention from friends groups. The Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) has taken the lead on the detailed design of the three-quarter mile western section which includes the existing railroad bridge over Route 128/95 and a truss bridge over the Fitchburg Commuter Rail line at the Weston border.

MCRT west from Route 20

This brings us to the focus of this article, the section of the MCRT running westward from Route 20 in Wayland at Russell's Garden Center to the current trailhead of the Assabet River



JOHN DIECKMANN

The northeast end of the Assabet Rail Trail in Hudson.

Rail Trail (ARRT) in eastern Hudson off Route 62, a total of 8.3 miles. Detailed design and construction of this section is going to be carried out in the same manner as for the five-mile Weston-Wayland section. The electric utility Eversource has obtained an easement from the MBTA to construct a 115,000-volt transmission line in the MCRT right of way from the Sudbury substation to Hudson. The line will be placed in an underground conduit. To provide maintenance access, Eversource will construct a heavy-duty gravel and stone dust road. The DCR will pave this road, which will serve as the multiuse MCRT. In addition to paving, the DCR will implement safe road crossings, guard rails, and other necessary features.

This plan has been opposed by elements in Sudbury, delaying the project for almost three years. In April 2017, Eversource petitioned the Energy Facilities Siting Board (EFSB) for approval to construct the transmission line. In December 2019, the EFSB issued a final decision approving the project. Sudbury and a citizens' group calling itself Protect Sudbury appealed the EFSB final decision to the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court. In January 2020, the Supreme Judicial Court ruled in favor of Eversource and the EFSB. Then, in March 2021, Protect Sudbury petitioned the Surface Transportation Board to block the project on the basis that the corridor had not been formally abandoned. In February 2022, the Surface Transportation Board ruled in favor of Eversource and the EFSB. This latest judgment ended legal challenges to the project.

Paul Jahnige, the DCR's director of greenway programs, commented, "With the legal challenges over, what is the timing for design and construction? It is looking like Eversource will begin construction this August and could finish in spring 2024. DCR is prepared to implement the upgrade to paved