

## Clearing a path

### Path

Officials examine how to move proposed island bike path ahead

**By Derek Gomes**

Staff writer

The Aquidneck Island Planning Commission and the communities it serves have long studied the feasibility of a bike path stretching from Portsmouth to Newport.

After at least 15 years of scrutiny, advocates celebrated a key first step in March, when Newport received a \$1 million state grant to construct a bike path from the Newport Gateway Visitors Center on America's Cup Avenue to the Community College of Rhode Island's Newport County Campus in the north end of the city.

The rest of the planned bike path would follow the train tracks that run along Aquidneck Island's western shoreline.

Having a designated path, though, is not enough to move the plan forward.

With each mile of the bike path costing between \$1 million and \$2 million, the total bill for the project could exceed \$28 million.

The state, which owns the right of way, also must give the project the green light.

“As public bodies, we need to say what is the best use for (the tracks) for the next 25 years,” said Tom Ardito, executive director of the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission.

“It has to be used for transportation, whether that's rails, whether that's bikes, whether that's a combination of the two.”

In recent years, rails-to-trails projects have proliferated across the country, as cities and towns transform defunct rail lines into public paths. In this case, Ardito believes the land can accommodate both.

Years from now, possibly decades, the rail line might be converted for commuter use, he said. In the meantime, a bike path makes sense.

“When you talk about rail service in the future, you have to think about what is the time horizon for that,” Ardito said. “If it is very long term, how do you make the best use for the rail corridor in the interim?”

“We do think that there should be a clear-eyed look at all the alternatives and all the uses,” he told The Daily News on Wednesday.

There has been widespread support among Aquidneck Island residents and community officials for the bike paths, Ardito said. But that support hasn't always extended to the state level.

When more federal money was available for trails in the past, the Ocean State's governors were not receptive, Ardito said.

Now, the opposite is true.

The money has dried up, but Gov. Gina Raimondo appreciates the value of travel beyond cars.

**PATH A5**



The city of Newport recently received a \$1 million grant to put toward the creation of a bike path on Aquidneck Island. It has been discussed that this area of railroad tracks heading north from Bridge Street in Newport could be included on the proposed path.

**Dave Hansen** | Staff photographer

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“Move people, not cars,” Ardito said. “There has been a great meeting between grassroots supporters of nonmotorized alternatives and a new governor who gets this in a way that former governors” did not.

The state's recognition of the importance of trails manifested itself in the \$35 million Green Economy Bond that voters approved last November. A portion of that is paying for the bike path in Newport.

Another area ripe for a stretch of trail is the northern section of Portsmouth, from the Mount Hope Bridge to the Sakonnet River Bridge, Ardito said. People already ride their horses and walk along the rail line there, which poses a safety hazard, he said.

Building a low-impact gravel trail there could provide more than just another outlet for recreation.

“We're interested in how we can combine bikeway development ... with enhancing coastal resilience,” Ardito said. “There are a lot of environmental issues up there, habitat restoration, illegal dumping. One could look at the area between the two bridges as a bigger environmental project.”

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