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FEATURED TOP STORY

Dream come true: North Conway Rec Path now open

Tom Eastman
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1 of 5



A cyclist rounds the bend near the Thompson Road access point of the North Conway Rec Path on July 1. One of three informational kiosks along the path is seen at left. (RACHEL SHARPLES PHOTO)

CONWAY — “It’s all come together, right on schedule. Today’s our last day on the job — we’re just finishing up some landscaping. But yeah, we’re set to go!”

So said Chris Murray, 38, project supervisor for A.J. Coleman and Son Inc. of Conway, speaking this past Wednesday about the completion of the Mt. Washington Valley Trails Association’s new paved North Conway Rec Path.

The winding 2.9-mile all-access (to non-motorized vehicles, other than class 1 e-bikes) trail extends from Cranmore Mountain Resort south across Thompson Road and then along the discarded Route 16 bypass corridor between the western shoulder of scenic Pudding Pond and the North-South Road, ending at Hemlock Lane just north of the North Conway Walmart.

Coleman had been given a contract extension to July 5 to add landscaping and other touches. Their 10-man crew has been out since last fall, working with Kevin Hamlin of HEB Engineers and Burr Phillips Civil Solutions LLC of Bartlett and town staff to get the new recreation path ready.

ADVERTISING

People started using the path before the project was completed, but now it is officially open. A formal grand opening is set for September.

"People have been out here already, of course, while we've been finishing up — I saw a long skateboarder last week doing one stretch near Thompson Road and it looked like he was a snowboarder or a surfer riding the curl. We've also had a lot of bicyclists, some walkers and earlier this week on one of those Razor scooters," said Murray, a 2003 Kennett High graduate, Bartlett native and now Conway resident, who said he is proud to have seen the project from start to finish.

A visit Monday to the smooth, 10-foot wide pathway also showed generations of families setting out on it, with a family from Nashua who own a second home in Intervale going for a walk, with the older folks walking with their daughter-in-law and son, who was pushing their 17-month-old granddaughter in a stroller.

"We've read about it over the past year, so we thought it would be fun to give it a try. Plus, with all this rain, we were dying to get out of the house!" said the grandmother in the group.

Meanwhile, mountain bikers who were accessing nearby Conway-owned trails on the Schiavi property in Redstone could also be seen departing from the Hemlock Lane parking area near Walmart.

In time, if all goes according to plan, the Kevin Memorial Skate Park will be built off to one side at the Hemlock Lane lot, with the group scheduled to come before Conway selectmen at their July 18 board meeting for an update of their fundraising progress and plans.

The new recreation path has three access points — one is next to the new Fairfield Inn and Suites by Marriott at Cranmore; a second is where the trail crosses Thompson Road midpoint between the north and southern end; and the third is at the southern terminus at Hemlock Lane.

It features three bridges over wetland areas, according to Burr Phillips of Civil Solutions LLC of Bartlett, who did the design work.

Two bridges consist of boardwalks. The one near the new hotel at Cranmore is 96 feet long, crossing a tributary to Kearsarge Brook; the second, 48 feet in length, crosses Artist Brook near Thompson Road; and the third is a 148-foot boardwalk near the northern end of Pudding Pond.

Phillips said the path has a grade of no more than 4.8 percent to comply with ADA accessibility criteria of being under 5 percent, with grades of 3.8 percent on the flatter section on the southern end and a few short sections north of Pudding Pond where it will be 4.8 percent.

The path features four block walls on the southern end and some fencing near the steeper sections. Bollards have been installed at either end to prevent motorized vehicles from accessing the path.

Meier — MWV Trails Association president and an attorney for Cooper Cargill Chant of North Conway, who has been a pivotal part of bringing the rec path to fruition — outlined funding for the first phase from Cranmore to Walmart.

He said it received a \$1.6 million matching Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Improvement Program grant as well as a \$200,000 Northern Borders grant, along with Community Development Finance Authority tax credits of \$240,000; Connie Davis Watson, \$300,000; Ham Foundation, \$200,000; Gibson-Woodbury Charitable Foundation, \$100,000; River Run Companies, \$100,000; and many other local grants.

After this section is completed, the MWVSTA looks forward to continuing the trail eastward toward Fryeburg to link to the Mountain Division Trail.

They have secured grant funding to extend the trail from Cranmore 2.2 miles north to pass on a yet-to-be secured route through parts of Whitaker Woods with a preferred route northeast of the Conway Scenic Railroad tracks to the state's Scenic Vista area in Intervale.

They are also looking westward, planning a 1.6-mile section in Bartlett from Attitash Ski Area and Thorne Pond to the Bartlett School and Library.

Eventually they plan to "close the gaps" and link these short sections to form a continuous trail system, a "Linear Parkway" that provides recreational opportunities to residents and visitors along the way.

Coleman's Murray said: "It was a great project — as a local, I'm proud to look at it and say I helped to build it. I think it's going to do a lot for locals and well as visitors.

"I hope we get the contract for the next phase," he added, referring to the next 2.2-mile phase planned to go from Cranmore to the state's Scenic Vista in Intervale, on a route still being determined but which Meier and Larry Garland, vice president of the trails association and its rec path chair, say will likely skirt the Conway Scenic Railroad tracks through Whitaker Woods.

A grand opening celebration for Phase 1 is planned for Sept. 12, according to Garland, whose day job is working as the cartographer for the Appalachian Mountain Club.

In separate interviews this week, the project's expected benefits for rec path users of all ages and physical abilities were touted by District 1 Executive Councilor Joe Kenney (R-Wakefield), MWV Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Michelle Cruz; Cranmore Marketing Director Becca Deschenes, Meier and Garland.

Also interviewed Monday at the Cranmore trailhead was Steve Swenson, 90, now of Exeter but formerly of Kearsarge and onetime rec path committee member, who said he plans to get an e-trike.

"I think this going to be great for everyone," said Swenson, a retired SAU 9 school psychologist whose wife Sally, a retired music teacher just did the Mt. Washington Hillclimb for her 80th birthday. They are parents of pro mountain biker Peter Swenson and three-time Olympic cross-country skier Carl Swenson.

Also on hand Monday for a group photo to celebrate the completion of the path were other volunteers, including fundraising consultant Tim Scott of Jackson, and capital campaign chairs Ted and Sharon Wroblewski of Intervale.

"We rode it with our grandchildren two weeks ago," Ted Wroblewski said of the rec path.

"It was an 11-mile round-trip from our home on Intervale Cross Road to Cranmore and then on the path to Hemlock Lane and back. They loved it," said Wroblewski, noting he and Sharon used E1 bikes (E2 and E3 bikes will not be allowed on the paved Rec Path).

In addition to the Swensons and Wroblewskis, other members of the original capital campaign committee for the path, formed in 2017, were Meier, Garland, Marianne Borowski, Ralph Cronin, Joe Berry, Jill Reynolds, Ray Mitchell, Sue Ruka, Nancy Cavalieri, Janice Crawford and Tim Scott.

He said the project garnered great support from the community when the fundraising campaign was launched, especially in terms of obtaining tax credits from the state, much as Mountain Top Music did when it got funds to renovate the Majestic Theatre in recent years.

"People believed in this. It's going to be great for the valley," said Wroblewski, former co-owner with his wife of the Berberhof Inn in Bartlett and co-founder of White Mountain Puzzles in Jackson.

"People saw the potential," said Scott, who has been involved with many other community projects over the years.

Also on hand for the group portrait was MWV Trails Association secretary Laurel Smith, daughter of Conway Scenic Railroad co-founders Dwight and the late Gee Smith; and board members Sally McMurdo, Ralph Cronin, longtime trails advocate Doug Armstrong and Civil Solutions' Phillips.

Absent on vacation were Meier and Deputy Conway Town Manager/Town Engineer Paul DegliAngeli; and other board members Earl Sires III and Jeanne Twehous.

Providing comments to the Sun on the completion of the path this week were Cruz and Deschene

Noted Cruz, who worked as liaison for the chamber and the rec path prior to succeeding Janice Crawford as executive director: "The MWV Rec Path is a much needed amenity for the Mount Washington Valley, and Phase 1 is only the beginning.

"It's wonderful seeing locals and visitors getting out to enjoy the opportunity to recreate while not on a busy motorized road," she said.

"Thank you to the hard work and dedication of the MWV Trails Association. They had a vision, came across several obstacles, and continued to move forward. I am personally thankful and look forward to spending time on this path with my family and friends.

"This path will offer an alternative path for transportation, which will help to reduce the number of vehicles on the road while commuting in the North Conway Village," Cruz said.

Added Deschenes, speaking for Cranmore: "The rec path is a wonderful addition that we are proud to be part of, collaborating with many passionate partners to make this happen.

"Community involvement is one of the resort's core values. Since 2018, we have donated just under \$40,000 to help fund the project with events such as the Rock the Rec summer concerts, the Mountain Meisters Pay2Play program, and general resort donations," she noted.

"This is such a great amenity for not only guests staying onsite or visiting the resort, but also tying our active community together. A big congratulations to everyone involved to make this happen!" Deschenes said.

She noted that Cranmore — which also offers a Mountain Bike Family Adventure Park for all ability levels — is offering rec path bike rentals adjacent to the trailhead.

Full suspension e-bikes will be available for rental at the satellite rental facility and at the main bike rental office by Cranmore's ticket office (in front of the new Fairbank Lodge under construction).

Meantime, here are some stats on what the project has entailed.

Two years ago, Coleman was selected as the general contractor for submitting a low bid of \$2.6 million. Total cost for the project was \$3.5 million, with an added \$150,000 for the landscaping.

The three kiosks along the route at Cranmore, Thompson Road and Hemlock Lane bear the wording, "Welcome to the Mt. Washington Valley Rec Path: A non-motorized, multi-use path and alternative transportation corridor."

All three kiosks contain a map showing the course of the path.

Eventually, at many of the 17 pullout areas and at scenic pond overlooks, Meier and Garland said, there will not only be benches but many will also have interpretative signs, showing natural highlights as well the topics pertaining to regional history.

"It's all a start, so it will take a while for all of the signs, but we will have a few to begin with," said Garland.

Strollers ... walkers ... rollerblading ... cyclists. Speaking of bikes, Sara Thomson of Stan and Dan Sports is one of several local bike shops that sell electric bikes.

Thompson said Category 1 bikes are "motor-assist only," meaning that a rider has to be pedaling for it to provide any assistance and that they have a top speed of 20 mph. Those are the only type of e-bikes allowed on the new rec path.

Category 2 e-bikes, she said, "Typically have a throttle involved —they can go up to 20 mph as well."

Category 3 gives an assist while the rider is pedaling and can attain speeds up to 28 mph.

Walkers will be glad to know the path has no more than 4 percent grade in keeping with AMA regulations, making it a good place for those with physical challenges to exercise.

Interviewed this week, Executive Councilor Kenney said he thinks it will be a tourism boon but will also become an alternative transportation path for locals seeking a different way to get to work and to shop — and that was key for its obtaining a Congested Air Quality and Mitigation Improvement grant.

Work on the project began in fall 2022 and ceased during the winter but recommenced this spring.

The paved path joins the many non-paved mountain biking routes in the valley.

The MWVSTA's website (mwvrecpath.org) notes that North Conway Recreation Path is designed to provide opportunities for physical activity to improve fitness, mental health and safe transportation alternatives.

Walkers, joggers, bicyclists, strollers, E-1 bike users and others will enjoy this multi-purpose scenic path and all that it offers along the way, including access to local businesses; and connections to the Pudding Pond and Sticks & Stones trailheads for hiking and mountain biking.

Thanks to the community's support, the dream has become a reality. Its health and economic benefits are going to be a fun thing to see as word gets out about North Conway's latest amenity for guests and locals alike.

For further information, go to mwvrecpath.org.

Tom Eastman

Reporter