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[Renewed effort gets trail plans moving](#)

By Ulrika G. Gerth

NEWBURYPORT — Hiking and biking enthusiasts may finally get their mecca: a 50-mile continuous trail along the Merrimack River, from the tip of Plum Island to the New Hampshire border.

Two regional organizations have joined forces and enlisted the help of local communities to revive a 20-year-old effort to connect the sections of the Merrimack River Trail — a plan Newburyport senior project planner Geordie Vining describes as "potentially transformative" for the whole region.

Since early this year, representatives of Essex National Heritage Commission and the Merrimack Valley Planning Commission have been meeting with local planning officials and trail advocates in the six cities and 11 towns that dot the Merrimack River. They are working to map out existing pieces of what they ultimately hope will be an on- and off-road trail system for bicyclists and pedestrians.

"The whole thing is exciting," said Betsy Goodrich, transportation planner at the MVPC. "There's certainly a momentum behind improving bicycle and pedestrian mobility in our region."

Even if only shorter pieces of the trail get developed to begin with, it will have a substantial impact on the livability of each community, Vining said.

"In terms of a community's sense of itself, the quality of life, economic competitiveness and all the rest, it's really significant," he said.

In Newburyport, Plum Island Turnpike as well as the shoreline trails along Maudslay State Park and Moseley Woods were officially designated part of the Merrimack River Trail in the early 1990s when the Merrimack River Watershed Council first conceived the idea of a trail tracing the region's main artery.

Over the years, various organizations have pushed the vision as more sections were established in communities like Lowell, Haverhill and Andover.

The effort had reached a standstill until recently when the state Department of Conservation and Recreation awarded Essex Heritage and MVPC a \$15,700 Recreational Trails Grant.

Equipped with a camera and maps, Bill Steelman, project manager and director of heritage development at Essex Heritage, has walked most of the existing trails. Last week, he completed a reconnaissance mission up and down both sides of the river to collect information.

A final report, due in late summer, will contain maps and recommendations for potential new trail routes to fill in the gaps.

"The dream would be to have an off-road trail that follows the entire length of the Merrimack River," Steelman said. "The reality is a lot of the area is developed or inaccessible. We're looking at designating long sections on-road where there's existing sidewalks or a wide shoulder you could bike on. In that regard, we're changing the definition of what the Merrimack River Trail really is."

Steeleman said the recommendations will require support at the local level, such as from an open space committee.

"We don't have a magic wand to designate (sections), so this is a partnership with local communities," he said.

Among the report's recommendations will be to officially designate Newburyport's shoreline passageways, from the walkway along the seawall in the South End to the path in front of the Towle Building and Cashman Park in the North End to the Route 1 underpass and city boardwalk, as part of the trail, Steelman said.

"If we can connect the pieces for a couple of miles along the central part of the city, then it will be more of a natural progression to keep pushing out," Vining said.

He added the process for gaining use of some of the land may require agreements with landowners for easements or outright acquisitions and going through state or federal regulatory processes.

In conjunction with the replacement of the Interstate 95 Whittier Bridge, which will feature a path for bicyclists and pedestrians, local officials are also examining ways to connect the two sections of the Merrimack River Trail in Maudslay State Park and Moseley Woods.

"We need to figure out if it's something we can invest in," Vining said.

In the end, it will be up to each community to fund new sections of the Merrimack River Trail. But Steelman said grant applications will likely have more clout as a result of the current effort.

"If the trail can be seen as part of a larger network, the application will be more competitive," he said. "Trails become more valuable the more connections they have."