



COURTESY OF CRAIG DELLA PENNA

THE SUGAR MAPLE TRAILSIDE INN in Northampton, Mass., is adjacent to a popular paved rail trail. The author and his wife bought the property in 2001 and have since restored the 1865 house and turned it into a bed-and-breakfast.

At Home On The Trail

Living Next To A Recreational Path Inspires More Than A Passing Interest

By CRAIG DELLA PENNA

In my day job I work for Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, the country's largest trails organization, as their New England field representative. When I go into a community considering a rail-trail project, I not only talk the talk, but I walk the walk. When people say something unfavorable or unpleasant about the possibility of having a trail in their neighborhood, I can talk with firsthand experience about what it is really like living with a rail trail next to one's house.

For 13 years, my wife and I lived in Agarwan, Mass., a community known for three things: It is the home of Six Flags New England; it has the lowest Zip Code in the U.S., 01001; and it is the only city in the commonwealth that has no downtown. It went right from farms to sprawling subdivisions, and it is a place where many residents have to use a gallon of gas to get a gallon of milk.

In the 1990s, when I started to get more involved in the rails-to-trails movement, my wife and I looked for a place to live that was near a rail trail in a community that still had a vibrant and functioning downtown.

Nevertheless, we saw the potential and jumped right into a bidding war. We prevailed, and in September of 2001, we moved in and started to restore the 1865 house.

We spent 14 months restoring not only the interior and exterior of the house, but also the grounds outside. This included the installation of "period gardens," with plants and themes that were common to the Civil War era. We had many surprises in the restoration, most of them unpleasant, but one was an interesting oddity. It seems that in 1868, three years after this house was built, the railroad came to Florence. The railroad was built so close to the house that the railroad officials offered a creative mitigation. They installed canvas ceilings in the two rooms closest to the tracks. The thinking was that if the original ceilings were cracked by the passing trains, they would not be noticeable behind the canvas.

During the restoration, we decided to go one step further and open a bed-and-breakfast. We call it Sugar Maple Trailside Inn.

(www.sugar-maple-inn.com) In 2003, we were honored when we received the city's Historic Preservation Award and our house was featured on Home and Garden Television's acclaimed series "Restore

pass by. By 7:30 a.m., the dog walkers are out, and by 8 a.m., school kids pass by. Scores of them. Most are walking, but a substantial number are on bikes and a smattering even use rollerblades. So many kids here walk, bike or skate to school that I'd guess one or two school buses aren't needed because of this safe route.

Around 8:30 a.m., a number of utilitarian bikers ride by — people biking to work. By midday, the users are mostly retirees and mothers pushing strollers. The dog walkers are back out late in the afternoon.

Finally, the evening strollers, joggers and walkers go by. My wife, a dedicated power walker, is on the trail twice a day for two-mile walks.

On weekends, the complexion of the path changes. There are more bicyclists, who tend to be tourists, but the local joggers, power walkers, strollers and dog walkers are still out there in force.

These trails are more than bike paths or recreation areas. They are true transportation facilities. The city has come around to this realization, because this year, for the first time, they are plowing the trail so it can be used in the winter.

Often when I go into communities planning rail trails — there are more than 100 rail-trail projects underway within 100 miles of our office — I am asked what it's like living next to the trail. Do small children run through your yard? Or pick your flowers? Don't the early morning joggers make a lot of noise? I say, "No." Also, believe it or not, most or all of the dog owners pick up after their animals, so that isn't a problem either.

Many people living in suburban developments, as we used to, probably feel a longing that cannot easily be explained. I think it is the longing for neighborhoods like those many of us grew up in. Places where you knew your neighbors, places with porches, certainly places with sidewalks.

It can also be explained by the lack of quality "third" places today. The first place is your family life. The second place is where you work. The third place is where people meet outside of the first two places. The third place experience in many lively communities today is the pathway known as a rail trail. This longing for the third place is why these projects are so successful.