



NORWOTTUCK NETWORK

MASS CENTRAL RAIL TRAIL — BOSTON TO NORTHAMPTON —104 MILES

May 13, 2023

My name is Craig Della Penna, I live in Florence, MA and I am writing today in support of LD 404 to allow the Mountain Division corridor to become a trail and LD 1450 to help fund the building of the trail. The best use for the state-owned Mountain Division corridor is a wide, paved trail for walkers, bikers, and runners, which will be accessible to people of all ages and abilities. This trail extension will connect to the existing, nine miles of Mountain Division rail-trail in Fryeburg, Gorham and Windham.

Though you are likely to get quite a few other letters of support for these bills, I approach this from an entirely different stand point.

Early in my professional career, I marketed rail freight and planned the start-up and managed the operations of several, large-scale, contemporary transloading facilities. One of those facilities—over a mile long—was one of the largest in the north-east. I actually know how to make a railroad work. However, beyond that, I have a background in railroad history and have written a series of books about old rail-lines and their conversions to rail trails.

Around the turn of the century, I left the railroad industry and worked several years for Rails-to-Trails Conservancy as a field representative assisting states and communities work through the complicated issues surrounding these conversions. Especially the issue of rail vs trail. “Should we remove the rail and make a trail instead?” That is usually the easiest of the issues to solve. “*Does it make economic sense to have a RR where it is going to lose money?*”

You been wrestling with this for a while now. In fact, about 18 month ago, I spoke about this very issue before your task force. My take on the situation hasn’t changed. It really does need to become a trail. **About 20 years ago**, Vermont was going through the same hand-wringing, stressful community conversation about a 96 mile railroad corridor across the rural top of the state. The St. Johnsbury and Lamoille County Railroad —ST&LC. That was actually the western end of your Mt. Division Railroad.

Back then in 2003, I was watching the back and forth letters in newspapers in VT over this. Lots of passion on both sides for sure, but the rail proponents were not only especially passionate about keeping the rail line, but they also had some basic facts wrong about how a railroad actually worked—financially.

I wrote a lengthy op ed piece about the history of why the railroad was there and why it didn’t make sense anymore to operate as a railroad. It had been operating as a ‘pretend’ railroad for 20 years. That is to say a railroad that no private entity wanted to operate without substantial public participation. Here’s a link to the essay. <https://www.norevisionisthistory.org/stj-lc>

That essay for the Vermont end of this railroad still applies to this day, to your end in Maine. Except for the fact that today, we have much more data on the impact of a trail on communities than we had 20 years ago. Very compelling data.

All this talk about long trails is very interesting. And the people in the trail world know that this is a compelling story, but until now, there hasn't been a good, highly credentialed report on what the likely experience of a long, finished trail in New England will mean in terms of economic impact.

And just this past week, our consultants finished a report that provides an answer to the question here that has never asked—until now. *“What would a completed Mass Central Rail Trail mean to the Commonwealth—and the communities along the way?”*

We (Norwottuck Network) then put out a Request for Proposals (RFP) to find a consultant who could write a report that would answer the underlying question. Here's the RFP that went out last summer. <https://www.nnnetwork.net/rfp> .

We hired a nationally recognized consultant and their work was completed just last week. The metrics that have been discovered are compelling. The MCRT will intersect with 18 other shared-use paths. There will be 4-5 million users a year. 960K just in the most rural county— Worcester County. 400K overnight visitors will be coming. It will mean \$200 million a year to the Commonwealth and the communities along the way.

Here's the link to the report. <https://www.nnnetwork.net/the-report>

Thanks for the opportunity to weigh-in and good luck in your process.



Craig Della Penna
Board Chair