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Resurrecting one man's dream

Trunk trail could 'change the economy'

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SOUTHBRIDGE — Almost a century ago, one man had the idea to run a rail line along the Quinebaug River. It never happened because that man, Charles Hayes, went down with the Titanic.

Today, years of overgrowth later, Gabriel McCarthy plans to resurrect the "Titanic Railroad," better known as the Grand Trunk Rail, as a hiking and biking route. The trail currently ends at West Street School, but McCarthy owns the strip of land behind several buildings along Hamilton Street, and the town owns the hillside from there to the river.

"That is the most exciting thing to come along in quite a while," said Conservation and Trails committee Chairman Ken Pickren.

The two men share a long-term vision — building a trail that could "potentially become a commuting route" among the area's towns.

"To get even 100 people walking around Southbridge has the potential to change the economy," McCarthy said at a Conservation Commission meeting last month when he proposed the concept. He could not be reached for further comment Sunday.

According to the Grand Trunk Trail Web site, the project started in 2000 with the construction of a stretch along the river and a foot/bike bridge over it, between River Road, Sturbridge, and Westville Lake Dam. The town of Southbridge built a second section, called Heritage Trail, along the river from there to West Street School. The route was chosen partly because several private owners split the actual Grand Trunk route in that part of town, and one was not willing to cooperate, he said.

Farther west, the Army Corps of Engineers has sections in the floodplain in Brimfield and Sturbridge, but is having difficulty getting agreement from Old Sturbridge Village for the section that runs through its land, Pickren said.

"They've been pretty instrumental in resurrecting it as a recreational trail," he said.

McCarthy's proposal "was a very timely thing for him to do, since we haven't spent any money yet" on extending the trail from West Street eastward, Pickren said. His committee had a tentative route, but it would have run along the roads. McCarthy's route would "usurp people having to walk along the sidewalk," Pickren said. "This is nicer."

To Demetri Kasperson and Monika Agnello, owners of the Seven Gaits Project Space on

Crane Street, the idea of a trail running behind their studio is a great one. Among other things, they hope to host environmentally-themed shows and presentations and see the trail as potentially being a way of bringing new life to Southbridge.

Kasperson compared the concept to the Norwottock Rail Trail in the Connecticut Valley, which has become a popular off-road route residents use to get to jobs and schools in downtown Northampton, Hadley and Amherst.

Other trails in Massachusetts have seen similar use, especially the Minuteman Bikeway, which runs 11 miles through Bedford, Lexington, Arlington and Cambridge and connects directly to the Alewife MBTA station. According to its Web site, that trail sees thousands of users daily during good weather. It isn't plowed in winter, so it becomes a cross-country ski route then.

Eventually, advocates hope to link the Minuteman to the Norwottock by building the Mass Central Rail Trail, a 104-mile route across 24 towns along a railway that was closed by the Hurricane of 1938. Twenty-one miles currently exist.

In Southbridge, Pickren and others aim to connect the various segments of the Grand Trunk/Quinebaug Valley Rail Trail into a system that stretches from Palmer to Webster, possibly with connections to the Southern New England Trunkline Trail that continues east and the Airline Trail that runs south into Connecticut. Doing that will require money, especially to fund "major repairs to several bridges," he said.

In the shorter term, he said, he'd like to see a trail start at Dresser Hill Road, run south to Paper Mill Road in Dudley, cross the river, and return up the west side.

Over time, however, Pickren said he hasn't seen much support from the public. On several occasions, his committee has asked for help for trailblazing days; they've gotten a couple of people who could stay a couple of hours, but would like more help.

"There's not a lot of people out there who want hikes or to build a trail," he said. "If I can get 10 people, we could build [McCarthy's] trail in a day, except for the bridge."

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