

MASS CENTRAL RAIL TRAIL



Mass Central Rail Trail Coalition

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Northampton

Did you know that within 150 miles of Northampton are almost 200 former steam railroads being transformed into linear parks aka rail trails? Northampton is at the intersection of two major ones. Mass Central Rail Trail (104 mile long Boston to Northampton) and the New Haven and Northampton Canal Greenway. (84 mile long New Haven to Northampton).

With all the ongoing conversations about remaking downtown Northampton to become more in-tune with 21st century transportation and parking needs, I would have thought there would be some inclusion in the conversation, or recognition that, a heck of a lot more people –and bikes—are on the horizon.

Over a dozen other multi-use trails connect directly to these two major trails, becoming a world-class network with vibrant economic power. People already travel from afar to experience the beauty of the sections that are now open.

The Mass Central Rail Trail today is currently one half open now. In three years it will be 70% open. Just this past winter MassDOT has completed a study on how to reassemble those missing pieces and that building-out this forgotten resource is now a priority at the state level. The State of New York, last December completed the Empire State Trail (EST), and built an additional 400 miles—in 4 years.

Yes. 400 miles in 4 years! The idea of the EST formed after a 2014 revenue study showed that the unfinished Erie Canal Trail yielded over \$250 million per year to the state and to communities along the way. In Pandemic 2020, trail use on that one trail more than doubled, from 1.6 million users to almost 4 million. That trend of high-demand, high-use valuable trails will likely continue because of the self-evident benefits to health, wealth, and fun.

In Northampton, on a recent weekend, we welcomed the launch of a series of guided bike tours led by an international operator with over 30 years of experience, primarily in Europe. The truth of “Build it and they will come” from the visionary film Field of Dreams seems applicable. It is only the start. There are several other bike touring firms on the horizon too.

I think it would be pertinent and timely for the conversation taking place about downtown to reflect this coming tsunami of visitors—coming largely without their cars to visit our downtown. To eat at our great restaurants and to shop at our local stores. The community conversation going on, needs to be discussing this now, or it will be revisiting these issues earlier than you thought.

Craig Della Penna, Volunteer Coordinator
Mass Central Rail Trail Coalition
www.MassCentralRailTrail.org