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REGION

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Merrimack River trail idea rekindled

By John Laidler, Globe Correspondent | October 21, 2007

Area planners and residents are reviving a decade-old idea of developing a recreational trail along 30 miles of the Merrimack River, from Newburyport to Lowell.

With support from local cities and towns and in partnership with two other regional agencies, the Merrimack Valley Planning Commission has applied for a \$15,000 state grant to undertake preliminary planning for the envisioned Merrimack River Trail.

If built, the trail would link existing and future paths along the river in a continuous 15-community corridor for walking and bicycling.

"I think it's a perfect time," Dennis A. DiZogio, the commission's executive director, said of pursuing the trail idea. "A lot of communities have decided not to turn their backs to the river, which they did in the past."

Where the river was once used primarily for industry, cities and towns are beginning to "think about it as a natural resource," said DiZogio, a former mayor of Methuen. "If you look up and down the river, you see communities developing trails."

About a decade ago, The Merrimack Valley Watershed Association conceived of a trail that would run the entire length of the river, from Franklin, N.H., to the ocean. Some individual trail sections were built but they remain mostly unconnected and the overall vision "fell off the radar screen," said Betsy Goodrich, the commission's transportation planner.

She said it was as a result of recent interest expressed by local communities that her agency decided to revive the idea, this time focusing on just the stretch from Lowell to the ocean.

"There's a lot of interest," she said, noting that a number of communities and area lawmakers have written to the state in support of the grant application, which was filed with the Department of Conservation and Recreation.

"It's a beautiful region; there's a lot to see. It would be wonderful to highlight the Merrimack River, which is one of our greatest assets," she said, adding that a trail would also help meet the commission's goal of providing an integrated transportation network in the region.

The revival of the Merrimack River Trail vision comes at an active time of trail development in the state. In this region, that work includes an effort among eight communities working with the Essex National Heritage Commission to develop a 27.8-mile "Border-to-Boston" trail primarily on inactive rail beds, from Salisbury to Danvers.

The Merrimack Valley Planning Commission, which is also assisting with Border-to-Boston, is partnering on the Merrimack River Trail effort with The Essex National Heritage Commission and the Northern Middlesex Council of Governments.

"I think we've come to understand the value of collaborating on a regional scale and in essence that what this project is all about," said Bill Steelman, director of heritage development for the Essex National Heritage Commission.

In addition to Newburyport and Lowell, the Merrimack River Trail would link Amesbury, Andover, Dracut, Groveland, Haverhill, Lawrence, Merrimac, Methuen, Newbury, North Andover, Salisbury, Tewksbury, and

West Newbury.

Goodrich said that the Merrimack River Trail, if developed, would be part of the overall emerging trails network in the region, connecting at different points with the Border-to-Boston trail and with the Bay Circuit Trail, an evolving recreational corridor from Plum Island in Newbury to Bay Farm on the Duxbury/Kingston line.

The Merrimack Valley Planning Commission expects to learn next spring whether it will be awarded the state grant. The study, likely to take about six months, is intended to identify a potential route for the regional trail by seeking links between the various existing, planned, and potential segments.

As part of that effort, it would determine what sides of the river various trail segments would be located, and whether certain segments would need to be on paved road.

Currently, Lowell and Andover have trails along portions of their sections of the Merrimack River, according to Goodrich. Haverhill also has an existing 300-foot long river trail and is designing another 300-foot long section. The city has plans for a continuous loop running along both sides of the river and two river-crossing bridges.

Meanwhile, Groundwork Lawrence, a nonprofit group, is building a trail on a portion of Lawrence's downtown riverfront, Tewksbury is designing a riverfront trail, and Methuen, which already has a riverfront park, is planning another one on newly acquired land.

Newburyport, which already has some trails along the river in Maudslay State Park, is set next spring to construct a 1.1-mile trail from the train station to the river. The trail will serve as the city's section of Border-to-Boston, and is also the first phase of a larger trail intended to encircle the downtown.

Across the river, Salisbury is designing a 1.4-mile trail from the river to Mudnock Road, the first phase of an eventual 3.8-mile trail - its portion of Border-to-Boston - stretching to the New Hampshire border. Plans call for the development of public floats and a parking area next to the river.

William E. Pillsbury, Haverhill's director of economic development and planning, said the city backs the effort to develop the Merrimack River Trail.

"It's vital for us to be involved in regional efforts like this and certainly we will do everything we can to support the efforts of Dennis DiZoglio and his group," he said.

DiZoglio said federal, state, and even private funds are all potential options for developing the regional trail, whose overall costs have not been estimated.

"We are working with them to coordinate the broader regional picture, but each community will end up developing their own sections," Goodrich said, observing that it was the local communities that provided the impetus for seeking the grant. ■