

COMMENTARY

# Rail trails a desirable aspect for homeowners

In my day job, I am a realtor in Massachusetts. Not your average realtor, mind you, but one with a special niche: I specialize in the sale of houses near to rail trails and other sorts of greenways. I know exactly what it is like to live near a rail trail—and it is great. But let's back up a bit and start at the beginning.

Our house was built in 1865 and three years later, in 1868, the railroad came to town and they built the track right next to our house. The railroad officials felt bad for the owners of the house that the track was so close, so to mitigate the damage that was sure to result from the shaking caused by the trains passing by, the railroad reinforced the plaster ceilings with lath strips nailed up from below. Now, that wasn't attractive, so below those reinforcing lath strips, they hung taut, but flexible canvas ceilings.

The railroad was abandoned in 1969, and after several years of discussion in the 1970s, the corridor became a bike path in 1982. It wasn't very long at 2.6 miles, but it planted a seed and a generation later, it has changed things in ways that were never really envisioned. Today, it is one of the most beloved places in town.

We came along in 2001 and bought the house,

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which was by this time, thoroughly run-down, and began a 14-month renovation. In 2003, we opened as a bed and breakfast. We were able to save one of the canvas ceilings and since we only see bikes and pedestrians going by, the house doesn't shake anymore.

I am the first realtor in the U.S. to focus on houses near to rail trails and greenways. Depending on the year, 40-60 percent of my business is in my niche.

Several years ago I did a report for the Massachusetts MLSPIN (the database of listing and property information) that focused on houses being sold in several communities in Eastern Massachusetts where two regional rail trails are located—The Minuteman Commuter Bikeway and the Assabet River Rail Trail.

I took a look at the listings that touted the houses' proximity to the trail. It was found that these properties sold for a higher proportion of the asking price and in a quicker fashion than houses that weren't near the trail in the given community. That report and over 20 others related to the effects of the trail on nearby residential properties can be found on this website—[bruce-freemanrailtrail.org/rail-trail-resources/rail-trail-studies/](http://bruce-freemanrailtrail.org/rail-trail-resources/rail-trail-studies/).

This is the Web's best compendium of white paper studies, reports, etc. on the effects of a nearby trail on residential real estate.

A few years later, the Massachusetts MLSPIN put a "button" on the back-end of the website that realtors use to create listings. On the section that lists items for area amenities, the phrase "near a bike path" has

been added. This has institutionalized the concept that living near a rail trail is a good thing and not something that will devalue properties.

The Millennial Generation—the group that makes up the largest purchasers of residential real estate today—are looking to live in more in-town settings as opposed to more suburban or cul-de-sac layouts. Indeed, since the Great Recession, we see this trend solidifying.

One of the reasons this Millennial cohort is looking in places in Southern New England is because older, established communities have grid-patterned streets, sidewalks, and porches. This is known as Traditional Neighborhood Development (TND)—places that have built-in opportunities to walk or bike around town.

In most of the places that have decent housing stock found in a TND layout, you will also find that they are places where former railroad corridor traversed. About two-thirds of the railroads in Southern New England have been abandoned, and most of that mileage is not in hinterland locations. They mostly lead to the antediluvian mill complexes that were commonplace around the region. Most of those heavy industrial mills have closed and are more likely converted to uses that don't need the freight railroad anymore, such as offices, condos, and apartments. And yet the dead railroad sits there, waiting to be rediscovered.

Within 125 miles of my house in Florence, there are over 200 rail trail projects underway right now. Many are the little branch-lines that led to those mills. Indeed, the lowly little 2.6-mile bike path next to my house will be open all the way to New Haven in about four years, and it'll open all the way to North Station in Boston in about eight years.

I would urge the residents of Dedham to jump on board this project and get this trail built. Though building a rail trail through the thicket of uncertainty is sometime scary and difficult, it is very important for people to become involved. Please do so.  
**Sincerely, Craig Della Penna**

*—Craig Della Penna is the author of three books on rail trails and is the most in-demand speaker in the U.S. on the issues surrounding rail trails and the effects on adjoining properties. [www.rail-trail-sidecompanies.com](http://www.rail-trail-sidecompanies.com) is his website.*