

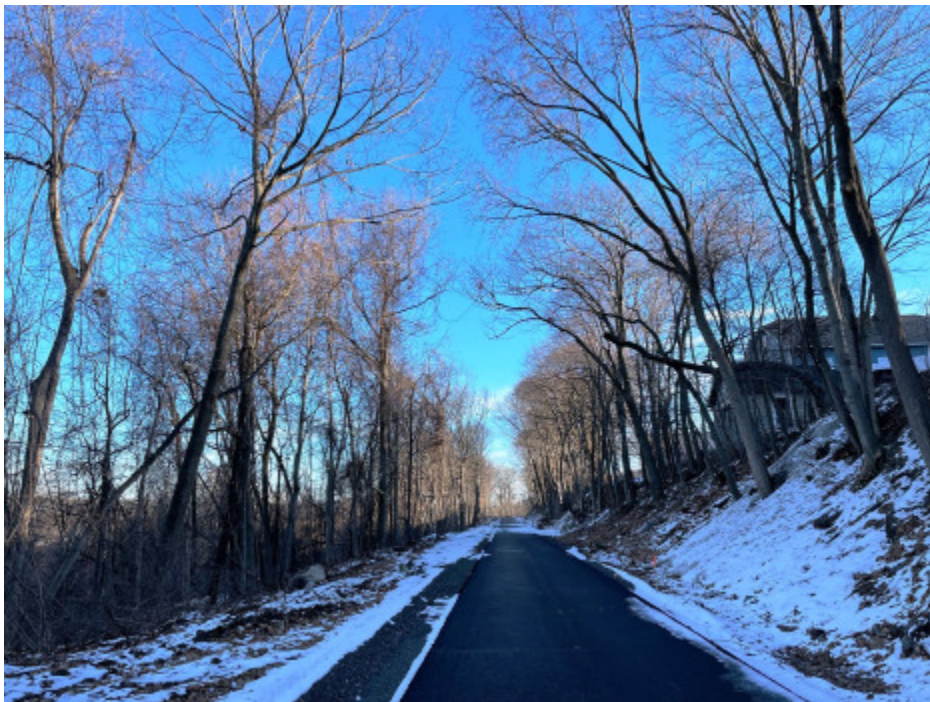
Progress made on Twin Cities Rail Trail project

The trail connecting the downtowns of Fitchburg and Leominster is slated to be completed next year.

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A stretch of the rail trail approaching the crossing of Duck Mill Road in Fitchburg. Route 12 is to the right, the Nashua River and MBTA train tracks are to the left. *Courtesy of Twin Cities Rail Trail Association*

After 25 years of planning, construction of the Twins Cities Rail Trail finally began last year, with Phase 1 anticipated to be completed this fall.

The 4.5-mile paved rail trail will connect downtown Fitchburg and downtown Leominster, running from Mechanic Street in Leominster to the Intermodal Transportation Center on Water Street in Fitchburg. The 12-foot-wide path will provide ample space for two lanes of walking and bicycling traffic as well as emergency vehicle access if needed.

“The project is important for the communities in many ways,” said Twin Cities Rail Trail Association Clerk Bennie DiNardo. Twin Cities Rail Trail Association is a volunteer, nonprofit group that has been advocating for the trail. “A paved trail connecting the two cities gives residents of both a safe and scenic way to travel the entire length, or just a portion of the trail.”



Making the grade where the rail trail will meet Fourth Street after passing below the Fifth Street Bridge in Fitchburg.

DiNardo said the trail will welcome bikers, walkers, runners, skateboarders and others who will use it either for recreational purposes or to commute to work at the train station or to one of the many businesses within a few hundred feet of the trail.

“The trail should improve the experience for drivers along Route 12; there is really no place for bikes on that thoroughfare, and walking or running along its sidewalks is treacherous,” he said. “It will be safer for both drivers and others if there is an alternative route between the cities. The experience of many other cities also shows that an attractive trail can be a boon for economic development, helping support businesses along the route.”

Contractor J.H. Lynch & Sons launched Phase 1 of the project in August, clearing brush and trees along the abandoned CSX railbed between the Fifth Street bridge in Fitchburg and Carter Park in Leominster, which runs parallel to Route 12, and paving a long stretch of the trail.

The tentative rail trail construction schedule for the remainder of the winter is to install a bridge behind LongHorn Steakhouse the first week of February and a bridge over Route 2 during the last week of February, subject to weather, the pandemic and other variables.



“The bridge over Route 2 is a more complex installation, requiring that the highway be shut down for a Saturday,” DiNardo said.

DiNardo shared an important safety reminder — the rail trail remains an active construction site.

“Please stay off the trail until the work is complete,” he said.

DiNardo said the first “white-collar job” he had while in college was at the Montachusett Regional Planning Commission, which was then headquartered where the Leominster train station is today.

“I grew up in Leominster and rode my bike to work every day that summer along Route 12,” he said. “It wasn’t as crowded and dangerous for bikers then as now, but it was not the best way to travel. I can’t wait to ride that route along the trail and see the views from

the new pedestrian bridge that will cross over Route 2, as well as a smaller bridge being built over an unnamed creek behind LongHorn Steakhouse.”

Phase 2 of the estimated \$18 million project, which is being paid for with a mix of local, state and federal funding, is slated to begin next year and will extend the trail at each end into the downtowns of the respective cities.

“When Phase 2 is done, the pedestrian bridge that will carry trail users over the Nashua River and MBTA train tracks into the Fitchburg train station should be a pretty spot to get nice views of the city,” DiNardo said. “I recently walked the portion between the Fifth Street Bridge and Duck Mill Road, and it’s amazing how the work has opened up views of the Nashua River that have been hidden for decades. In Leominster, the connections for people who use Doyle Field will be a great attraction, and Carter Park is, of course, a pretty little piece of land with lots of history around it.”

DiNardo said the reaction from the community to the rail trail project has been “overwhelmingly positive.” The Facebook page is growing steadily and is currently just shy of 2,000 followers.

“Whenever we have hosted presentations, hundreds of people have crowded into meeting rooms reserved at the DoubleTree in Leominster to show their support,” DiNardo said. “Both mayors and both city councils have been hugely supportive, doing everything they could do to move this project along. State officials from Gov. Charlie Baker on down see this trail as a major priority, linking two gateway cities and providing healthy recreational and commuting opportunities.”

For more information, email twincitiestrail@gmail.com and follow Twin Cities Rail Trail on Facebook and Instagram.

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