

THE SUN

Squannacook adding to region's walking greenways



Squannacook Greenways member Tim Palmer of Townsend and his daughter enjoy the newly opened Squannacook River Rail Trail phase one. (Jacob Vitali/Lowell Sun)

By [Editorial](#) |

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Another one of our region's scenic recreational walkways is moving closer to the finish line.

Come springtime, the Townsend-Groton Squannacook River Rail Trail's second phase should be open to the public.

Squannacook Greenways President Peter Cunningham said work started Nov. 15 on the project. The second phase will continue where the first left off at Old Meetinghouse Road in Townsend and continue to the Harbor Church. Due to the project's construction permit, work must be finished by March 15.

Townsend-based Shepherd's Family Farm/Landscaping has returned for construction of the second phase.

When completed, the 3.7-mile trail will reach West Groton.

Cunningham said \$100,000 from the federal American Rescue Plan Act will pay for the second phase. Local funds were secured with the help of Democratic state Sens. Ed Kennedy of Lowell, John Cronin of Lunenburg, as well as Republican state Rep. Sheila Harrington of Groton.

Phase one of the stone dust trail — constructed where trains once passed through — officially opened to the public on Sept. 25, a 1.1-mile stretch starting at Depot Street in Townsend and concluding at Old Meetinghouse Road.

Cunningham said at the time the opening of phase one was “incredibly gratifying,” noting to reach that point had been a challenge, requiring about 18 years of dedication on the part of all involved.

“I think it’s unfortunate that it’s so difficult to build rail trails,” Cunningham said. “Once they’re built everybody loves them to death, but trying to get them built, trying to get adequate funding to make sure it happens, sometimes is a real struggle. And then once they’re built, maintaining them can also be a struggle.”

The third phase of the trail enters Groton, from northern Crosswinds Drive to the Bertozzi Wildlife Management Area. The fourth and final phase will connect Northern Crosswinds back to South Street in Townsend.

Upon completion, the trail will provide a much safer way to bike or hike to Harbor Village Mall. Cunningham’s also gratified to see that the concerns raised by those who opposed the rail-trail concept haven’t been realized.

” ... They were resistant to rail trails, and (thought) if there’s a rail trail here, it’s going to lead to increased crime, so on and so forth. That has not happened and a lot of the people that I think initially had been naysayers to it are now realizing that it’s a great resource,” Cunningham said.

Squannacook River Rail Trail also provides a stepping stone to a pair of bookending walking paths, the multicomunity Bruce Freeman Trail and the Twin Cities Rail Trail, which will link Fitchburg and Leominster.

To Cunningham’s point about the challenges of mounting such an undertaking, the Chelmsford-based Freeman Trail, named after the late Chelmsford state representative who championed that cause, has been discussed and planned by local officials since the 1980s.

When finished, the trail will provide walking and bike paths starting in Lowell and continuing through Chelmsford, Westford, Carlisle, Acton, Concord, Sudbury and around Middlesex County.

Construction on the Lowell Connector Trail, a Freeman Rail Trail spur, began over the summer.

And phase one completion of the 4.5-mile Twin Cities project, which will connect downtown Fitchburg and Leominster from Mechanic Street in Leominster to the Intermodal Transportation Center on Water Street in Fitchburg, also aims to be completed by March.

The progress being made on these recreational outlets couldn’t come at a better time.

In the age of COVID-19, the outdoors provides a way to stretch our legs — and lift our spirits.