

Mass Central Rail Trail celebrated

Awards given to Hawk, Henshaw

By Eileen Kennedy
Correspondent

GILBERTVILLE – About 100 local, state and federal rail trail advocates gathered at the Stone Church last Saturday to celebrate the Mass Central Rail Trail, which travels through New Braintree, Gilbertville and Ware, and continues to be built out for 104 miles between Boston to Northampton. They were also there to hear from state and national advocates, and celebrate several advocates for their work.

This was the eighth Golden Spike conference organized by former Rails-to-Trail official and local rail trail advocate Craig Della Penna. He also is a Realtor who focuses on properties near rail trails at Murphys Real Estate in Northampton, and has worked hard on making sure the Mass Central Rail Trail becomes fully built and connected with as many other rail trails as possible.

He and his wife also own a bed and breakfast on the Norwottuck Rail Trail in Northampton.

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Phillip and Mary Warbasse, members of the Friends of the Stone Church, helped welcome attendees to the conference.

Awards

For locals, the highlight was most likely seeing Steven Hawk, who has advocated for the MCRT pieces in Ware from his wheelchair with great enthusiasm over the years, and Cynthia Henshaw, East Quabbin Land Trust executive director, receive Golden Spike awards for their advocacy and vision.

"Thank you everyone on Facebook and in Ware who has supported me," Hawk said, who often chronicles his adventures on the rail trail on his Facebook page. "It's been 20 years since my accident and people may not realize the rail trail has been therapeutic for me." Hawk became paralyzed after being in a serious car accident.

He said the MCRT portion near Gibbs Crossing in Ware has made it easy for him to simply get outside as well as access shopping. "I couldn't be more honored," he said. "And Craig, I can't thank you enough for what you're doing." The crowd gave Hawk a standing ovation.

Henshaw also received a Golden Spike award for her linear thinking as the EQLT director. Instead of concentrating solely on preserving parcels of land, she and the board of directors also focused on helping to develop portions of the MCRT.

"She is unusual in that she does linear thinking," said Della Penna. "She is one of a few on this trail who is a linear thinker, on the 100-plus mile trail."

Henshaw, unsurprisingly as she is always in motion, was not on



East Quabbin Land Trust's Judith Jones accepted the Golden Spike award on Cynthia Henshaw's behalf.

hand to accept her award as she had driven to The Country Store in Petersham to pick up the food for the conference's lunch. Della Penna described Henshaw's emphasis on making community connections, such as the EQLT buying the store, renovating it and then leasing it to a young couple who are keeping it going.

"Cynthia Henshaw is an amazing person," said EQLT Board of Directors President Judith Jones said as she accepted Henshaw's award for her. Jones also noted that Henshaw was recently made president of the Massachusetts Land Trust Coalition.

Henshaw also helped welcome conference-goers to the Stone Church, built in 1872, home of the Trinitarian Congregational Church on Main Street. The Friends of the Stone Church have worked hard to raise money through donations and grants to restore the building, and work is ongoing.

Others who received Golden Spike awards were the family of the late Paul Penfield, for his work and advocacy to get the Wayside section of the MCRT



Keynote speaker Peter Harnik, author of "From Rails to Trails", shared his passion for rail trails.

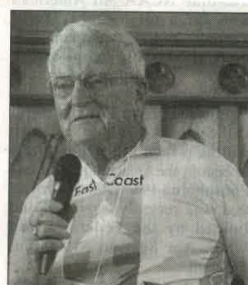
built; State Rep. Lindsay Sabadosa, D-Northampton, for her efforts to pass special legislation to allow Community Preservation Fund money to be used for buying land for rail trails, and William O'Neill for all he has done to make rail trails everywhere and his work on the East Coast Greenway, which connects 15 states and 450 cities and towns over 3,000 miles.

Railroad connections

Since rail trails are built on abandoned or dead railroad lines, it's not surprising that connections to railroads and their history also surfaced during the conference.

James D. Porterfield, who heads the Railroad Heritage & Tourism Institute, which is part of the Center for Railway Tourism at Davis & Elkins College in West Virginia, came to urge advocates to consider connecting rail trails with their railroad heritage as a way to celebrate railroads and attract tourists.

At its peak in the 1920s, railroads had 85,000 train stations and employed 2.7 million people, or about 5% percent of the country's



William O'Neill of East Coast Greenway accepts his Golden Spike award.

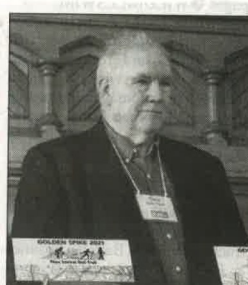
residents, he said.

He pointed to one rail trail in the Midwest that erected silhouettes of various railroad stations along the way so users can get an idea of what was there, and urged attendees to think about those connections.

He said the institute is working on a website, The Railroad Tourist, which will let people planning a trip identify railroad heritage sites, including railroads, former stations, restaurants in former railroad stations, related museums and rail trails. A prototype can be seen at www.therailroadtourist.com.

Matt Kierstead, an historian of engineering, industry and transportation, discussed his public history interpretation projects, and the work that went into creating new history signage for portions of the new 750-mile New York Empire State Trail.

He pointed to his work on the Albany-Hudson Electric Trail, which is a former electric trolley line now owned by National Grid. It runs for 36 miles between Rennselaer and Hudson, New York and is part of the Empire



Craig Della Penna prepares to present Golden Spike awards to Mass Central Rail Trail advocates.

State Trail.

He hunts down historic photos, meets with area historians and comes up with a plan for the signs that has to entertain as well as educate those who use the trails, he said. "It has to engage and be relatable to modern life," he said.

Kierstead also said a plan of how signs will look should be developed for the entire length of a project before any signs are created and installed.

Peter Harnik, a co-founder of the national advocacy group, Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, closed out the speaker portion of the conference, much to attendees' delight. Although retired, his career has included bicycle and park advocacy. He began his talk with several quotes from his book published last year entitled, "From Rails to Trails," which is a history of how former railroads became trails.

He also talked about railroad connections. "Rail trails are subtle and thought provoking too. Do you notice that waterways are hugged tightly enough to provide the flattest possible profile and lowest possible construction costs, but no so close that rising stormwa-

ters would have washed away the ballast, ties and tracks?" he read. "How about those overturned granite, cast steel or concrete posts? They were whistle posts, each one positioned hundreds of yards ahead of country road crossings, to remind a locomotive engineer to sound the whistle. I've seen dads on tandems instruct their children to go 'Wooooooo-Wooooooo-Woo-Woooooo' – that's the proper rule book cadence – as they whiz past the posts."

He said while some former railroad lines have been lost forever, turning those that are still around into rail trails "is really worth all the pain and effort."

Harnik read a perfect description of the pleasure that a rail trail can provide. "Some rail trails are obvious and sensory; they are flat, or very nearly so, even to the point of being magical. If you're cycling on a trail and it's getting dark, and you're on the verge of being late enough to get a reprimand when you come home, but the rhythm of your legs and the cadence of your lungs are so perfect, and the glimpse of the view around the broad next bend is so enticing, and you haven't had to shift gears for what seems like forever or make more than the barest tweak to the angle of your handlebar, and the bridges fly over the passing streams with implacable authority, and you simply can't bring yourself to turn around or stop, then it's a rail trail."

Guided walks around Gilbertville, including a tour of the Gilbertville Mill complex that will become a cannabis cultivation site, and bicycle rides to Wheelwright and portions of the MCRT from Hardwick to Ware that are under construction, were also available after the speakers.