

Short bio of Craig Della Penna

Early on, I worked in the railroad industry for Pinsky Railroad Company. This was one of the country's earliest shortline railroads dating from the 1930s. In the 1990s, I was marketing rail freight and planning the start-up and managing the operations of what eventually became seven, large-scale, contemporary, railroad transloading facilities. Our facilities took thousands of trucks off the roads coming into New England each year.



One of these facilities—in So. Windham, CT (seen to the right)—was the largest in the Northeast—over a mile long. And I'm proud to say that no one was ever killed or even injured at any of my facilities.

In February of 1994, I was put under contract by a regional publisher to write a series of books on the history of old railroad lines converted to walking and biking trails.

The books were pretty detailed in terms of railroad history, why it was there, why it went away and by way of an odometer-based mileage guide; I showed all the bits of RR infrastructure or archaeology that was out there and what it did.



The books were well-received and two years after the first of three books on this subject came out, I got involved in the politics of how these paths did, or did not get built and I began to actively organize "friends of the trail" groups in numerous communities all across New England where the idea of a rail trail was not being automatically seen with favor. In fact, there were many places where opponents carried the day. I know this is so foreign to 21st century people, that people were actually dead-set opposed to the idea of converting dead corridor into a linear park, but that was the case.

In 1997 I was hired by the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, [RTC] as an organizer and lobbyist in the New England region to not only prevent bad policy at the state and local level, but to also "parachute" into some of the most notable rail trail "wars" in the northeast. In fact, within 150 miles of here lies the densest network of former steam railroad corridor in North America and the vast majority is becoming trails. Remaking these forgotten places into linear parks is a game-changer in Gateway Cities and towns. A reinvestment in places that have NOT been reinvested-in, for 2-3 generations.



In late 2001, while working for RTC, my wife Kathleen and I bought a badly run-down, circa 1865, farmhouse that sits next to (eight feet from) the rail trail in Northampton's historic Civil War era, village of Florence. We began a far-reaching renovation and had contractors there for 14 months.

Then in the spring of 2003, we opened as a bed & breakfast called [Sugar Maple Trailside Inn](#). We won a Historic Preservation award from the city and the renovation was even featured on [HGTV's Restore America](#) television program. Even in Yankee Magazine's 70th anniversary issue, our reno and our bed & breakfast was featured.

In 2004, I left RTC, became a Realtor and focused on developing a unique niche—selling houses near trails and greenways. This was in direct response to all the antis I met over the years who said their houses would never be saleable if the dead railroad behind their house became a trail. Of course, I have proven them all wrong. [I am the 1st Realtor in the U.S. with this niche](#), and I have



been featured twice in National Realtor Association trade magazines, twice in the Certified Residential Specialist Magazine, and twice in the Massachusetts Association of Realtors magazine. I was even recently featured in a national [Wellness oriented Real Estate magazine](#).

I've also been written about in an editorial for the *Boston Globe*, an article in the *Wall Street Journal*, and even a story for the *United Airlines in-flight magazine*, *Hemispheres*, called [Roads Less Traveled](#).

The National Association of REALTORS awarded me the National EverGreen Award at the NAR conference in Chicago, for not only being the 1st REALTOR in the U.S. to have this special niche real estate practice, but also for my accomplishments in getting trails built all over the Northeast. I also hold the Certified Residential Specialist (CRS) designation. Only 2% of Realtors in the U.S. have this designation.



In 2005, I also set up two entities. One was **Northeast Greenways Solutions (NEGS)** to teach local groups and communities how to get their projects to "YES." Projects that don't get to YES, don't get built. That is all I really do. Get places to YES.



The other org was called [Central Highlands Conservancy LLC \(CHC\)](#), a hybrid land-acquisition vehicle set up specifically to purchase former railroad corridor in Massachusetts in order to prevent it from being sold to adjacent landowners.

Using CHC, we purchased 3.2 miles of former railroad right of way. This included three, large, former railroad bridges of the developing 104+ mile trail called [Mass Central Rail Trail](#).

We gave the local land trust, East Quabbin Land Trust, two years to buy us out—for our costs, no mark-up. After purchasing it from us, the land trust then received grants to build out the trail and rehab the bridges to be safe and proper.

We have also used CHC to teach other land trusts how to do this. There are now 6 land trusts in the northeast that have a significant role in reassembling former railroads into linear parks.

Today, having given well-over 1,200 lectures in twenty one states, I am one of the country's most in-demand public speakers on the subjects of rail-to-trail conversions. Here's some of the themes and issues I focus on. Smart-growth, land preservation, brownfield redevelopment, mitigating climate impacts, effects on nearby residential real estate values, place-making projects, sustainability and other similar topics.

In late 2016 and early 2017, I was invited by [American Trails](#) to do a series of national webinars on these topics. And in the spring of 2022, I did another one with over 500 people in attendance, from all over the U.S. In just the past few years, I have been the keynote or plenary speaker at state or regional conferences in New York, California, Vermont, Virginia, Connecticut, Missouri, Michigan, New Hampshire and Massachusetts.

In their 10th anniversary issue, *The Ride* magazine named me as the most effective advocate for rail-to-trail issues on the Eastern seaboard, and I have helped build over 1,000 miles of rail trails in scores of communities in New England and New York.

And in 2016, I became an accredited teacher of Realtors in both Massachusetts and Vermont, where I began teaching a course about the Rail Trails and their effects on nearby residential properties to scores of Realtors for their Continuing Education requirements.

In early 2017, I launched a free, monthly e-newsletter that now goes out to over 15,000 readers. In fact, in the spring of 2019, Constant Contact, the company that hosts the e-newsletter, told us that we won an award because it is in the top 10% of all the thousands of e-newsletters they host world wide. Top 10% in terms of engagement with the readers, in opens, click-throughs, forwards to friends, or social media. Amazing!

And here's something very odd, Though I've written five books, in the past few years, five books have been written that feature me in them as a case study in creative marketing, or 21st century branding, or in a book about only working at things you love—and not things you don't. The most recent book came out in April, 2021 and it is the second one that has featured my innovative real estate practice.

I also "herd-cats". Seriously, in the past 20 years, I have organized two teams of attorneys to write two Amicus Briefs for high-profile cases before the Mass SJC that were important in the developing network of rail trails here. [Here's a link](#) to the most recent one.

In the summer of 2019, I came onboard the 20 year old [Norwottuck Network](#) as their President. This is a 501c3 or-



ganization set up to help buildout the 104± mile long. Mass Central Rail Trail. We have recently enlarged the board of directors to be along the entire 100+ mile long corridor and have expanded the mission.

In the summer of 2022, we let out a request for proposals to find a consultant to answer the never asked question; *What would a completed Mass Central Rail Trail would mean to the Commonwealth and the communities along the way?*

The report came out in the summer of 2023. [Here's a link](#) to the report. The metrics are very compelling.

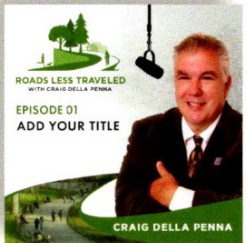
When completed, the MCRT will have 4-5 million users a year. 64% of the state's population will live within 10 miles of it. 400,000-500,000 people a year will overnight on it. It will produce about \$200 million a year in benefits. MassDOT is pricing up right now, how much it will cost to [FinishTheRailTrail](#).

We are currently at 63 miles open. At the end of the year, we'll be 75 miles open. To get 100% open is going to be expensive. State Reps and Senators along the corridor are clamoring to get it done. In fact all the places that voted down the trail back years ago are all on-board now and have written letters of support from their Selectboards.

By my definition, we are now at "yes" here and thus I've stepped down as President of the Board at NN. They are now rebranding themselves to be the Mass Central Rail Trail Coalition. Yay!

My next chapter in the rail trail world will be a bit different. I will be standing up a national podcast called Roads Less Traveled. This will be hosted by IconsOfRealEstate.com. I will also be doing a memoir about my unusual life journey.

Welcome to the Roads Less Traveled Podcast!



Love rail trails, bike tourism, or greenway real estate? Have you ever dreamt of operating a bed & breakfast along a scenic trail, or seen how trails can revive small towns? Join host Craig Della Penna, a Realtor, trail advocate, and storyteller, for quick, insightful conversations where real estate meets sustainability and adventure. Have a story to share? Book your spot and be part of the Roads Less Traveled.

Want to join me on the podcast?

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