

## **Start of bike path work delayed for a year Fear of pollution forces redesign**

By Sally Heaney, Globe Correspondent, June 16, 2005

State officials have delayed beginning construction of the long-awaited Bruce N. Freeman Memorial Bicycle Path for a year while the project is redesigned to deal with any hazardous materials on the site.

After years of planning and preparation, stretching back into the 1980s, rail trail supporters were looking forward to work starting this spring on the first 7.5-mile stretch of the trail in Chelmsford and Westford. But a day before the construction contract was to be awarded in April, the state put the brakes on, according to Erik Abell, a spokesman for the Massachusetts Highway Department.

The state wants to avoid repeating the construction cost overruns experienced with another bike path, the Assabet River Rail Trail, where dealing with contaminated soil is doubling the project cost to \$4 million, Abell said.

The Bruce Freeman trail would ultimately run from Lowell to Sudbury and possibly Framingham.

Tom Michelman of Acton, secretary of a multitown friends group for the trail, said Sunday that when he first learned that it would be delayed it was a "a kick in the gut."

Michelman's feelings have mellowed since then, but Andrew Sheehan, coordinator of community development for Chelmsford, who has been involved with trail planning, said: "We really feel like we were sort of dumped at the altar.

"They don't want to get in the same situation on another project, and we were the next in line," said Sheehan. "The overrun was discovered very close to the beginning of our project."

Trail supporters such as Michelman and Sheehan have been aware of the delay for weeks but the change in plans has not been widely publicized.

Abell wrote in an e-mail last week that MassHighway is taking steps to keep future projects from facing cost overruns like those experienced on the Assabet River trail, which would run from Marlborough to Acton, also on an old railroad bed. The first section of that path, in Marlborough and Hudson, is under construction. Coal ash and arsenic were found in material in Hudson excavated during construction. According to Abell, the material must now be disposed of off site as hazardous waste -- an expensive process.

"Moving forward, MassHighway has a new rail trail design process in place that considers the costs associated with excavating contaminated materials and either reusing or landfilling it," he wrote. "This should prevent a project from generating significant additional costs, like the Assabet project, and avoid projects from being halted during advertising, like the Bruce Freeman project."

While tests for hazardous materials have not been performed along the Bruce Freeman trail, the state assumes that some contaminants will be found there as a natural byproduct of railroad operations, Abell said.

The Bruce Freeman trail will be redesigned so that most of the material in the rail bed will be used for the new bike path and paved over rather than excavated and trucked off-site to be disposed of as hazardous material.

Leaving potentially contaminated soil on site and essentially capping it during construction of the path is one of the approaches recommended by the state Department of Environmental Protection. The DEP says that contact with potentially contaminated soil can be eliminated by placing it under pavement or an equivalent layer of compacted stone dust.

The Bruce Freeman redesign will also include a process for disposing of any other contaminated material found during construction, such as from a spill, according to Abell. "That is not to say that additional contaminated material will certainly be found on-site, but estimates will be included in the redesign to deal with removing and properly disposing other contaminated materials, should they be found," he wrote in an e-mail.

In Concord, an engineering and environmental assessment of the 3.5-mile section of the trail proposed to be built in that town during a second phase of the project is now underway. The town and the friends group are holding a public information meeting at 7 p.m. this evening at the Town House during which a consultant will update citizens on the report.

Barbara Pike, a Concord member of the friends group, has a positive attitude about the delay in Chelmsford and Westford. "If this is an issue that subsequent sections of the trail will need to deal with, we are ahead of the game for their having gone through this first to figure it out," she said. "We won't have to reinvent the wheel."

In Acton, voters at the annual Town Meeting this spring approved spending \$75,000 for initial design work for the 4.6-mile section of the Bruce Freeman trail that will run through their town. Michelman, an Acton member of the friends group, said that he doesn't think the delay will affect the work in Acton, except for hampering the process of raising support for the trail.

"We all want to use it," he said. "Obviously, having it built would be a big advantage for showing how great it would be to have it continue on."

But he also puts the delay in the context of the nearly 20 years the project has already taken. "Another delay of another year is disappointing," he said, "but, after so many years, what's another year?"

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