

WOW Trail: putting state-owned land to more productive use

One year ago, this photo of two young girls illegally trespassing on the State of New Hampshire-owned railroad corridor was published on the front page of The Laconia Daily Sun.

The photo prompted a reminder from the N.H. Department of Transportation Bureau of Rail and Transit of the dangers of trespassing on the active railroad corridor. The photo also became the screen saver on my computer. It serves as a daily reminder of the importance of the regional rail trail effort.

It was 1980 when the City of Laconia first discussed developing a recreation path along the State of New Hampshire-owned railroad right-of-way, and April 1982 when, together with the Lakes Region Planning Commission, the City of Laconia published the Lakes Region Bikeway System Report.

According to that long-ago published report:

"The railroad right of way is well suited for the trail for a variety of reasons: it's close proximity to the homes of year round and seasonal residents; the level grade and separation from automobile traffic make it attractive to very young and older riders; and the route combines scenic beauty with access to the region's busiest commercial areas."

Fast forward to present day and two phases of this long-ago conceptualized trail are currently under construction in Laconia and Belmont. Come the end of October, users will be able to travel from Lakeport all the way to Belmont, near the Mosquito Bridge, a one-way trip of about 4.5 miles. This is a significant step in the regional trail effort that will one day connect Meredith Bay to Weirs Beach, Lakeport, downtown Laconia, Belmont, Tilton, Franklin and New Hampshire's 56+ mile Northern Rail Trail.

The State of New Hampshire-owned railroad right-of-way is arguably some of the most spectacular real estate in the Lakes Region yet, for most year-round and seasonal residents, it is off limits. Unless you own a snowmobile or have bought a ticket for a scenic train ride, you've likely not had a chance to enjoy the Lakes Region from this state-owned land.

Together, we are changing that.

The WOW Trail will transform this underutilized state-owned railroad right-of-way into a vibrant year-round public recreation space for ALL residents and visitors to enjoy, bringing with it the economic impact that rail trail communities around the country now enjoy. Shovels are in the dirt this summer because of the persistent, collective effort of countless community volunteers and donors who see the value of the trail for the region and have generously donated their time and resources to make it happen.

Yet we still have work to do. We need your help to meet a \$40,000 fundraising gap for Phase 2. Please share your enthusiasm for the regional trail with your friends and neighbors. Better yet, consider making a donation online at www.wowtrail.org or by mail to WOW Trail, PO Box 6832, Laconia, NH 03247. Every dollar counts and no gift is too small.

In his recent Fourth of July column published in The Laconia Daily Sun, a local real estate broker reminded us that "It's the friendly, family-oriented atmosphere we have in the beautiful Lakes Region and the multitude of events and activities that keeps drawing families back year after year." There's no doubt that a regional bike trail linking neighboring communities together and showcasing our three beautiful lakes will fast become one of the Lakes Region's best amenities, drawing vacationing families back year after year and enhancing the quality of life for those of us fortunate to call this place home.

It's going to be spectacular. Thank you for coming along for the ride.

**A limited amount of granite pavers (12"x36") will be placed along Phase 2 behind the downtown Laconia train station. If you'd like to permanently commemorate your business, family, or remember a loved one on the trail, these can be purchased with a \$1,000 donation and will be engraved with your business name, logo, or special message. To reserve a commemorative \$1,000 granite paver, please send your donation to

WOW Trail, PO Box 6832, Laconia, NH 03246.**

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