

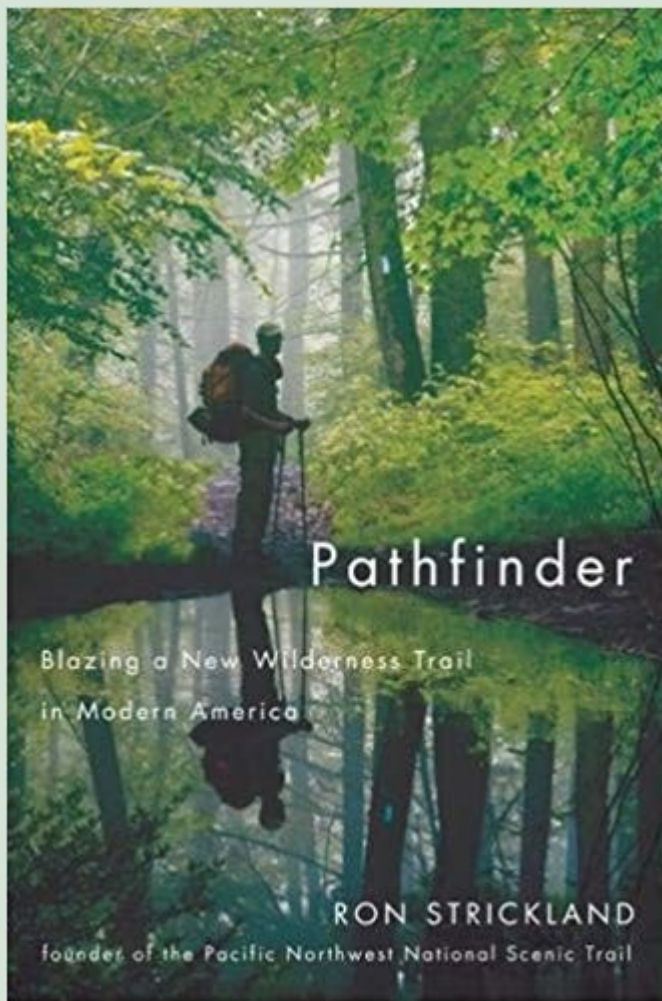
PRIVATE SECTOR INNOVATOR:

Craig Della Penna

You probably don't associate Realtors with trails activism, but I'm about to introduce you to a Massachusetts innovator who may give you a whole new take on the open house and the fixed rate mortgage. Craig Della Penna is a go-get- 'em entrepreneur who lives and breathes former railroad corridors.

Beginning with a 15-year career where he marketed rail freight and planned the start-up and managed the operations three of New England's largest and most successful railroad-owned trans-loading facilities; he segued into the advocacy end of the trail world after being invited to write a series of books [3 books] on the subject of rails-to trails—with a bent towards the history of the old railroad.

He was later hired by Rails-to-Trails Conservancy [RTC] to be their point person, their New England Representative. He specialized in assisting communities where a proposed trail was getting a lot of push-back from residents—fearful that a trail would bring criminals and other negative effects to their neighborhood.



In 2004, when RTC scaled-back out of New England, he left the firm. However, he and his wife Kathleen continued to operate a bed & breakfast in Northampton, MA that sits eight [8] feet from one of the oldest municipally built rail trail in southern New England. <https://www.sugar-maple-inn.com/> Obviously, when he talks about the idea of converting a former railroad corridor in urban or suburban neighborhoods, he doesn't just 'talk-the-talk'. He 'walks-the-walk'.

After leaving RTC, he became a REALTOR® specializing in an interesting niche. He specializes in residential properties near to rail-trails or other greenways. Recently this unique real estate practice was featured in the National Association of Realtors trade magazine in their Smart Growth section and seen by 1.3 million readers. It was also recently mentioned in a Boston Globe editorial and in United Airlines in flight magazine—Hemispheres and the Wall Street Journal. More info about this at: <https://www.northamptonrealtor.com/innovator>

I wish that someone in every city and region in America would adopt Craig's clever methods. He and a couple of friends set up a land acquisition company called, Central Highlands Conservancy (CHC) – <http://www.chc-llc.org>. CHC tracks the sale of former RR corridor in Massachusetts. When such a property becomes available—and is in danger of being sold off to adjacent landowners who would segment it. CHC steps-in and buys it, blocking-out them out.

CHC then works with a local land trust who can buy it in a few years through a capital fund-raising campaign. CHC then sells it to them for cost + expenses. No mark-up. CHC focuses on former railroad corridors "that can become a part of a regional network and have the capability to provide an off-road connection between schools, downtown areas, city/town services and recreation areas."

Their first project in 2007 accomplished those goals, selling 3.5 miles of corridor including 3 large bridges to a regional land trust. Corridor that will now forever be protected and one day be upgraded to become a safe trail for families to enjoy. CHC is on track to buy several more miles of former railroad corridor in 2008.

Another tool in his trail advocacy quiver, is his access to the very sophisticated MLS database. In Massachusetts, there are about 25 properties that over the years for one reason or another, acquired the former railroad corridor behind a residential property. Using his access to the MLS, he has an on-going, automatic search underway—looking for these properties. When they come onto the market, he will be notified immediately. One of several trail supporters will then step in to buy the house, divide off the former railroad corridor—donating that to a land trust and then the house will be sold without it. Similar, slow but steady projects like this are underway in Vermont as well. It is akin to putting Humpty Dumpty together again.

Craig's greatest asset though is his on-going slide lecture series which is tailored to specific locales—teaching communities the not only 'how' to build rail trails, but more importantly, the 'WHY' it is necessary to do so. Having given over 1,200 lectures in 21 states and Canadian provinces, he is one of the country's most in-demand speakers on the subject of rail trails, smart-growth and real estate. He is a bomb-throwing, yet energizing, and uplifting speaker.

In another format, he also provides a needed balance at some of the more contentious public hearings in communities planning to build a rail trail.

More often than not, he'll sit in the back of the room and after the opponents of the project have expended their passionate shot gun blast of why the conversion of the derelict former railroad corridor was going to be a bad thing, he'll then speak for a few minutes about his real-life experience of living next to a rail trail. Eight feet from one. He'll even offer up a "complimentary, weeknight stay to rail-trail opponents" at their bed and breakfast in Northampton, MA. Week nights only and it must be during the school year.

One of the interesting things about the trail in Northampton is so many kids walk and bike to school on it, that it is the equivalent to almost two school buses. In his talk, Craig will recount how his community came to a watershed moment a few years ago when the city realized how many kids were using the pathway to walk or bike to school—even in winter. So many kids were using the trail for the transportation use of walking or biking to school that the city now plows it in the winter. He then asks the audience how many kids in that town bike to school.

Within a 100-mile radius of his house in Northampton, there are over 200 rail trail projects open or being planned. This is the densest network in the U.S. and it connects right where people live, work and play.

Naturally, such public-spirited work attracts diehard opposition - usually on the basis of fear of crime. When the summer is hot and the news cycle slows down, many

newspapers like to run stories that will drive the sales and the discussion about a controversial rail trail project somewhere always makes for good fodder.

In July of 2008, the good story in that regard was in the Boston Globe where the "Marie Antoinette of rail-trails" (Craig's words) was quoted in the Boston Globe to the effect that bicyclists and hikers would do better to get their exercise indoors at "the gym that you got the membership for and that you know you are not using."

Please note that Craig is not promoting wilderness trails but walking-biking solutions at the grassroots community level where they are so desperately needed.

