

Easthampton School Committee hears pitch for safer school routes

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EASTHAMPTON – During its Oct. 26 meeting, the Easthampton School Committee discussed developing new walking and biking paths for Easthampton Public School students.

Massachusetts Safe Routes to School Outreach Coordinator Lucy Friedman-Bell presented the program's current goals. "Safe Routes to School, Easthampton Public



City Planner Jeff Bagg speaks at Easthampton School Committee meeting.
Photo credit: Easthampton Media

Schools and the city of Easthampton are working to support students who are walking and biking to the elementary schools in transitioning to walking and biking to Mountain View School safely," said Friedman-Bell.

After conducting a district-wide parent travel survey, Friedman-Bell concluded that there were higher rates of walking and biking at the elementary school than at the middle school.

With Friedman-Bell using this data to advocate for safer routes for elementary school students, City Planner Jeff Bagg proposed paths to White Brook Middle School, also the site of the new Mountain View School that will house the city's elementary and middle levels once completed. "I'm seeking a letter of support for an application for one of the infrastructure grant programs that Lucy mentioned and the application is due Dec. 1," said Bagg.

Bagg's goal is to build a path through Nonotuck Park, connect it to the Manhan Rail Trail and then have that connect to the school.

"The idea of making a connection from the Manhan Rail Trail to White Brook has been a goal of the Rail Trail Committee as well. These connections to downtown and neighborhoods from the rail trail are a really important goal that we're working towards," Bagg explained.

A Complete Streets study was conducted in 2017 to look at streets, sidewalks and possible connections. Bagg noted the data showed, "New bike path connections talk about doing the connection via a bunch of different sources such as a shared-use path up Hisgen Avenue or new sidewalks on Park Street."

A shared-use path would be ideal for walkers, bikers and multi modes of transportation. "The idea is to get these off of the road as much as possible or separate from the road," he said.

At the moment Bagg is looking for funding for two specific projects: building a path through Nonotuck and upgrading the sidewalks on Park Street. "The routes we've looked at are going through Nonotuck as well as going up Park Street," he explained.

While these projects are a ways away, Bagg wants to secure funding to begin on at least one of the projects. "My goal is that we want to make an application in December for one of these two options which is either building a path through Nonotuck, which would bring the trail around to the back of the school or upgrading the sidewalks on Park Street," he began. "We have years worth of work to do on infrastructure to catch up with this move, so we want to pick one or the other to move the ball forward."

Committee member Marin Goldstein showed his support for Bagg's proposal.

"I support 100 percent finding safer routes for our kids to get to school and looking at alternatives like walking and biking. So please come back in November and review that with us to get that letter of support," said Goldstein.

Goldstein did, however, question whether the Nonotuck Park path aligned with the Williston path that had been discussed in the School Building Committee Meeting. "We don't want to build paths just to build paths," he said.

White Brook teacher Scott Cavanaugh explained the Nonotuck Park path would be used whether a former path is built or not. "That path is going to be used whether there's something on the other end or not because it gets a lot of existing traffic," Cavanaugh began. "If we don't pave a path there then there's going to be a dirt path that'll emerge because of existing traffic. A lot of kids go that way regardless."

Bagg intends to return to the committee in November in an effort to acquire a letter of support for either the Nonotuck Park path or repaving sidewalks on Park Street.

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