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Local group looks to connect trail systems

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ROCKINGHAM — A local group is seeking support from community members to develop more recreational hiking and trails in Rockingham and North Westminister.

“The long-term vision is to be able to hike all the way from downtown Bellows Falls and connect to the (Windmill Hill) Pinnacle trails,” said Peter Bergstrom, with the Rockingham Conservation Commission (RCC), at a community meeting on Wednesday, March 29 at the Rockingham Public Library.

More than 40 community members turned out to hear more information on the proposed trail connections.

The newly-formed Saxtons River Valley Trail Initiative, which organized the meeting, is a collaboration between the Windmill Hill Pinnacle Association (WHPA), the Bald Hill Conservation Committee (BHCC), and RCC.

Members of these three groups are exploring the possibilities of connecting the Bellows Falls Historic Riverfront Park and Trail System to the Bald Hill trails in Westminister, and then continuing on to Saxtons River and beyond.

The riverfront trail system was the idea of Bellows Falls Historical Society (BFHS) Treasurer Stewart Read, Bergstrom said.

The members of the three groups hope to ultimately connect the expanded trail system with the existing, larger Windmill Hill Pinnacle system, which includes more than 25 miles of trails from Putney Mountain to Grafton.

Bergstrom said that once the riverfront trails are completed in Bellows Falls, the group wants to have a connection to Bald Hill, then to Saxtons River, then west to the Pinnacle trails, Bergstrom said.

The Riverfront Trail, planned to run south from the Bellows Falls Riverfront Park along the Connecticut River to Paper Mill Road, already has an easement for the whole route, but no trail has been created there yet.

“We are working with the Bellows Falls Community Bike Project, the BFHS, health and wellness groups, and probably more partners. We plan to apply for a National Park Service grant to support trail development,” Vanessa Stern, a member of the Bald Hill Conservation Committee, said in an email earlier this week.

At the meeting, Stern offered a basket of colorful highlighters, and asked visitors to draw trails they might envision on a series of several large maps around the room.

“This is an exploratory meeting on my part,” said Walpole, New Hampshire resident Karen Kuriholm, who said she often hikes area trails with her dog. She attended the meeting to obtain more information on the project, she said.

Stern also mentioned creating wheelchair-accessible trail routes, and possible work with local school programs. Walking bridges over abutments, such as at local farms, may also be a possibility, she said.

At this time, the WHPA network runs to the west of Rockingham, and the proposed trails would connect to that network. The idea is to seek input on how to connect to the trail network Rockingham has now, and to publicize the trail network, according to Bergstrom.

The topic of private property also came up. It may take some time to create arrangements with property owners that they feel comfortable with, organizers said. The vision is long-term and will involve discussions with property owners, some of whom may say “no,” and will also involve looking into how to fill in missing links, organizers said.

The group will also talk to local recreation organizations, such as snowmobile clubs, to seek their input, and will speak with property owners who have already given access to the clubs.

Audience members discussed the different types of trail use, such as all-terrain vehicles. Some were concerned ATVs may use hiking trails, while others said

multi-use trails may lead to a wider, varied group of people using the trails, all of which could be compatible.

A few community members suggested some trails be designated only for running or non-motorized use.

Part of the trails system channels all users to Route 121, where a bottleneck exists to get under the interstate, so it may not be possible to limit access to motorized vehicles, organizers said. Some old roads still exist in the forest that can route around Route 121, but they include a climb, one audience member said.

Emmett Dunbar, Development Director for Rockingham, attended the meeting. Dunbar said that a larger, connected trail system could help boost tourism, and that the town has a Historic Homes Front Porch Walking Tour that connects to local, informal trails. Eventually, integrating that tour for visitors, with more extended, connected hiking trails in the area, could help bring in visitors to the area. More information on that historic homes tour can be found at the Rockingham municipal website, rockbf.org.

The excitement among local residents is “really good” at this time to complete the Bellows Falls riverfront recreational trails, Dunbar said.

Several audience members expressed interest in taking a group hike to explore the trails discussed on Wednesday.

Community members were also asked to sign up for a mailing list to take part in more discussions, help with contacting property owners, trail maintenance, and other tasks to help with the Saxtons River Valley Trail Initiative project.

For more information on the proposed trail expansion project, visit www.windmillhillpinnacle.org. For more information on Rockingham Free Public Library programs, call (802) 463-4270 or visit

Rockinghamlibrary.org.

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