

Upper Falls Greenway and Riverwalk Improvements

By Ted Chapman, Riverside Greenway Working Group, Project Manager



Bridge abutment

A short walk west from the Depot on Oak Street in Upper Falls, the Upper Falls Greenway ends at a bridge, locally referred to as the “sunset bridge.”

system. It is a network of trails branching from the MBTA Greenline, accessing conservation land, recreation areas, open spaces, schools, and streets being developed by Chief Environmental Planner Jennifer Steel’s office. While standing together at the bridge with beautiful views of the river, Jennifer, Jerry, and Jay spoke of their vision for creating a safe connection between the Upper Falls Greenway and the Upper Falls; and the need for improvement to these existing conditions is self-evident.



Snaking along the shoreline, the Upper Falls Riverwalk is visible 25-feet below, the only connection between the two trail a precarious 18”-wide stairway built by local residents to access the trail. From where we stood, fencing and a condemned platform on the bridge obscured the full potential to take in views of the river and the bridge’s impressive structure.

The Upper Falls Riverwalk is a segment of the Blue Heron/ Charles River Path that leads Newton residents all the way to Boston. From the bridge this trail goes upstream to the Upper Falls Riverwalk Conservation Area on Williams Street and downstream to the Bobby Braceland (Upper Falls) Playground. There the unmarked trail climbs up through the off-leash dog park, exiting the playground through a gate on Pennsylvania Avenue in Upper Falls heading on streets to Hemlock Gorge.

The Upper Falls Greenway is a mile-long rail trail renovated in 2016 through the work of many citizen advocates, including George Kirby, Jerry Reilly, Jim Lerner, and then City Councilors Deb Crossley, John Rice, and Brian Yates. A stairway connection to the Riverwalk was proposed and approved by the Parks and Recreation Department in 2022 but was never built, due to permitting issues. We set a goal to link the two arms of the Riverwalk and create a connection to the Greenway above with funding from the MassTrails program.

With financial support from the Upper Falls Area Council and Community Development Corporation, and the Newton Conservators we hired trails professionals from

The bridge’s massive stone abutment speaks to the history of this structure built to carry the railway line that moved sand and gravel from Needham to fill Boston’s Back Bay. Starting in 1858, working “day and night as 145 gravel cars and 80 men made 25 trips per day — loading, transporting and dumping” [Urban Geology] 50-foot-high ridges of sand and gravel eskers (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Esker>) were leveled.

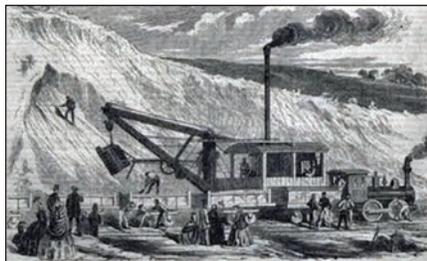


Figure 1: Engraving of Steam-powered Excavator Loading a Gravel Train in 1858; from Ballou’s Pictorial Drawing Room Companion, Boston Public Library



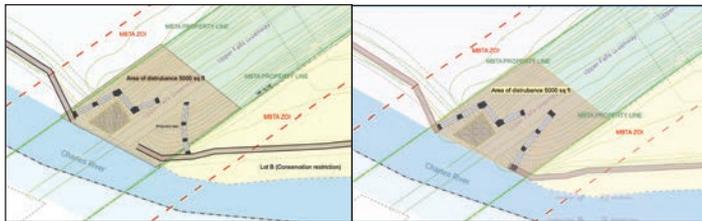
Figure 2: A Steam-powered Locomotive and Gravel Train Makes its Way Through the Town of Newton

The removal of these glacial landforms along the Charles River in Needham and Newton created ‘deserts’ that have been redeveloped within the I-95/Route 128 corridor into office parks, residential areas, and even part of Woodlawn Golf Course in Auburndale. One preserved esker, now a challenging mountain bike course, is present on the west side of Cutler (Kendrick) Pond abutting I-95/128; evidence of tracks from the rail line can still be seen near the north entrance of Cutler Park.

The Riverside Greenway Working Group was created in 2017 to advocate for creating trail connections and restoring a recreation and transportation legacy that existed on and along the banks of the Charles River in Newton in the 1800s. I met Jay Werb and Jerry Reily on a dry-run walk of the Upper Falls loop of the city’s new ACROSS trail

Conservation Works and Terramore, LLC, the firms that did the work on the Pony Truss Trail, to assess feasibility and then design and provide construction estimates for the project. We arrived at proposed solutions:

- to build two sturdy stairways with railings, one on the North and one on the South side of the rail line embankment;
- to replace the fenced-off overlook platform with one perched atop of the abutment to the right of the Greenway;



Two options for the south side stairway

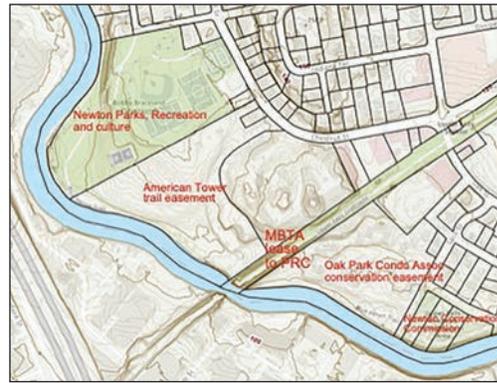
- to stabilize the tread of the 2900-foot-long Riverwalk by adding 3 inches of gravel basepack to the trail tread to make walking easier and protect tree roots;
- to make a new connection from the Bobby Braceland (Upper Falls) Playground to the Blue Heron trail closer to the river, avoiding the off-leash dog area.
- and begin to address invasive plant populations along the trail, replacing them with native species.

The initial vision of constructing a boardwalk under the bridge to connect the two arms of the Riverwalk, was ruled out due to the complexity of attaching a boardwalk to the narrow foot of the abutment, permitting, and cost challenges.

The design team provided these construction estimates for the proposed work:

- Two stairs and viewing platform: \$92,000
- Riverwalk improvements: \$78,000
- Survey, invasive species mitigation and signage, misc.: \$10,000

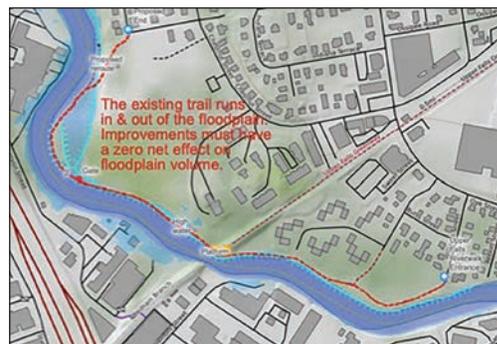
Beyond design, the major challenge of this project is the complexity of permitting, involving five landowners and three easements. The permitting uncertainty required two options for the south stairway until permissions were resolved, a process which should be eased by the fortunate decision of Newton’s new administration to financially support the project. When Mayor Marc Laredo and Chief of Community Services John Rice heard about this project



from the Ward 5 Councilors Julie Irish, Rena Getz, and Brittany Hume, they decided that this high-value project should be fully funded by the City using Northland funds and be coordinated through the Parks and Recreation Department.

Because the previous iteration of the project was approved in 2022 by the Parks and Recreation Commission, this step can be skipped this round. For this project to be approved, a proposal will be docketed with the Public Services and the Finance Committees by the Ward 5 City Councilors; following these committees’ endorsements, final approval by the full City Council is required.

After permitting and funding, the challenges to completing construction are straightforward: finding a capable contractor to do the work under the city’s bidding process; receiving a construction permit from the MBTA, which owns the land



the Greenway is built on; and meeting the requirements of environmental regulations. Wetland regulations require that within the 100-year-flood

zone (the turquoise, hatched line in the image above) the net volume of soil filled or removed must be zero. This means that when 2–3 inches of base pack area added to the trail tread (red dashed line), it must be balanced by removing and equivalent volume of soil within adjacent areas of the flood zone. Approximately half the length of the trail is under this condition.

Assuming all the approvals are received, and a suitable construction firm is available, this exciting project should be built by the end of 2026. This is a model for public-private partnership, a collaboration between the city and citizen advocates. The next step in the story of this railtrail will be achieved through citizen advocacy, encouraging Newton, Needham and the MBTA to reestablish connection across the Sunset Bridge to Needham on the “Community Way.” ♦