

My Journey of Building Communities Through Rail Trails by Craig Della Penna

My career has followed one consistent idea: former railroad corridors can become powerful assets for communities. From railroad transloading operations and trail advocacy to real estate, land conservation, public speaking, and media, I have spent more than three decades helping communities turn overlooked corridors into trails, linear parks, and engines of reinvestment.

Early in my career, I worked for Pinsky Railroad Company, one of the country's earliest short-line railroad companies. I marketed rail freight and helped plan, launch, and manage what eventually became seven large-scale, modern transloading facilities. Together, those facilities took thousands of trucks off the roads coming into New England each year.

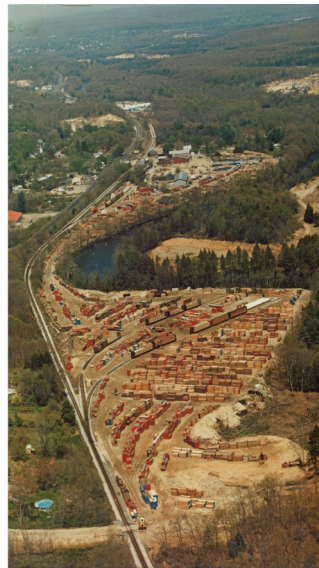


One of those facilities, in South Windham, CT was the largest in the Northeast and extended for more than a mile. I am especially proud that no one was ever killed or even injured at any of the facilities I managed.

In February 1994, a regional publisher contracted me to write a series of books about old railroad lines that had been converted into walking and biking trails.

The books combined detailed railroad history with practical trail guidance. I explained why each railroad had been built, why it disappeared, and—through an odometer-based mileage guide—where readers could find surviving railroad infrastructure and archaeology and understand how those features had once been used.

The books were well received. Two years after the first of three books appeared, I became involved in the politics of how these paths did—or did not—get built. I began organizing friends-of-the-trail groups in communities across New England where rail trails did not automatically enjoy public support. Although that resistance may seem foreign to many people today, opponents prevailed in numerous communities.



In 1997, the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC) hired me as the New England organizer or lobbyist. My work included preventing harmful state and local policies and “parachuting” into some of the Northeast’s most notable rail-trail wars.

Within 150 miles of my house lies North America’s densest network of former steam-railroad corridor, and most of that inventory is becoming trails. Turning these forgotten places into linear parks can transform Gateway Cities and towns by bringing investment to communities that have gone without it for two or three generations

In late 2001, while I was working for RTC, my wife, Kathleen, and I bought a badly run-down farmhouse that was built in 1863 during the Civil War. The house stands just eight (8’) feet from the rail trail in Florence, Northampton’s historic Civil War-era village. We began an extensive renovation that kept the contractors on site for 14 months.



In spring 2003, we opened the **Sugar Maple Trailside Inn**, a 2 guest room traditional bed & breakfast. The City of Northampton honored the renovation with a Historic Preservation Award, and HGTV’s Restore America featured the project on national TV. Yankee Magazine also featured the renovation

and our bed-and-breakfast in its 70th-anniversary issue. In spring 2026, we received another award as the top-rated bed-and-breakfast in the area. It has been an amazing journey. In 2004, I left RTC, became a Realtor, and developed a distinctive niche: selling houses near trails and greenways. The idea grew directly

from years of hearing opponents claim that a trail would make homes next to such a place difficult, if not possible, to sell. My experience has proved the opposite.

I became the first Realtor in the United States to build a practice around this niche and was featured twice in the National Association of Realtors trade magazines, twice in Certified Residential Specialist Magazine, twice in the Massachusetts Association of Realtors magazine and more recently, in a national [wellness-oriented real estate magazine](#).

My work has also appeared in a Boston Globe editorial, The Wall Street Journal, and the United Airlines in-flight magazine Hemispheres in a story titled [Roads Less Traveled](#). <https://tinyurl.com/RLT-story>



At its conference in Chicago, the National Association of Realtors presented me with the National Evergreen Award. The award recognized both my pioneering trail-oriented real estate practice—the first of its kind in the United States—and my work helping communities across the Northeast build trails.

I also hold the Certified Residential Specialist (CRS) designation. Only 2% to 3% of Realtors in a given service area hold this designation, yet CRS designees account for the largest share of sales.



Those experiences—operating rail facilities, writing about railroad history, organizing trail supporters, acquiring corridors or teaching/inspiring others to do it, and advocating for public investment—now shape the work I do as a speaker, consultant, Realtor, and bed & breakfast host.

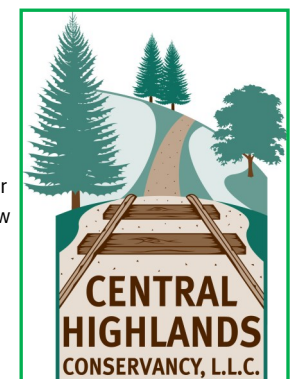
In the early years of the 21st century when I was starting my RE practice, I stood up two impactful ventures. Northeast Greenway Solutions and Central Highlands Conservancy. Two entities with complementary purposes. [Northeast Greenways Solutions](#) (NEGS) teaches local groups and communities how to move trail projects toward a decisive “yes.”



Projects that never reach “yes” are never built, so helping towns get there remains the heart of my work.

The second entity, [Central Highlands Conservancy LLC \(CHC\)](#), serves a different purpose. It is a hybrid land-acquisition vehicle created specifically to purchase former railroad corridors in Massachusetts before they can be divided and sold to adjacent landowners.

Using CHC, we purchased 3.2 miles of former B&M railroad right of way in Hardwick and New Braintree. This stretch included three, large, former railroad bridges of the developing 104+ mile trail called [Mass Central Rail Trail](#). A corridor that was thought to be lost.



We bought the 3.2 mile stretch of the corridor in Central Mass and gave the East Quabbin Land Trust two years to buy the corridor from us at cost, with no markup. After completing the purchase, the land trust secured grants to build the trail and rehabilitate the bridges for public use. And EQLT does more and more each year. We have also used the CHC model to teach other land trusts or hybrid orgs how to do this. Today, about six land trusts across the Northeast play significant roles in reassembling former railroad corridors as linear parks.

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Today, after giving well over 1,200 lectures in 21 states, I am one of the country's most in-demand speakers on rail-to-trail conversions and their subsequent role in the redevelopment of sometimes forgotten places. My presentations explore smart growth, land preservation, brownfield redevelopment, climate-impact mitigation, nearby residential real estate values, placemaking, sustainability, and related topics.

In 2016, 2017, 2022 and 2026, [American Trails](https://www.americantrails.org/presenters-and-authors/craig-della-penna) invited me to present a series of national webinars on these topics. Link here. <https://www.americantrails.org/presenters-and-authors/craig-della-penna> And in recent years, I have also served as a keynote or plenary speaker at state and regional conferences in New York, Kentucky, Vermont, California, Virginia, Connecticut, Missouri, Michigan, New Hampshire, and Massachusetts.

In its 10th-anniversary issue, *The Ride* magazine named me the most effective rail-to-trail advocate on the Eastern Seaboard. I have helped communities across New England and New York build more than 1,000 miles of rail trails.

Although I have written five books, five other books have featured me as a case study in creative marketing, 21st-century branding, or building a career around work you love. The most recent, published in April 2021, was the second to examine my innovative real estate practice.

I have also brought together complex coalitions. Over the past 20 years, I organized two teams of attorneys to prepare amicus briefs for high-profile cases before the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court. Both cases were important to the development of the state's rail-trail network. The most recent brief is here. masscentralrailtrail.org/amicus

In summer 2019, I became president of the 20-year-old Norwottuck Network (NN), a 501(c)(3) organization created to help complete the 104-mile Mass Central Rail Trail. More recently, we expanded the board to represent the full corridor, broadened the organization's mission, and rebranded the initiative as the Mass Central Rail Trail Alliance, a project of the Norwottuck Network. New web is at <https://www.masscentralrailtrail.org/>

In summer 2022, we issued a request for proposals to find a consultant who could answer a question that had never been studied: What would a completed Mass Central Rail Trail mean for the Commonwealth and the communities along its route? The report was released in summer 2023. An executive summary of that report and two related studies is available at this link. <https://tinyurl.com/3ReportsPodcast>

Their collective findings offer compelling evidence of the trail's potential impact. The report projects that a completed MCRT will attract four to five million users annually. It estimates that 64% of the state's population will live within 10 miles of the trail, that 400,000 to 500,000 people each year will stay overnight while using it, and that the completed route will generate more than \$213 million in annual benefits. Today, 73 of the MCRT's overall 104 miles are open. Communities that voted against the trail years ago are now on-board, and their Selectboards have submitted letters of support.

By my definition, the project has reached "yes," so I have stepped down as president of the Norwottuck Network (MCRTA) board.

My next chapter in the rail-trail world will build on this work in a different way.

I have created a national podcast called **Roads Less Travelled**, with several hundred interviews in development. It is produced by one of the world's largest podcast aggregators. You can find it wherever you get your podcasts or here. iconsofrealstate.com/podcasts/roads-less-travelled

I will also continue working behind the scenes to help Massachusetts finish the rail trail. The 100 mile trails that intersects with 18 others.



And in the fall of 2026, we are now standing up a new 501(c)3 called Northeast Rail Trail Accommodations Association. (www.NERTAA.org—not live yet). This will be an umbrella over all the current places to stay overnight on the MCRT and develop new opportunities. Stay tuned on this.

Northeast Rail Trail
— ACCOMMODATIONS ASSOCIATION —

Sign up for the free e-newsletter and listen to the podcast for updates—and for hints about what comes next. Craig Della Penna CraigDP413@gmail.com 413 575 2277

