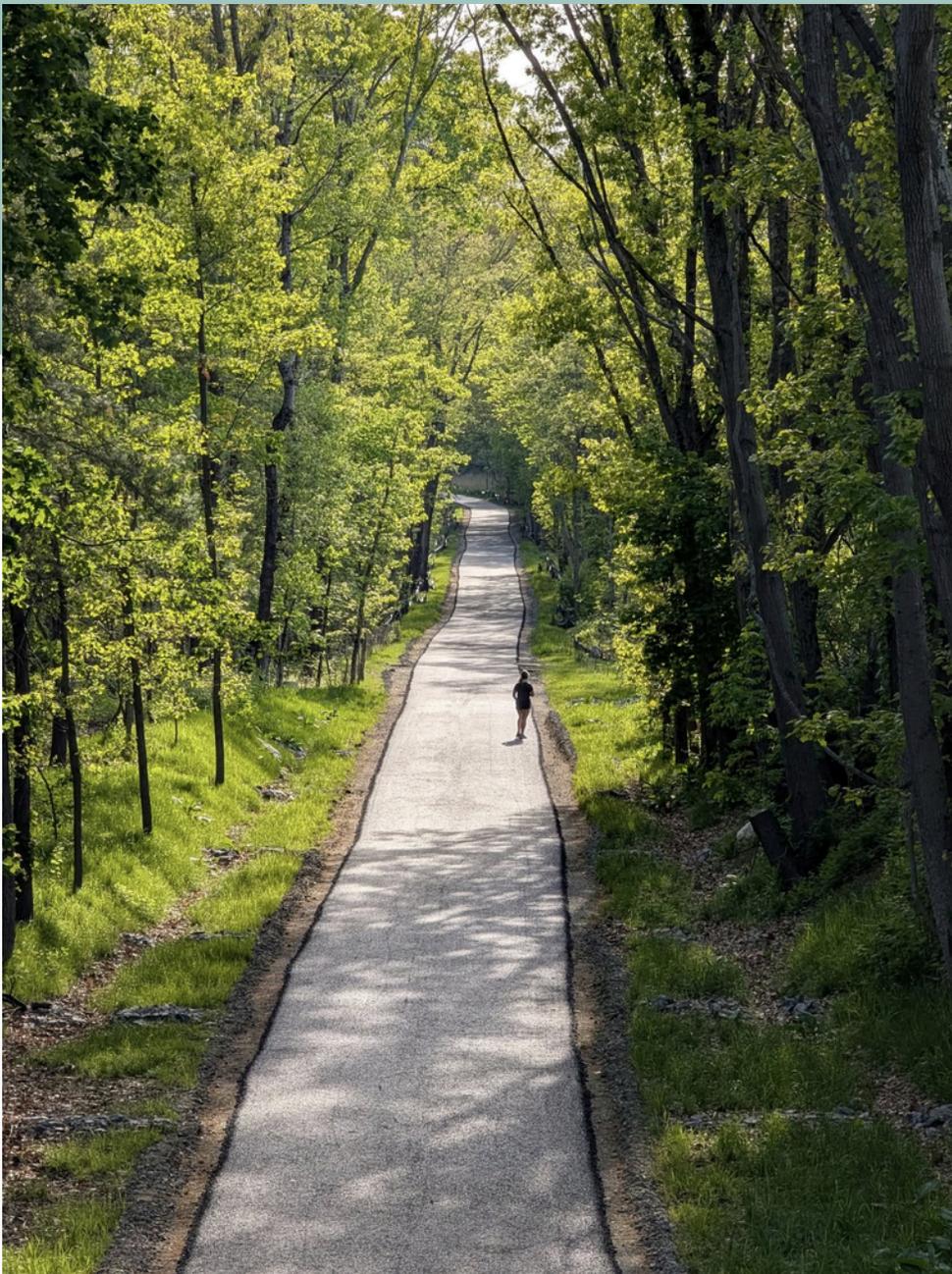


Sudbury Gets Moving on the MASS CENTRAL RAIL TRAIL

By Janie Dretler
Vice-Chair, Sudbury Select Board



*Connecting our town to a statewide network of trails, the project offers new opportunities for **recreation, connection, and exploration.***



Rail trail map from Envisioning a Statewide Connection MCRT Benefits Study.

Sudbury is joining communities across Massachusetts in bringing a long-held vision to life: transforming the former Mass Central Railroad corridor into a connected greenway stretching from Boston to Northampton. The Mass Central Rail Trail (MCRT) is steadily taking shape, with Sudbury’s section now moving closer to completion. To learn more about the history and significance of the project and what it means for Sudbury, I reached out to Craig Della Penna, a longtime advocate who has dedicated his career to advancing the MCRT and other rail trail projects across the state.

For readers who may not be familiar, how would you describe the Mass Central Rail Trail and the vision behind it?

The MCRT from Boston to Northampton is the longest developing trail in New England. Longest in both time (50+ years) and in miles (104+). And it is by far and away the most complicated rail trail to do in New England, and it will be the most impactful when completed. It was never thought to be a long, cross-state trail until the idea of putting it together again showed up in a state parks agency planning document in 1999 called “COMMONWEALTH CONNECTIONS A greenway vision for Massachusetts” <https://tinyurl.com/GreenwayVision>.

How far along is the project overall, and where does Sudbury’s section fit into that bigger picture?

After 30+ years of relatively small \$\$ grant funding and buildouts by either small local volunteer groups, municipalities or the state parks agency, a lot of the trail is now open in several sections. By the end of 2025, we should be at 75 of the 104+ miles open. Also, I’ll point out that 18 other rail trails intersect with the MCRT. One of the most significant of the 18 is the Bruce Freeman Rail Trail—Lowell to Framingham—intersecting with the MCRT at Sudbury.

What originally inspired your involvement in rail trail development?

During the 1980s to the year 2000, I used to market rail freight, planned the startup, and managed the operations of several large-scale railroad transloading facilities. One in Connecticut was over a mile long. Over the course of that career, I took 10s of thousands of trucks off the roads coming into New England. I have a background in RR history and in the spring of 1994, a regional publisher invited me to write a manuscript about rail to trail conversions in New England with a special focus on the railroad archaeology that was still visible, and by way of an odometer-based mileage guide, I pointed out where that unusual artifact was, what it did, etc.

That first book came-out in 1995 and it was a hit. The publisher put me under contract to do two more (NY and NJ) and my wife and I were going out on weekends, all over the northeast exploring and researching these places. Then in 1996, I began to learn about places where the trail was seen as a scary and negative thing (Largely in Massachusetts). That was when I began to get involved in those conversations and helped stand up “Friends” groups wherever there was a controversy. I was inspired to provide my ‘first-person’ truth—having been on hundreds of these trails—and witnessed, firsthand how good they were. In 1997, I was hired by Rails-to-Trails Conservancy to be the point person in New England, helping get places to “YES”. That is all I do; get places to YES. Places that don’t get to YES, generally can’t get built.

A bridge along the MCRT crossing Hop Brook west of Dutton Road.

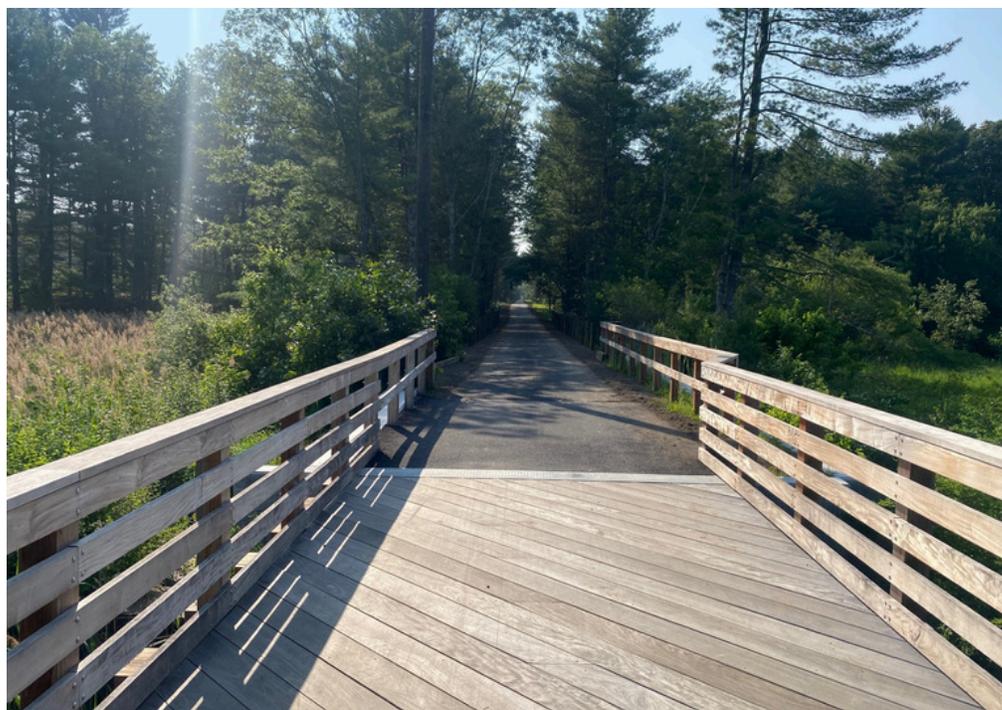
What do you think makes the Mass Central Rail Trail unique among other trails in Massachusetts or across the country?

The densest network of former steam railroad corridor in the U.S. is within 150 miles of my house in the CT River Valley. Most of this network is a long-forgotten branch lines where huge, multi-story mill complexes that produced heavy things needing rail transport. Those complexes are now apartments, condos or startup businesses and the dead railroad network is being repurposed into linear parks.

This network of conversions located in high-density population centers creates a kind of low-impact tourism that hasn’t been seen yet widely in Massachusetts. Having long distance trails (like the MCRT or the BFRT) created in Mass will be a game-changer as they will allow for the startup of numerous small businesses in village center locations where the community might not automatically have the population density onto themselves to allow for these startups, but the idea of tourists, mostly on bikes, well that will be the game-changer that makes for more, small, locally owned businesses.

What kinds of benefits do you typically see when a community connects to a trail like this?

The first thing is that you’ll see more walkers out there who are exploring the community in a brand-new way. More people will be buying 4-legged buddies to walk with. Tiny kids will be learning to ride a bike on the path. The concept of “Restoring the Third Place” will become apparent. (First place = family. Second place = workplace. Third place is where you meet people outside of the first two places.)



What are some of the unexpected or uncommon benefits that other communities have realized from trail connections?

People will meet their neighbors at this new-fangled linear park, and they'll realize that their lives have now improved, and life will now be a bit more fun each day. And in a few situations, not all, but a few, people who were against the trail idea, will come around and admit that it was a good idea in the end. Stay patient, Sudbury. There will be a few.

As Sudbury's section comes online and connects with neighboring towns, what kinds of changes or opportunities do you think residents will notice?

The MCRT will be getting completed, from East to West, and trail traffic will increase in the mornings with mostly west-bound traffic and then in the afternoon with mostly east-bound traffic. An ebb and flow. There will also be a discovery that each day starts with pretty much the same scenario. Starting at 5:30 a.m. or the crack of dawn, joggers and power walkers pass by. By 7:30 a.m. the dog walkers are out. Around 8:30 a.m. utilitarian bikers ride by—people biking to work.

By mid-day, the users are mostly retirees and mothers pushing strollers. The dog walkers are back out late in the afternoon. Finally, the evening strollers, joggers and walkers go by.

On weekends the complexion of the path changes. There are more bicyclists, who tend to be tourists, but the local joggers, power walkers and dog walkers are still out there in force.

Do you have a favorite story or moment from your years working to advance the MCRT?

It was in November of 2006, while biking across the state on the future MCRT with a travel writer from the NY Times and a staffer from the East Coast Greenway while in Berlin, we came upon what I knew to be a theft of the corridor. Someone took a diamond tipped, cut-off saw and cut out a 30-foot section of track and dragged it off to the side with the ties still attached. Then a driveway was created to connect the street to a house being built way up the driveway beyond the former railroad corridor. I knew it was illegal and took some pix and sent to the MBTA's privatized RE Dept and told them that they couldn't defend their own land and

needed to lease the entire corridor, 24 miles from Waltham out to Berlin—to DCR, the state parks agency. To my forever shock and amazement, they did. And that Wayside section is now nearly all built out. That is how your section of the corridor got built out.

Looking ahead, what's next for the project, and what keeps you optimistic about its future?

As the trail gets built out across the state, we will be digging-in and developing more historic interpretive signage and kiosks AND we'll be developing the country's largest QR code display—probably over 100-150 obelisks and kiosks across the state to make it an even more inviting to visitors. And we need to be standing up bed & breakfasts along the way. Inn to inn touring. The future is bright. And I am standing up a national podcast called Roads Less Traveled and will be interviewing people involved in these efforts.

As more sections of the Mass Central Rail Trail are completed, Sudbury's connection will serve as both a local resource and a vital link in a larger statewide network. The trail will offer residents new ways to enjoy the outdoors,

connect with neighboring towns, and experience a piece of Massachusetts history revitalized for the future. What began as an ambitious vision is now becoming a reality, one step, and one community, at a time.

My sincere thanks to Craig Della Penna for sharing his deep knowledge, passion, and decades of advocacy that have helped bring this transformative project to life. His work continues to inspire communities like ours to see what's possible when vision and persistence meet.

Additional Information

Mass Central Rail Trail: www.masscentralrailtrail.org

Mass Trail Tracker: masstrailtracker.com

*Craig Della Penna is a pioneering Realtor, nationally recognized rail-trail advocate, and the host of **Roads Less Traveled** podcast. As the first U.S. Realtor to specialize in properties along scenic rail-trail corridors, Craig has decades of experience transforming "dead" railroads into thriving community assets. He has delivered over 1,200 lectures in 21 states, authored five books, and was hailed by **Ride Magazine** as the most effective rail-to-trail advocate on the Eastern Seaboard.*