

PLOWING THE RAIL TRAIL IN NORTHAMPTON, MA

The longest open rail-trails in southern New England, has been getting the snowy end of the stick for years. The Ryan Bikeway, also known as the City of Northampton Bikeway, has been open since 1983 but has never known the benefits of a snow plow --until the winter of 2003-04.

Over the years, this recreation trail has evolved into a transportation trail as the number of people using it for more utilitarian purposes has steadily increased, including children walking and biking to school each day. The city has realized that not plowing the trail and allowing it to remain snow-covered for limited user groups such as cross-country skiers is unwise public policy.

In fact, even cross-country use was hindered due to people trudging through the snow on a daily basis, trampling down the path with thousands of footprints.

When a city councilor was provided with evidence that other areas in New England plow their trails, he took it to Mayor Higgins who, in turn, asked the head of the DPW about its capability to plow the trail as part of a regular route through the city. After researching the project, the DPW agreed to integrate plowing of the trail into the route.

The DPW uses three pieces of specialized equipment: a six-wheeled tractor with a snowblower attachment and a bulldozer tread tractor with a plow. If the trail needs sand after it is plowed, they will follow up using a four-wheel drive pickup with a sander body.

It has been such a success that plowing continues on, this year—and scores of kids continue to walk and bike to school each day.

