



BICYCLE & PEDESTRIAN

Increasing concern for air quality, energy conservation, rising fuel costs, and the health benefits of getting outdoors is generating continued interest in multi-modal transportation in the Montachusett Region and throughout the state. In fact, as part of the public outreach that was done for this RTP, pedestrian and bicycle accessibility came up within the top four of most important categories for the region to address. The MRPC has been working toward a more sustainable transportation system by educating and promoting transportation mode choice throughout the region. This section will review existing and proposed Bicycle and Pedestrian transportation alternatives while focusing on the importance of mode shift.

Existing Infrastructure

Bikeways

Bikeways are special routes and/or facilities established to facilitate the movement of bicycles as an energy efficient transportation and/or recreational mode of travel. Bikeability is a measure of how well an area encourages biking for everyday trip purposes.

In 2019 MassDOT updated the “[Massachusetts Bicycle Transportation Plan](#)”. This plan consists of an overview, a roadmap which includes the vision, goals and principles, as well as initiatives and an action plan. As a part of this update development, MassDOT also developed the “Municipal Resource Guide for Bikeability” to go along with the updated Bike Plan. This plan is meant to assist communities in enhancing community bikeability and includes additional resources.

The Vision, Goals and Principles identified in the updated Bike Plan include –

Vision – Biking in Massachusetts will be a safe, comfortable, and convenient option for everyday travel.



- Goal 1 – Create high-comfort connected bike networks for people of all ages and abilities.
- Goal 2 – Increase the convenience and attractiveness of everyday biking.
 - Principle 1 – Treat all people the same regardless of travel mode
 - Principle 2 – Address gaps and barriers known to discourage everyday biking
 - Principle 3 – Lead by example and partner with municipalities to advance everyday biking

MassDOT developed a Capital Investment Plan (CIP) to manage funding that works towards this vision. This plan includes projects such as small-scale maintenance projects to large-scale multimodal modernization projects. All projects are scored based on their anticipated benefits in order to determine investment priorities. Additional programs include Complete Streets Funding Program, the Chapter 90 Program, the Multi-Use Pathways Program and the MassTrails Funding Program.

Bikeway Projects in the Montachusett Region include –

See Map “Bikeway Projects in the Montachusett Region” in the appendix of this document.

- **Mass Central Rail Trail (MCRT)**– (Clinton/Sterling) This trail has been extended to Sterling Center along the Fitchburg & Worcester RR right-of-way, which ran from Sterling Junction through Sterling Center to Pratt's Junction. An estimated 21 miles of this trail are already open. The Sterling section is complete from Gates Road (where there is parking) north across the Quag bridge to the Sterling Cider Mill (where there is parking) at Waushacum Avenue/Newell Hill Road. It is hoped that the Sterling rail trail can be extended through Sterling Center north to the Police Station. MasDOT's recent construction of a roundabout at Route 12 and Chocksett Road, a second roundabout at I-190 Exit 6, with lane reductions, and additional pedestrian and bicycling accommodations offers the potential for safe extension of the route further north. The general direction of the Sterling Spur of the MCRT offers the potential to connect to the recently-funded Twin Cities Rail Trail in Fitchburg/Leominster.



The Mass Central Rail Trail is planned to extend from Northampton to Boston, and has been completed locally from Rutland to West Boylston (with some gaps). Part of the Sterling trail may likely serve to connect the Mass Central Rail Trail from West Boylston around to the north of the Wachusett Reservoir to Clinton, Berlin, Hudson, etc. and to Boston.

The Clinton/Berlin areas are important components of the MCRT with the 1,000-foot tunnel and the two significant bridges in Clinton and Berlin that would be restored as a part of the over-all trail. The MCRT would be the longest single RR based rail trail in the northeast and at Northampton it is going to connect directly with a North/South trail to New Haven, CT making for a totally sustainable tourism experience for families. Boston to Northampton on the MCRT and then south to New Haven on the Farmington Canal Greenway and then take passenger rail back to Boston.

- **Nashua River Rail Trail** – (Ayer/Groton) This trail is a former railroad right of way that travels 11 miles through the towns of Ayer, Groton, Pepperell and Dunstable. Managed by the Department of Conservation and Recreation, the trail was officially opened to the public on October 25, 2002.



- **North Central Pathway** – (Gardner/Winchendon) This recreational trail connects the communities of Gardner and Winchendon. The trail was broken down into phases to ease the development process.
 - Phase 1 – Dedicated paved trail from Park Street past Crystal Lake to Mount Wachusett Community College (MWCC)
 - Phase 2 – Using existing roads from MWCC, Kelton & Stone Streets to Route 140. This portion of the trail exists only as an on-street connection with signage. Once Phase 6 is completed, this phase will no longer be needed.



- Dunn Park Spur – Existing roads from MWCC to Dunn Park with dedicated connector at the Middle School
- Phase 3 – 3.2 miles paved from Route 140 to Old Gardner Road in Winchendon
- Phase 4 – Downtown Winchendon to Glenn Allen Street
- Phase 5 – \$1.7 Million-dollar project that consists of 2.1 miles starting at North Ashburnham Road to Glennallen Street (Rt. 202).
- Phase 6 – A \$3.1 Million-dollar bridge over Route 140 that is currently in the design process. It is listed on the Draft 2020-2024 TIP for year 2022.
- Phase 7 – Proposed along Park Street to old rail bed, ending where Phase 3 begins.



When completed, this trail will provide the region with a link to many other recreational sites and activities including Dunn Pond, Gardner High School Athletic Facilities, Mount Wachusett Community College, Gardner Municipal Golf Course, the Gardner Veterans Rink, Clark YMCA, Grout Park and many more.

- **Twin Cities Rail Trail** – This 4.5-mile rail trail is currently under the design phase at the time of this document write up. The trail will connect downtown Fitchburg to downtown Leominster via the former CSX railroad bed that parallels Route 12. Due to the complex nature of the trail design, the project was broken up into two phases.



- Phase 1 – This phase will begin to be constructed during FY2020 and will be the main portion of the trail connecting the area of First Street in Fitchburg down to Carter Park in Leominster. This portion of the trail will have two major bridges and many road crossings.
- Phase 2 - The second phase will consist of a bridge over the Nashua River and existing railroad tracks over to the Intermodal station in Fitchburg and the other end of this phase will continue the trail through Carter Park to Mechanic Street in Leominster.



This phase of the trail is extremely important as it will connect trail users directly to the commuter rail as well as MART transit services.

It is believed that this trail will provide a much-needed multi-modal connection from one city center to the other by providing many different populations, including environmental justice neighborhoods, access to recreation, shopping, medical centers as well as to transit options.

- **Ashburnham Rail Trail** – (Ashburnham) Ashburnham Rail Trail (ART) Inc., a private not for profit, is working along with the Town of Ashburnham toward a goal of a safe, non-motorized route between Ashburnham Center and South Ashburnham. This relatively flat, recreational trail will benefit residents and visitors by providing a safe route along a very busy 2.5-mile section of Route 101 where sidewalks are currently unavailable due to geographic constraints.

ART, Inc. is working toward two major aspects of this project:

1. Working with the Town as they complete the engineering and design of the 2.5-mile section of the Rail Trail, which will provide users convenient access to the many existing businesses and service of Ashburnham center, as well as providing excellent opportunity for future growth in this area.



Along the route, the Rail Trail would offer access to the Post Office, municipal soccer fields, J.R. Briggs Elementary School and the William J. Bresnahan Scouting and Community Center. The Town has purchased the abandoned railroad bed and both the Town and volunteers maintain and improve the trail.



2. At the South Ashburnham termination of the current Rail Trail, the ultimate goal is to connect the Ashburnham Rail Trail to the North Central Pathway of greater Gardner and Winchendon via the abandoned Cheshire Branch of the former Boston & Maine Railroad. With this connection, Ashburnham would be a major entryway to a tri-state network of rail trails.



Progress on the 2.5-mile section of the trail has been difficult, slow and expensive. However, the piece described above is vital to the overall goal of the ART, Inc. and Ashburnham's future economic development.

To date, the Town has acquired ownership and/or rights to the majority of segments that comprise the Rail Trail. In 2007 and with support of Ashburnham residents at Town Meeting, a 25% Design Plan Technical Proposal was completed for one section of the Rail Trail and an application for an Abbreviated Notice of Resource Area Delineation was submitted to the Ashburnham Conservation Commission. To move the project forward, the Department of Transportation must deem the project viable. If so, the Town must complete 100% of the design plan for the entire 2.5-mile route before receiving state funding to complete the project.

Challenges that lie ahead for completion of the Rail Trail include:

- Parking and access point delineations
- Clearing, grading and surface preparation
- Bridge surface reconstruction at Whitney Pond
- Bridge construction or bypass at the washed-out gulley behind the soccer fields
- Road crossing measures at Rt. 101
- Municipal, State and Federal permitting
- Applying for and receiving state and federal grant funding



The financial and economic situation has left Ashburnham and ART, Inc. with few options of moving forward with these expensive and major projects. Funding and grant money are limited for such a short but vital section of rail trail. That is why the Cheshire Line is such an important piece of the plan.

With greater awareness of the incredible asset they have in Ashburnham, ART, Inc. hopes to keep their dream of a Tri-State Rail Trail alive.

- **Squannacook River Rail Trail** – (Townsend/Groton) The construction of the Squannacook River Rail Trail is on track to begin in November 2019. The capital campaign has raised \$134,000, and anticipates passing its \$150,000 goal before November. As of June 1, 2019, permitting is completed at the state level and in the town of Groton, and is nearing completion in Townsend. Because the rail trail passes through turtle habitat, construction is limited to the November to March time period.

When completed, the Squannacook River Rail Trail will be 3.7 miles long through the towns of Townsend and Groton, running between the Bertozzi Wildlife Area in Groton and Depot Street in Townsend center. This multi-use recreational trail will parallel the scenic Squannacook River and will connect the town centers of Townsend Harbor and Townsend Center, two historical districts, two shopping centers, the North Middlesex Regional High School, and several major open space/ conservation areas (notably Townsend State Forest and the Squannacook River and Ash Swamp Wildlife Management Areas). In Townsend, this trail closely parallels the bicycle and pedestrian unfriendly Route 119, providing a long-desired safe alternative to that state highway for non-motorized travel. The surface will be stone dust, with a 10-foot width.

The rail bed is owned by the MBTA, and was leased in March 2015 by the non-profit Squannacook Greenways. Squannacook Greenways was the first non-profit in the state of Massachusetts to sign a lease to construct a rail trail with the MBTA. Much more information is available at sqgw.org.



In 2019, the Squannacook Greenways, Inc. received MassTrails funding to continue efforts in project development. This particular funding will be used for a) tasks required for compliance with the Orders of Conditions received from the Groton and Townsend Conservation Commissions, b) trailside signage to display safety, regulatory, accessibility, and resource protection information, c) trailside appurtenances including kiosk, bollards and benches.



Pedestrians

Like the roadway projects in the region, pedestrian facilities in the Montachusett Region are also limited due to a lack of funding. During these tough economic times, communities tend to focus their monies elsewhere. Local communities have expressed interest and support of improved pedestrian ways, often in connection with potential bikeways, but they lack adequate funding for the design and construction of these facilities.

As mentioned in the bicycle section above, in addition to the Massachusetts Bicycle Transportation Plan, the state of Massachusetts also created the [Massachusetts Pedestrian Transportation Plan](#) in 2019.

The Vision, Goals and Principles identified in the updated Pedestrian Plan include:

Vision – All people in Massachusetts will have a safe, comfortable, and convenient option to walk for short trips.

- Goal 1 – Eliminate pedestrian fatalities and serious injuries



- Goal 2 – Increase the percentage of short trips made by walking

Principles

1. Value people walking and their travel needs, especially the most vulnerable – children, elderly, people with disabilities – to ensure they can walk safely.
2. Prioritize improvements for people walking by proactively addressing gaps and barriers that discourage walking and are known to increase the likelihood of crashes.
3. Lead the Commonwealth in meeting the pedestrian plan goals by supporting local municipalities and other agencies to increase everyday walking.

In the 2020 Montachusett Unified Planning Work Program (UPWP), there is a Regional Bike and Ped plan task. This task will include the development of both a Regional Bike Plan and a Regional Pedestrian plan. The MRPC will be sure to incorporate the data from the statewide plans into both of these documents as well as the information and recommendations that were included within this Regional Transportation Plan.

Sidewalks

The majority of the communities in the Montachusett Region are rural in nature with small downtown areas. The areas typically contain sidewalks within the major activity centers. The urban communities have a more extensive infrastructure within the central business districts that facilitates pedestrian circulation. Efforts have been made to improve pedestrian access by means of sidewalk improvements, crosswalk delineation, and construction of handicapped ramps, improved lighting, and connections to municipal parking lots. Designated fixed route bus stops are also common along the sidewalks providing a connection between different modes of travel.

Trails

Using Unified Planning Work Program (UPWP) funds, the MRPC was able to conduct a region wide trail inventory starting in 2005 and finishing in 2011. Through public outreach, local meetings and data collection, the MRPC was able to gather trail data for each of their 22 communities plus Devens. This data was broken down into three categories:



- Existing Formal – Trails that are open to the public.
- Existing Informal – Trails that exist but are not open to the public. These trails are likely on private or environmentally sensitive land.
- Potential – These are trails that are not currently in existence but that have potential for development in the future.

In 2012, the trail inventory data was updated through community outreach and field investigation. A Montachusett Regional Trail Guide was then created with the updated trail data in 2014. This guide includes all of the Existing Formal Trails along with local cultural and historical points of interest. The first guide consisted of 10,000 printed copies that were distributed throughout the region. These guides were so popular that they were all dispersed in just over a few years.

In 2019, the MRPC, with the help of the Montachusett Regional Trails Coalition (MRTC), updated existing trail data once again and published an updated Montachusett Regional Trail Guide. At the time of this document, the MRPC currently has approximately 750 miles of existing formal trails throughout the region.

Resources & Funding

MassDOT developed the Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) which will allow the state to develop and implement the Commonwealth's transportation investment strategy. This plan includes a magnitude of projects and project types – from small-scale maintenance projects to large-scale multimodal modernization projects. All projects listed in the CIP are subject to the MassDOT Healthy Transportation Policy Directive which requires the incorporation of walking, bicycling, and transit in all projects.

Funding sources for multi-modal projects include:

- Complete Streets
- Chapter 90
- Shared Use Path Program



- Safe Routes to School
- MassTrails Grants

Working with the Montachusett Regional Trail Coalition

The MRPC is partnered with the Montachusett Regional Trail Coalition (MRTC) in support of their mission “To advance local and regional connectivity, community commitment, and enthusiasm for trails in the Montachusett Region.” This mission was re-established during a strategic planning process that was made possible in part by a grant from the Community Foundation of North Central Massachusetts. During this process, a vision statement, guiding principles and goals were also established-

Vision Statement

MRTC envisions:

- fostering trail connections in and around the Montachusett region;
- serving as a centralized resource for regional trail planning;
- helping our communities see trails as essential infrastructure.

Guiding Principles

MRTC advances the development of diverse, high-quality shared-use trails and greenways that are sustainable and accessible:

- Collaboration - Seek participation of diverse stakeholders who represent the communities we serve.
- Connectivity - Advocate for trail linkages within and between communities to bring people and places together in the region.
- Accessibility - Provide trail experiences for people of all abilities and ages.
- Sustainable Development - Commit to developing trails that protect the environment and meet user needs through best management practices.
- Economic Vitality - Support the local economy by putting North Central Massachusetts on the map as a recreational and tourist destination.



- Healthy Lifestyles - Encourage the health, fitness, and well-being of residents by providing multimodal trail opportunities.
- Awareness & Education - Work to make trails a part of the community fabric, connect people with the natural world, and provide outdoor learning experiences for people of all ages.

Goals

- Goal 1 – Identify, secure, and appropriately utilize the human and financial resources necessary to carry out the work of the strategic plan.
- Goal 2 – Develop and implement a marketing plan that targets the proper audiences, strengthens brand awareness, and supports MRTC's mission.
- Goal 3 – Promote trail connectivity and usage throughout the region by identifying and acting upon opportunities for outreach, education, and advocacy.

The MRTC has been instrumental in gaining public involvement, education, and working with MRPC to identify trail gaps and priorities. Some of the significant trail projects that have been identified include:

1. Connecting the Twin Cities Rail Trail from its terminus in Leominster south to Sterling where it would connect to the Sterling Spur and the Mass Central Rail Trail.
2. Connecting the North Central Pathway in Winchendon to the Ashburnham Rail Trail to the south
3. A Gardner to Athol connection that has yet to be determined

Sidewalk Inventory & Pedestrian/Bicycle Connections for MART Bus Routes

This study focused on the Cities of Fitchburg, Gardner and Leominster, in particular, the major fixed bus routes within these communities. The goal was to find and prioritize areas where there are gaps in accessing the bus routes. The study area was defined by the areas within ¼ mile of the bus routes.



As part of the process, a sidewalk inventory was conducted within this study area, and trail data was also included to show transportation alternatives. Data was gathered regarding special populations and points of interest were noted. All of these data sets were mapped and assisted in the prioritization of key areas. See Map “Pedestrian & Bicycle Priority Areas” in the appendix of this document.

Priority areas for each community included:

- Fitchburg State University (Fitchburg) – This area was listed as one of the top bus routes (Route 4), is located in both of the top five specialty population block groups, and incorporates a major continuing education facility in the area. John Fitch Highway is also a major roadway in the City of Fitchburg (12,000-20,000 avg. vehicles per day). There is also recreational trails nearby at Coolidge Park and Fitchburg State University’s athletic fields.
- Leominster Hospital (Leominster) – This area incorporates both elderly and disabled populations, is located on one of the top bus routes (Route 2) and travel routes (North Main Street (Rt. 12) - average of 15,000-30,000 vehicles per day), includes a major medical facility and shopping plazas as well as low income and/or elderly housing facilities.
- Johnny Appleseed Plaza (Leominster) – This is a large area that mostly encompasses Central Street (Route 12) along bus route 9 in the area of Johnny Appleseed Plaza and Willard Street, which connects over to the Walmart shopping area. This section includes both top populations of elderly and individuals with disabilities, low income and/or elderly housing facilities, shopping plazas, and a possible trail connection on the east side of the plaza.
- Parker Pond (Gardner) – This area is located in both of the top five specialty population block groups and is located in between two major routes, Route 68 and 101. The smaller



side streets to the east of Parker Pond do not currently have sidewalks. The bus route connects the two routes via Foss Road and Robillard Street. Connections from the smaller side streets near Parker Pond to the bus route and major roadways would be ideal.

- Timpany Plaza (Gardner)– The area just north of Timpany Plaza is listed as having both disabled and elderly populations and is one of the top 5 block groups for elderly residents. It is located within walking distance to the bus route along both Timpany Boulevard and Pearson Boulevard. Both of these locations have many points of interest such as shopping and restaurants and recreational fields/playgrounds.
- Gardner Plaza Shopping Center (Gardner) – The Gardner Plaza is located just off of Route 2 to the north. There are shops and restaurants located here as well as along Pearson Boulevard. There are also two nursing homes and an elementary school located within close proximity. The main focus area is east of Elm Street which is just north of the plaza.

Trends

The desire for more multi modal transportation options within the Montachusett Region has increase significantly over the past few years. More people are seeing the value in having these types of transportation options and are also advocating for the development of new, safer, bicycle and pedestrian facilities throughout the region. Programs such as Complete Streets and Safe Routes to School are gaining support from our communities -

- Complete Streets – 17 out of 22 communities have approved policies, and 8 have received funding for multi modal projects
- Safe Routes to School – 16 out of 22 communities are partners with the program

The State is also contributing financially to trail projects through the MassTrails Grant program. This program provides grants to support recreational trail and shared use pathway projects across the Commonwealth. These grants are reviewed and recommended by the Massachusetts Recreational Trails Advisory Board and the Commonwealth's Inter-Agency Trails Team. There are two funding sources for the grant –



1. Recreational Trails Program (RTP) – these grants are federally funded through the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), administered at the State level, and provide funding for the development and maintenance of recreational trail projects, both motorized and non-motorized.
2. Commonwealth Trails Grants – “These grants are supported by the State’s annual Capital Investment Plan (CIP) and aim to help communities design, create and maintain off-road shared-use pathway connections between where Massachusetts residents live, learn, work, shop and recreate, especially by building out the longer distance regional networks of multi-use pathways across the state and filling in critical gaps in existing networks, or overcoming current barriers to connectivity.” (www.mass.gov/guides/masstrails-grants)

In 2019, five communities within the Montachusett Region received MassTrails funding – Athol, Fitchburg, Groton, Lunenburg, and Townsend.

Another notable funding source is the Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Improvement Program (CMAQ) which provides federal funding for states to support projects and programs intended to improve air quality and reduce traffic congestion. Example projects include – traffic flow improvements, public transit services and facilities, bicycle and pedestrian facilities and programs, rideshare activities, etc. The Twin Cities Rail Trail project that is currently scheduled in the FY 2020 & FY 2021 Transportation Improvement Plan was funded through this funding source.

Recommendations

As these multi modal trail and bikeway projects continue to be studied and developed, funding is always a major component. Increasing the existing funding programs and available dollar amounts are always critical to further these regionally significant projects. Additionally, continuing the study and planning of trail related developments in order to identify priority trails and trail connections are also key for alternate modes of transportation.