

RAIL TRAILS



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LEADER IN
SMART-GROWTH
LAND PRESERVATION
RAIL TO TRAIL
CONVERSIONS

RAIL TRAILS *By, Sheila Alston*

I had the distinct pleasure of interviewing a real estate agent who has a business that is ultra niche and over the years he's become the #1 agent for helping families with homes near Rail Trails. His name is Craig Della Penna the other day and we talked about the work he has been doing to revitalize old towns and communities in the Northeast over the past 20+ years. Being from the west coast myself I had no idea that there has been a quiet movement to convert dead rail road tracks into hiking and biking trails since the 1980s. This incredible movement has begun to attract young families and breathe new life into old run down towns.

Craig is a licensed REALTOR® in Massachusetts and his story is quite interesting. He didn't begin his career as an agent. His journey began in the late 1980s when he worked for a short line rail road company as an operations manager and marketer. He became intrigued with the many lost railroads of New England and wrote several books on old rail lines being converted to biking and hiking trails. He formed "Friends of the Trail" groups and started a lecture series to inform the public about the benefits of the conversion.



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Craig Della Penna

Change comes slowly

The idea of converting unused railroads to trails appeared in a letter to the editor in a Chicago Tribune in 1963, but it wasn't until 1986 that the non-profit organization, Rail-to-Trail Conservancy, launched. At that time there was only 1,000 miles of trails open across the country. Today there are over 24,000 miles.

"Since the early 1960s there have been over 70,000 miles of former steam railroad corridor taken out of the nations inventory and the majority of this mileage is in the Northeast." Craig explained.

He figured everyone would love the idea of converting these old forgotten railroads into trails, but to his surprise many residents were strongly opposed. He says "he watched fearful people at town meetings clamor to prevent the conversion. They were families who lived along the former railroad and were worried of the public being too close to their property. The most common fears [continued on page 22....](#)

were crime and that the trail would devalue their property." (In reality, Craig explains that homes for sale that market their proximity to a biking trail have less Days on Market and sell for a higher percentage to list price.) So for 6 years Craig was a lobbyist and organizer for the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy where he educated the public and worked with government officials to further the growth of rail-to-trail systems.

In 2001 he and his wife renovated an old historic home that sits 8 feet from a rail trail into an award-winning bed & breakfast called The Sugar Maple Trailside Inn. It was featured in HGTV and was given a Historic Preservation award from the city. It was there that he met many wonderful families that traveled along the rail trail and stayed at his B&B. "People stay with us and love the area so much they want to relocate here. Since becoming a REALTOR® a sizable portion of my sales are of properties very close to a rail trail-and historic or antique residences."

Restoring Gateway Cities

The benefits Rail Trails have brought to communities is nothing short of amazing. Entire cities that were once industrial centers when the railroads were working, had fallen to the wayside as many families left when mills closed years ago. Now these same towns have become new revitalized gateway cities. Old paper mills are being transformed to apartment buildings or cool commercial spaces. Millennials don't want to live in a place like they grew up. "They don't want suburban track homes with cul-de-sacs, where they are car dependent to get anywhere. They want communities with sidewalks, porches, village centers, and historic building that have been converted to offices and housing and the ability to hop on a trail to easily get from home to work and to play" Craig explains.

For Craig, being a leader in this niche has been incredibly fulfilling. Not only has he helped increase property values locally but he has made a difference in how the people of his town live. They now have a beautiful space that connects people and local towns together

and encourages them to be active, enjoy nature and the history around them. He says in the near future families will be able to go on a bike ride from Boston 100 miles on a rail trail to Northampton, stay at trailside B&Bs and then take a train-ride home. What an adventure!

"Wellness isn't just about energy efficiency, or the ambiance that a calm and peaceful house will bring, wellness also means having a special and inspirational 3rd place in your life. The 1st place in your life is your home and your family. The 2nd place is your work-place. The 3rd place is where you interact with people outside of the first two. It might be a church, a tavern, a local café, a place like a traditional civic organization, or maybe it's the linear park created from a former railroad corridor.

For many in my town our rail trails are a 21st century version of the 3rd place. This new 3rd place is so special, so electrifying to people who experience these new, but old, distinctive trails in their neighborhood that this 3rd place quickly becomes the best loved location in a community. Having such a treasured place nearby that brings people together, becomes a touch-stone for wellness in a different fashion." - Craig Della Penna



Featuring Craig Della Penna Rail-To-Trail and Historical Home Expert Eco-Broker and REALTOR®

Craig helps train other realtors in New England how and why they should help others in this niche. To contact him or to sign up for his free newsletter about current rail trail development click [here](#).