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Rail trail



Jason Soukup has been leading the “bike bus” which started rolling in mid-March, with an assist from fellow parents and wife Betsy Soukup, right. Courtesy Photo



MANCHESTER, NH – Manchester parents looking for a safer route to bike their kids to school may be inching the Granite State Rail Trail closer to completion.

[Jason Soukup](#), an avid bicyclist and parent of three kids ages 6, 8 and 10, has been teaming up with other parents and volunteer adults to ride along

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Street, but Soukup said they feel like it's not ideal for the bikers or the motorists commuting in the morning.

"We want to be active. We don't want to use our cars," Soukup said. "We're using what's there but it's not optimal for us and it's not optimal for cars."

The solution, as Soukup sees it, is creating a new stretch of rail-trail that runs alongside an active train line that runs north to Concord and would connect downtown Manchester an estimated four miles all the way up to the Southern New Hampshire University campus.

During the pandemic, Soukup said he got more involved in the rail trail nonprofit [Manchester Moves](#) and now serves as its board secretary. The organization was founded in 2008 and helped develop about eight miles of rail-trail in the Queen City plus the Piscataquog walking bridge.

In recent years, Soukup said the group went dormant until the current members reactivated it around January 2021. He's been organizing the Bike School Bus since last month.

The hope, Soukup said, is to make a deal with the incoming new owners of the active rail line (CSX is buying Pan Am Railway) to get permission to use their land to build what is known as a "Rail with Trail."

While most traditional rail-trails are paved over the right of way of a defunct railway, rail with trail concept uses the same right of way but is adjacent to an active rail line, usually with a fence to separate the two.

How it's going...

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Currently, there are painted bike lanes, which could be safer, says Jason Soukup, by developing rails-with-trails.

How it could be going...

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How a proposed rail-with-trail might look. Image provided by Jason Soukup

To accomplish this goal, Soukup said Manchester Moves has been meeting with city and state officials and met with CSX representatives about a potential deal. Such a deal can't move forward until CSX completes its acquisition of the rail line, probably sometime in May, Soukup expects.

Another likely barrier is a legal one. States that have successfully completed rail-with-trail projects have passed laws ensuring rail companies are not liable in cases where the use of their land is permitted for recreational uses without a fee.

To lower that barrier, Soukup said they worked with Rep. Linda Gould, R-Bedford, to sponsor [legislation](#), which he said has so far passed the House. It's currently being reviewed by a Senate committee.

"There's very little opposition to it," Soukup said.

Rail trail projects are generally about \$1 million per mile to build, as a rule. But no preliminary engineering has been done to create an accurate estimate of what it would cost to build this corridor, which would be in total about 30 miles inside Manchester, Hooksett, Bow and Concord. Each community would be responsible for building their part.

If that section is completed, it would mark a significant milestone for the state's rail-trail networks by linking the north and south sections of the 125-mile [Granite State Rail Trail](#). The northern

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Completing the Manchester section of that trail would also open up a whole new section of non-motor-vehicular transportation in the Queen City.

“If we could complete that, it would be a gamechanger for Manchester,” Soukup said.

And he said it would link up with several other trail sections that extend westward into Goffstown, and, when the Rockingham trail’s connection to downtown is completed, eastward.



The trail marker on Page Street. File Photo/Carol Robidoux

Right now, the [Rockingham Rail Trail](#) goes from Elliot Hospital past Lake Massabesic. Soukup said the city’s Master Plan already includes plans to extend that from Elliot to downtown, which would provide parts of the center city easier access to the trails as well.

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recreational; they become a viable means of transportation.

“When these things get done, they transform cities,” Soukup said. “They become usable, walkable cities that people want to live in.”

He said there is the will to get this done among city and state officials, among Hooksett town officials and residents. It’s included in the Manchester [Master Plan](#). And he’s confident that they’ll be able to get funding for the project.

“If we get permission, I guarantee you finding the money will be the easiest part of the project,” Soukup said.

The big question is whether they’ll get permission from CSX.

Meanwhile, Manchester Moves has been working on other initiatives, like installing solar-powered lights in the Rockingham trail tunnel under Interstate 93, plans to paint a mural on the Parker Street tunnel of the Piscataquog Rail Trail and spring cleanup days in collaboration with the Manchester Parks and Rec Department.

All are welcome to join in the cleanup effort. Volunteers are encouraged to bring work gloves. Organizers will supply coffee, other equipment and pizza lunch.

- 4/23- South Manchester Rail Trail, 9 a.m. to Noon. Meetup: 377 S. Willow St (behind the DMV).
- 4/30- Piscataquog Rail Trail, 9 a.m. to Noon. Meetup West Side Arena, rear parking lot.



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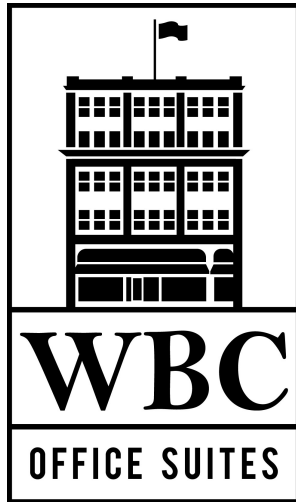
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