

My name is Tom O'Brien. I'm a resident of New Milford, Connecticut, and I'm here to speak in favor of House Bill No. 6126 AN ACT AUTHORIZING BICYCLISTS TO CROSS THE HOUSATONIC RAILROAD AT GRADE IN NEW MILFORD.

I grew up in the 1970's in a small town in upstate NY. From the age of ten, I recall walking and riding my bike everywhere. One of the advantages I enjoyed, that I never fully appreciated until I moved away, was the fact that the Erie Canal Towpath—an early multi-use trail, that now stretches almost uninterrupted from Buffalo to Albany—was less than ½ mile from my house.

I moved to New Milford in 1999. In almost all respects I found it to be an ideal place to raise a family, but I was disappointed to discover that almost no kids walk or ride bikes here. Like other towns in the state, the roads are narrow and heavily-traveled, and drivers are unaccustomed to sharing the road with bicyclists or pedestrians.

Because of these hostile conditions, New Milford families who want to ride their bicycles typically pack the bikes and kids into a car, and make the 45 minute drive to New York State's Harlem Valley Rail Trail. I've often joked that I can drive to a ski area in less time than it takes to get to a safe place to ride a bike, but it's true.

Admittedly, New Milford does not have an historic canal, with ready-to-use towpath, or an abandoned rail bed that could easily be converted to a greenway. But we are blessed with a scenic river and long stretches of undeveloped shoreline. Thanks to the efforts of Mayor Pat Murphy and many concerned citizens, the 2010 Plan of Conservation and Development (POCD) allows for the development of a riverside multi-use trail. Someday this trail will stretch from the border with Brookfield (in the south) to Gaylordsville (in the north). And we're not alone.

As I'm speaking, efforts are underway in Danbury and Brookfield to create a greenway that follows the Still River northward toward it's confluence with the Housatonic. And to our north, The Housatonic Covered Bridge Trail plans to run from New Milford through Kent and Cornwall, and onward to Massachusetts. When all of these pieces come together, Western Connecticut will be blessed with not only a vital resource for recreation and transportation but a legitimate tourist attraction.

We're hoping to establish the first leg of the New Milford River Trail in Sega Meadows Park, a (2 mile long) ribbon of land that hugs the east bank of the Housatonic River on the northern end of town. Running the length of the park is an ancient dirt road that could easily be re-graded to make an appropriate surface for bikes and foot traffic.

Of course, every project that looks easy runs into unforeseen snags. In our case, the problem is a choke point, just inside the south entrance to the park where steep slopes on both sides of the road force it to cross a single set of railroad tracks that are operated by the Housatonic Railroad Company. This intersection is currently designated as a "Private Crossing."

If you approve Rep. Chapin's Bill and thereby grant bicyclists (and pedestrians) permission to carefully step over the tracks and continue their journey, it will represent a major improvement in transportation and recreational opportunities for kids and families in New Milford and throughout Western Connecticut.

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