

Southern leg of Granite State Rail Trail nearing completion

By RYAN LESSARD and MICHAEL COUSINEAU New Hampshire Union Leader Feb 20, 2019

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Amanda Jeanty of Londonderry walks Lily on the Londonderry Rail Trail on Tuesday. Plans are in the works to connect the trail with points north through Manchester.



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Bike riders who want to see riding trails across the state get connected can look forward to several ongoing projects.

“A lot of people are concerned about distracted drivers quite a bit, so you see people looking for bike trails,” said Patrick Lessard, co-owner of The Bike Barn in Manchester. “We see a significant number of customers. They go out of their way to go to various trails that have been completed.” With the awarding of federal and state grants, the section of a rail trail extending from

Manchester to Salem is expected to be about 75 percent complete in the next two years. But a significant portion connecting Londonderry to Manchester hinges on the approval of a

Londonderry warrant article on March 12.

The rail trail is part of a larger project called the Granite State Rail Trail, which will connect Lebanon and Salem over an estimated 120 miles. Currently, trail sections are disconnected, with individual communities handling development projects.

The state Department of Transportation has approved two \$1 million projects, one in Manchester and the other in Londonderry, to complete the connection. Each project includes \$800,000 in Transportation Alternatives Program grant money, awarded in January, but contingent on \$200,000 of matching funds.

“What a shame it would be to pass up this grant because we couldn’t afford to do the matching grant,” said Londonderry Rail Trail Committee member Pollyann Winslow. “If we passed up this grant, it would be a long time before we raise that money.”

The warrant article is for \$1.62 million, which includes the \$800,000 grant and \$600,000 from the town’s unassigned fund balance, which was approved unanimously by the Budget Committee and Town Council. It also includes \$220,000 raised by Londonderry Trailways.

If passed, the warrant article would pay for the completion of Phase 5 of the Londonderry Rail Trail, which is a 1-mile stretch from the existing 3.2 miles of trail that will go through Little Cohas Marsh and terminate at Harvey Road.

Phase 6 will go from Harvey Road and run for about 1 mile along the perimeter of the Manchester-Boston Regional Airport until it connects to the Manchester trail. Winslow said details of the final section have yet to be laid out by engineers.

Winslow said she is looking forward to providing access to Little Cohas Marsh.

“It’s the most beautiful place in Londonderry that people don’t have access to,” she said.

Queen City connections

In Manchester, three trail projects designed to connect the north to south route are funded and due to be complete in the next two or three years.

Todd Connors, engineering manager with the city's Department of Public Works, said a project to build 1 mile of trail between Gold Street and Perimeter Road was funded with a \$1.2 million federal grant with \$300,000 in city funds. They've been working on it for about two years and expect to finish it next year.

Officials from Manchester and the state Division of Historical Resources aren't in agreement over making repairs on a railroad trestle over the Cohas Brook between Goffs Falls Road and Perimeter Road, he said.

"We currently disagree with what the state would prefer and we would like to do something a little cheaper," Connors said.

Another project funded with \$640,000 in state money and \$160,000 in state funds from 2014 will finish the 1.25 miles between South Beech Street and the southern end of the Riverwalk — where existing trail connects to Goffstown — by next year. Connors said that project is dubbed the "Downtown Connector."

The latest federal Transportation Alternatives Program grant will go to connecting the trail from Perimeter Road to Harvey Road at the Londonderry town line, but Connors expects that won't be constructed until 2021 or 2022.

Manchester Public Works Director Kevin Sheppard said they will request a portion of the matching funds in their budget proposal to the Board of Mayor and Aldermen next month, and ask for a commitment for the rest of the required \$200,000 for later years.

"We've had some initial conversations with the mayor. I think we were just notified (of the grant) in the past two weeks," Sheppard said.

Another project in Manchester to build out two miles of the eastward Rockingham Rail Trail between Mammoth Road and Lake Shore Road, was awarded \$800,000 from the state and will be constructed next year.

Salem by Tuscan

Salem also has been making strides in its rail trail development. The Salem Bike Ped Corridor currently includes 2 miles from the Windham town line to the Salem Depot area at Main Street. The second phase of that project was opened to the public last November.

That brings the largest paved contiguous section of the Granite State Rail Trail from Derry to Salem up to 9.3 miles.

There is also currently an unpaved section of the trail on the southern end of town extending from Clough Crossing Road to the state border where it connects to the rail trail in Methuen, Mass.

David Topham, co-chair and treasurer of the Friends of the Salem Bike Ped Corridor, said the next sections will be built by Tuscan Village developers as it will run parallel to the project along Route 28. A half-mile stretch will extend from Main Street to the post office, which Topham said will likely be done later this year. Then, another three-quarters of a mile will extend further south by 2020.

“That gets us down to the very busy Exit 1,” Topham said.

From there, the town will use a \$868,000 federal grant it got from the Highway Administration last fall to build a stretch of trail that will cross Rockingham Boulevard for another six-tenths of a mile until it reaches the existing unpaved trail at Clough Crossing Road.

Topham said 20 percent of the \$868,000 is locally matched funds. The town has already hired CMA Engineers to begin work on that project, but Topham estimates it won't get built until late next year.

“It's all little increments, but big bucks behind it,” Topham said.

Eventually, the goal is to pave the southernmost stretch of 2 miles, which is estimated to cost about \$2 million. About 2.4 miles of trail in Methuen is already paved, Topham said.

Right now, the Granite State Rail Trail is about 60 percent completed, Topham said. After the Salem, Manchester and Londonderry projects are complete, he estimates it will be closer to 75 percent complete.

The only remaining gaps in that southern leg will be in the Woodmont Commons development area in Londonderry and a 1-mile section near the proposed Exit 4A area in both Derry and Londonderry.

Woodmont developers have signaled an interest in building a section of the trail within their development area, Winslow said. Exit 4A construction is expected to begin in 2021 and go into 2023.

Mark Connors of the Derry Rail Trail Alliance said New Hampshire DOT agreed to construct a tunnel under the exit area by North High Street and Madden Road.

“They did engineer a tunnel to go underneath the six lane intersection,” Connors said.

This spring or summer, they will also be building a short section of trail that goes over the Hood Pond Dam. After that, Connors said the last piece left in Derry is the half mile connecting to the Londonderry town line. Londonderry has another half mile to pave on the other side of the border.

Winslow, of Londonderry Rail Trail Committee, said it’s been difficult to see the bigger picture as everyone works to finish the Granite State Rail Trail.

“We all kind of get tunnel vision with our own sections, but it will be beautiful to see this whole thing come together,” Winslow said.

Topham said a statewide group has begun lobbying the state government to set aside \$5 million out of each biennium budget over a 10-year period (totaling \$25 million) to finish the 120-mile trail. He said it would be a major tourism draw when finished.

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