

For some, dams are seen as iconic or historical structures, reminders of the area's industrial past. Their long-lasting presence in our rivers and streams has become familiar, and dam removal presents an unknown. Some wonder how wildlife they have witnessed near the dam could adapt to such a big change. But nature knows what to do, and nostalgia should not hold back our river's right to be free.

But what does dam removal actually look like? The Charles River's transformation will look a little bit like the renderings on page 2 — from the instant the functionless barrier is slowly and carefully removed by engineers, in collaboration with wildlife experts and with the help of streambank restoration, our river will be resurgent — meandering more naturally through the newly created flood

plain, buffered by a vibrant wetland ecosystem that helps us weather intense storms, and welcoming all manner of fish, birds, insects, and life. And the transformation will be swift — as the river's edges are exposed to sunlight, dormant seeds will blossom from the riverbed into lush native plants — milkweed, swamp hibiscus, sedges, marsh marigold, asters, goldenrod — providing habitat for birds and wildlife and scenic beauty for all to enjoy. With the dawn of spring, migratory fish will return from the ocean, instead of stopping short at a wall of concrete, and experience free passage to an abundance of clean, cool waters and tributaries to spawn for the first time unimpeded in over 400 years.

We will all be able to again enjoy the wonders of a wild, living river. ♦

The Community Way Forward — A Green Connector for Newton and Needham

By George Kirby, Upper Falls Greenway cofounder and board member, Bay Colony Rail Trail Association (BCRTA)

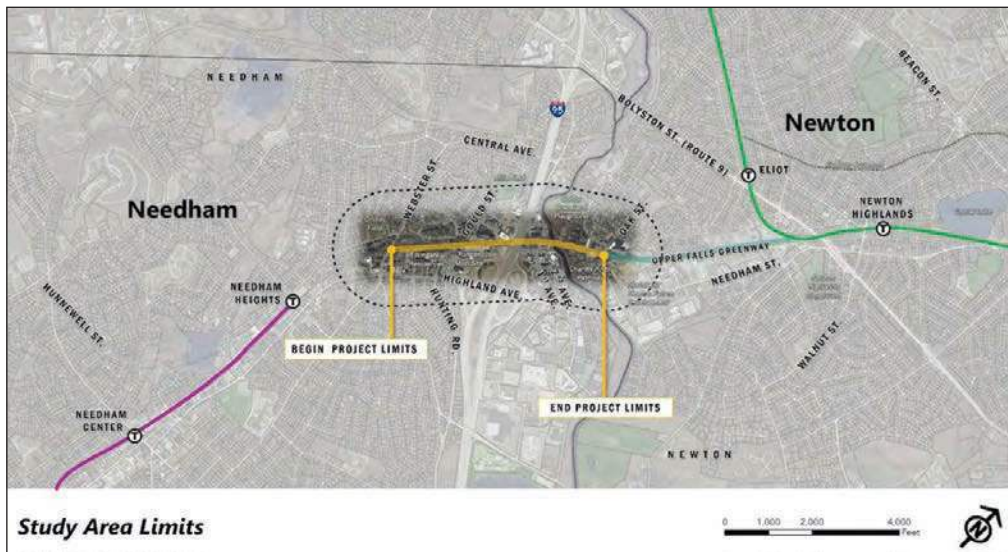
Thinking back over 12 years ago to the beginnings of what became the Upper Falls Greenway, our group of dedicated volunteers understood that it would take time to make the old railroad right-of-way into a future bicycle and pedestrian trail. Over 12 years and many efforts later, we're continuing to walk, run, and bike the Greenway for fresh air, exercise, and access to Needham Street shopping without having to drive. Together with the City of Newton and the Town of Needham, the first steps have been taken to bridge our Greenway to the proposed Community Way spanning the Charles River and Route 128/95.

Last year, a study initiated through a state grant of the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (ARPA) provided funds to conduct an initial feasibility assessment of the proposed Community Way. The grant terms provided for a two-pronged assessment of the corridor for use either as

a bicycle/pedestrian way or as a combined pathway and busway. The consulting group GPI conducted the study and included professionals with expertise in design and construction of both transportation corridors and bicycle/pedestrian trails. The study working group also included representation from municipal administrations, elected officials, and volunteers.

Josh Ostroff provided positive input and insight as Director of Transportation Planning for the City of Newton.

The results released this September included a survey of potential users in Newton and Needham that showed roughly a 2:1 preference for building a dedicated bicycle and pedestrian way (without carrying shuttle bus traffic). Although the study was limited to the area of the Community Way, the working group further noted that bicycle and pedestrian connectivity would be improved. Still, rapid shuttle bus access to nearby transportation



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hubs (Newton Highlands or Needham Heights MBTA) would pose significant operational, logistical, and financial challenges. The feasibility study surveyed the Charles River and Route 128/95 crossings and the Needham Heights to Webster street corridor, including estimated costs to design and construct the Community Way bridges and trail. Both the detailed final study report and the working group recommendations letter are available at: www.newtonma.gov/communityway

Many abandoned rail corridors have been converted into “rail trails” throughout the Commonwealth, encouraging “active” non-polluting recreation and transportation. The Minuteman Trail from Cambridge through Arlington, Lexington, and Bedford may be the most well-known. Many other wonderful trails include the Bruce Freeman from Concord to Lowell, the Nashua River Rail Trail from Ayer to Nashua, NH, and the Cape Cod Rail Trail from Dennis to Wellfleet. The benefits increase as the trails connect to more areas of natural beauty, schools, community centers, and shopping, offering a car-free and safer way to walk and bike for all ages.

The Community Way would connect the Newton Upper Falls Greenway to the Needham Heights neighborhood, improving access to the Northland Development on Needham street and the proposed mixed-use redevelopment of the former Muzi Ford site. A future Needham route around the still active portion of the rail line could also



include shared widened sidewalks as well as a path along the right-of-way. Moreover, the Community Way is an essential link in the long-term vision described by the Bay Colony Rail Trail Association for a continuous, safe connection from Newton through Needham and

the Needham town forest to Redwing Bay on the Charles River and eventually to Dover and Medfield.

Since the proposed Community Way and bridges over the Charles River and Route 128/95 are primarily located in Needham, the City of Newton would likely be a supporting partner to move the project forward. As the discussions progress, the Needham Select Board and Town Administration must determine a path forward in

collaboration with MassDOT and the MBTA (as owner of the right-of-way) on planning, scheduling, and design. The ability to move such a substantial project forward must include steps leading to state and federal funding for this project on the “TIP” (Transportation Improvement Program) long-term schedule, hopefully within the next several years. Given the extended state and federal funding time frame, the feasibility study cost estimate includes allowances for inflation and construction contingency. It would meet the most recent state and federal standards for generous path width and ADA compliance. Since the Community Way would connect more than one Massachusetts community, it should enhance the likelihood of qualifying for state funding.

As part of our volunteer efforts to advance the Upper Falls Greenway in Newton, over a year was devoted to community input, discussions, building support, and hosting walking tours of the proposed Greenway with local neighbors and community representatives. To become a long-term priority for the Town of Needham, the residents of Needham Heights will need to come together and speak out in support of the proposed Community Way. Staying focused for years seems like a long time, but it can and should be done! Here in Newton, we can enjoy the results of our efforts these 12 years later every day.



Project limits and bridge photos shown excerpted from the GPI study report

Let’s look forward to extending our Upper Falls Greenway over the bridge on the Charles River and riding and strolling the Community Way forward to an even more beautiful, safe, and accessible future. ♦

The Big Picture on Rail Trails:

- <https://www.baycolonyrailtrail.org/>
- Rails to Trails Conservancy (national), <https://www.railstotrails.org/>
- Craig Della Penna’s newsletter on rail trail plans & progress in the Northeast (mostly southern New England), **subscribe here** or contact him at: craigdp413@gmail.com