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Happy trails in Westford?

Some residents question need to acquire land for new parking area

By Rachel R. Briere
rbriere@towellisun.com

WESTFORD — Special Town Meeting is a month away and one article is causing many residents to rail against it.

Article 22, which seeks the town's authorization for selectmen to acquire a 1.48-acre parcel on Acton Road to be used for "general municipal purposes" was indirectly the cause for drawing a large crowd to the Planning Board meeting last night.

The vote on the land in question is the first in many steps, according to Chairman Michael Green, in eventually creating a parking area for users of the Bruce Freeman Rail Trail. The article needs a two-thirds majority vote to pass at the Oct. 19 Special Town Meeting.

"We need to stop. A major one of a number of steps, but we wanted to start a discussion," Green told a packed room at the Millennium Building. "This conversation is not going to end tonight."

Director of Land Use Management Angus Jennings provided a brief history of the parcel near the

intersection of routes 27 and 225, and how the idea came back to the forefront after years on the back burner. The area is not zoned for parking. Jennings then told the group the town is seeking to determine whether there is support for a parking area.

About two miles of the rail trail cuts through Westford but there is no parking to access it. The closest parking area is in Chelmsford at Heart Pond, which is about three miles south. There is concern about safety because people are parking illegally along Route 27 in order to use the trail for walking, biking, running and cross-country skiing.

"There is some concern about the informal parking taking place and that speaks to the demand for parking that is out there," Jennings said.

A two-page flier being circulated in the neighborhood near the parcel raises a number of issues with creating a parking area there, including a potential increase in crime, litter, congestion and noise. The flier also states that more parking options would decrease the value of nearby

homes and be a danger to children.

"What's the town's view on whether we are responsible for parking for the trail?" resident Tim Walsh asked. "There is clearly a need, but the question is, does it need to be in Westford when there is only two miles of trail in town?"

Another resident, Cheryl Major, wondered why in a shaky economy the town is considering spending money on everything that goes into building the parking area, including man hours from both town employees and contractors, studies and eventual construction.

"We could be getting more bus routes or more teacher aides," she said.

Green assured Major that money used to acquire the parcel would not come from general municipal funds or taxpayers. He explained there are funds from certain developments in town, including Summer Village at the Pond, that can be used for recreational purposes such as the parking facility.

Green continued the discussion to the Oct. 4 Planning Board meeting.

Pepperell woman injured in N.H. crash

MILFORD, N.H. (AP) — A collision between a motorcycle and an SUV in New Hampshire has killed a man.

Police say they responded to the accident Sunday afternoon in Milford. They say the southbound

motorcycle was being operated by 42-year-old Lyndeborough resident Richard B. Clark and his passenger was 36-year-old Pepperell, Mass., resident Kimberly L. Lambert.

They say Clark died of his injuries and Lambert has been hospitalized

in Massachusetts with injuries not considered life-threatening.

The northbound SUV had a driver and a passenger from Milford. Police haven't said if they were injured.

Police are trying to determine the cause of the accident.

Don't look now, but Patrick looks to be playing the race card again

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Some peeved at possible parking lot

By Rachel R. Briere, rbriere@lowellsun.com

Updated: 09/20/2010 06:35:50 AM EDT

WESTFORD -- The Bruce Freeman Rail Trail was created as a way to link several Greater Lowell communities. The purpose was to provide a safe and serene place for any and all to take in their surroundings and explore their own backyards. Now, residents of one neighborhood along the trail are worried it may be more of an intrusion in their lives than an added bonus.

Neighbors of the trail in Westford, near the Chelmsford line along Routes 27 and 225, plan on voicing their concerns about an idea to build a parking area in town for those wishing to access the path. The Westford Planning Board will discuss the option at its meeting tonight at 7:30 in the Millennium Building, 23 Depot St. However, the board and town stress there is no official proposal to build a parking lot for trail enthusiasts; they are only looking for input on the topic.

"The purpose of the meeting is simply to provide a forum to bring people together to consider the issue, review information as available regarding options that have been suggested, and provide the board the opportunity to offer direction regarding their policy objectives in order to inform staff efforts," Angus Jennings, the town's director of land use management, wrote in an e-mail and notice mailed to residents. "The Planning Board hopes to facilitate a productive discussion taking into account the range of opinions regarding whether and where additional public parking to serve the Rail Trail may, or may not, be in the public interest."

The letter stresses the Planning Board has no proposal before it in regards to a rail-trail parking lot and further emphasizes the plan is "purely conceptual." It invites area residents to participate in the discussion at the meeting.

Jennings' letter may have been spurred by a recent two page-flier circulating around town stating the intent of turning a parcel of wooded land in a residential area near the intersection of routes 27 and 225 into a parking lot. The flier lists a handful of negative impacts a parking facility there would generate, including an increase in crime, litter, congestion and noise. It also states that the creation of more parking options would decrease the value of homes in its vicinity and become a danger to children living in the area due to traffic entering and exiting.

The flier encourages residents to attend tonight's Planning Board meeting, and call or write Town Manager Jodi Ross and the Board of Selectmen.

Westford residents Rob Frado, Cheryl Major and Tim Walsh are listed as the contacts for those seeking more information. Frado and Major declined to comment until after the meeting. A call to Walsh was not returned.

The Bruce Freeman Rail Trail is open to all non-motorized uses including walking, cycling, jogging and cross-country skiing. The 25-mile route is the former New Haven Railroad line from Framingham to Lowell. Making its way from Lowell to Framingham, it stretches through Chelmsford, Westford, Carlisle, Acton, Concord and Sudbury.

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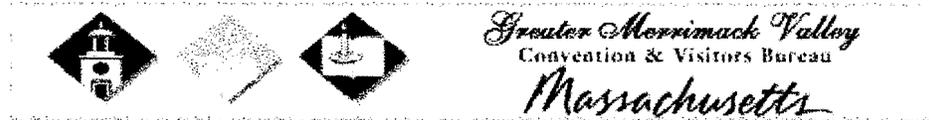
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Rail trail parking plan rankles neighbors

By PIERRE COMTOIS
 Sun Correspondent

WESTFORD -- Residents upset about a 27-space parking lot planned for their neighborhood were somewhat relieved last night when members of the Board of Selectmen promised to look into the matter.

Specifically, Acton Road residents had asked the board to reconsider a vote it had taken years before approving a plan by the North Middlesex Regional Council of Governments (NMCOG) to construct a parking lot along Acton Road giving access for bicylists to Westford's portion of the rail trail.

The rail trail is an inter-community project that seeks to convert miles of unused railroad bed to a bicycle trail that would wind its way across many area towns.

"This will be a sizeable parking lot for our neighborhood," said Acton Road resident Steve Macintosh.

"Our neighborhood is a small, tight knit community," said fellow resident Robert Frado adding that traffic from a parking lot would endanger the neighborhood's children.

The planned parking lot, located on town-owned land given over to NMCOG, has not yet been constructed.

Macintosh and Frado told selectmen that they learned only recently of the plan to build the parking lot across the street from their homes and became alarmed at the size of the project.

But when they asked the board about reconsidering its vote that approved NMCOG's plan, selectmen were unable to verify ever taking one.

Board Chairman Robert Jeffries could not recall if the board ever took an

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official vote on the matter when it first came up four or five years before or if a public hearing and notification to abutters was ever made.

Residents last night claimed that they were never notified of the plan to locate a parking lot in their neighborhood.

"If there was no official process, this board will reconsider its vote," Jeffries assured residents.

"I'm satisfied with what the board decided," said Macintosh following last night's meeting. "I'm happy that it showed flexibility on the issues and is willing to take a closer look at it."

Selectmen directed Town Manager Steven Ledoux to contact NMCOG on the matter and to report back to them.

"I want to see everything that was presented at the time," said Jeffries.

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