

Rail to Trail History

(Rockland, MA 02370)

(Content Provided By Donald Cann)

In 1999 Rockland's current Master Plan was adopted at Town Meeting. Priority #1 of the plan was to develop open and recreational space. The plan called for creation of an Open Space Committee and a trail system. Open Space Committee members are appointed by the Selectmen. A major component of such a walking/bike trail system was to connect to our neighboring communities. This led to the concept of a "Walk to the Sea" with the thoughts of connecting with Hanover and continuing to Scituate and the ocean. The obvious way to achieve this was to use the old Hanover Branch Line rail bed. This railroad was built in the 1860's by a Hanover business man by the name of E. Y. Perry who made tacks in Hanover. It originally ran from Hanover Four Corners to North Abington. In 1887 it became part of the Old Colony Line. The line mostly carried freight but had passenger service as well. In the 1940's and 50's there were self-propelled cars for commuter service running on the line. The 1980's saw the last of the use of the line as a freight service.

When the MBTA acquired the Old Colony Line for a commuter rail, the Hanover Branch tracks were acquired with it. The T surplused the branch line and made some efforts to sell it. The Rockland Open Space Committee, armed with both the Master Plan and the newly developed Open Space Plan, started to explore the acquisition of the rail bed for recreational purposes and to initiate the way to the sea concept. In cooperation with the Town of Hanover, we received two Greenway Grants from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts for this exploration. Public meetings were held and maps of the proposed trail were produced and exhibited.

With the information we acquired with the grant money, the Rockland Open Space Committee made an effort to inform local and state officials and the general public of our interest in making the rail bed a trail. Things happen in unpredictable ways. When the administrators of the T were constructing the Green Bush Line, they wanted to put the tracks over a piece of land in Hingham that was formerly U.S. Government land, given as park land. The T applied to the National Park Service, which administers the donation of government land for parks, for permission to do this. The Park Service agreed, if the T gave an equal piece of land to the state for recreational use. The Hanover Branch Line was offered as the trade, and accepted by the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR.) The DCR became the owner of the rail bed, with continued National Park Service oversight.

At this time the Rockland Open Space Committee continued to work to open the rail bed as a trail. One of the major obstacles was getting rid of the tracks and the ties. The Selectmen made contact with [Iron Horse Preservation Society](#), a non-profit which proposed to remove the ties, tracks and grade the land for trail use, at no cost to the town or the state. The Selectmen signed a contract with Iron Horse. At this time work has begun to remove the tracks and ties and a big step in fulfilling the concept put forth in the current Master Plan for the Town of Rockland has been taken in an effort to improve recreational opportunities in town.