

Towpaths to Trails

2025 Update

How Trails along the Middlesex Canal can be links in the Commonwealth's Priority Trail Network and fulfill the goals of the Canal Commission



Presentation to the Annual Meeting
Middlesex Canal Commission

20 March 2025

Andrew Jennings
MCA Proprietor
& FORTT Leader

Doug Chandler
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Middlesex Canal Commission



Part A

Review of 2024 Report

Towpaths to Trails

How Trails along the Middlesex Canal can be links in the Commonwealth's Priority Trail Network and fulfill the goals of the Canal Commission



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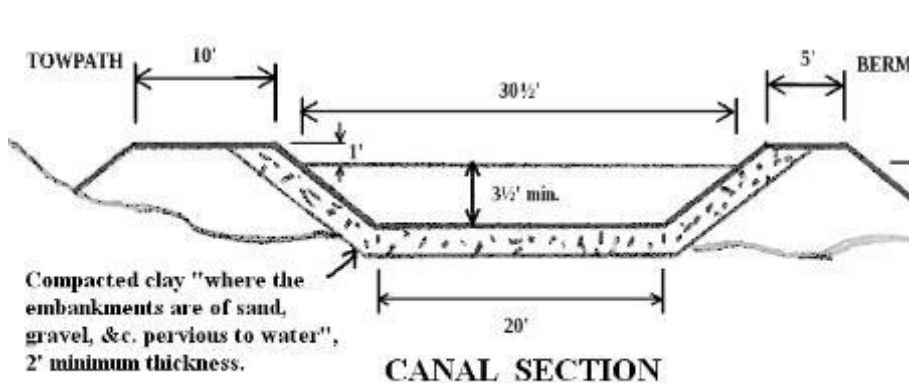
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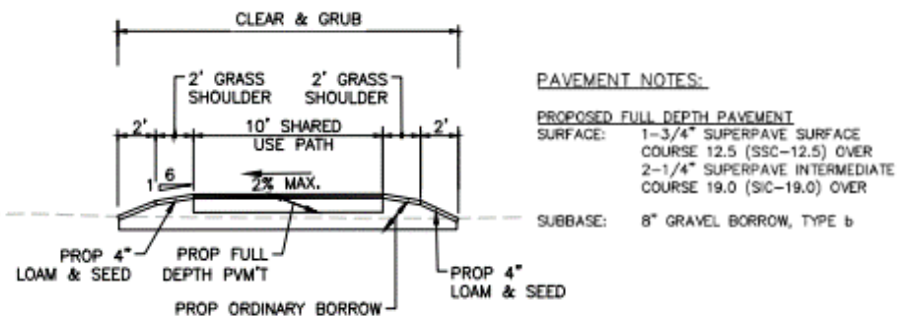


What does recreational use of the towpath mean to our canal?

- Opportunity for outside funding to improve and preserve the towpath as a trail, fix swampy areas
- Brings recreational users to the canal where they can be educated on the historical importance of the canal.

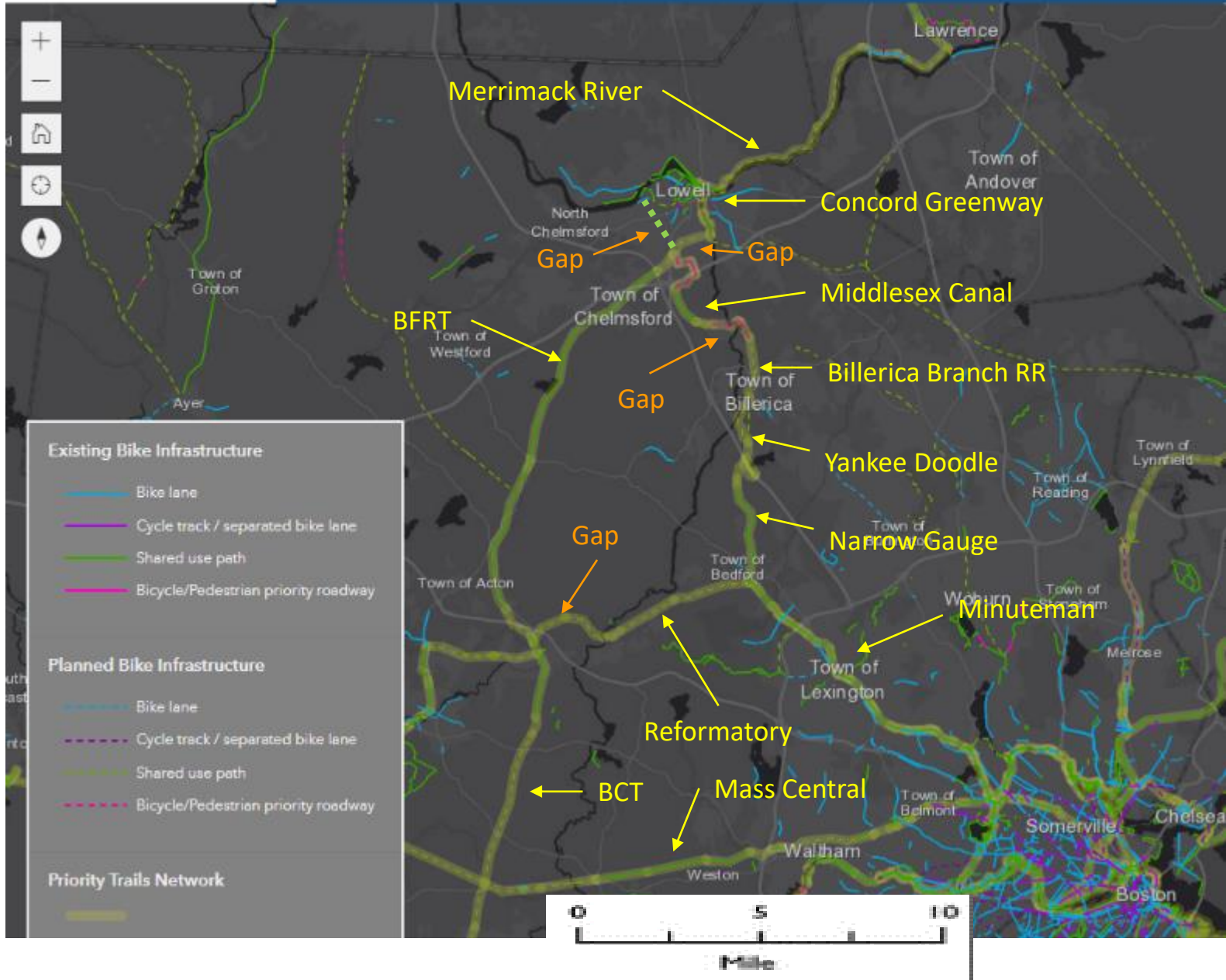


Revised 2014, J.Breen. See p. 19, /The Middlesex Canal/ by Lewis Lawrence.



Typical Rail Trail (Woburn)

- Rough estimate is ~ \$2M/mile, from recent Woburn Rail Trail study <https://www.woburnma.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Shared-Use-Path-Feasibility-Study-Canal-and-RR-ROW-2022.pdf>



Primary Project

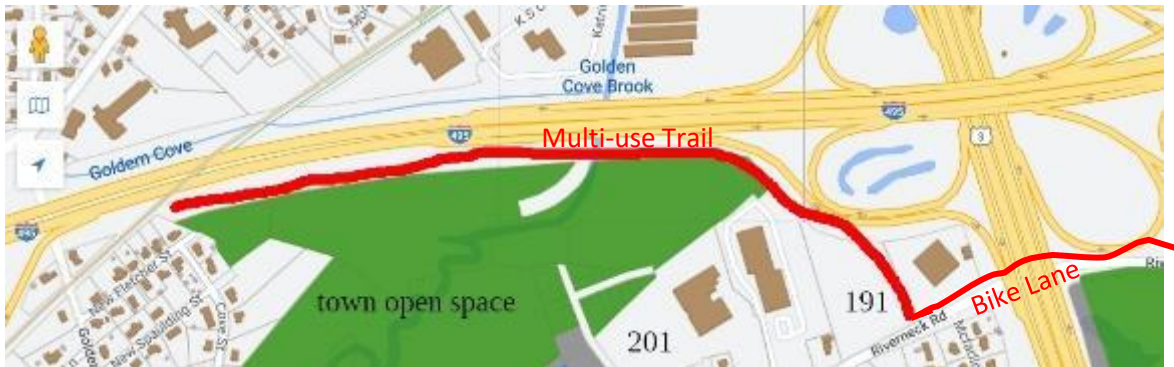
“Thoreau Towpath”

- Connects Canal Museum to Merrimack River
- Four distinct segments:
 1. Canal Museum to Riverneck Road at Canal Street
 2. Riverneck Road at Canal Street to Bruce Freeman Rail Trail
 3. Bruce Freeman Rail Trail to schools **in Lowell Highlands**
 4. Schools to Merrimack River
- Historic Link to Thoreau
 - In 1839 Henry David Thoreau took a trip in a small dory from Concord MA to the Merrimac River and wrote a book about his travels.
 - Two of the best sections of the canal on which Thoreau journeyed in 1839 still exist in Billerica and Lowell, mellowed back to nature by the passage of two centuries of benign neglect.
 - The proposed Thoreau Path will memorialize this inspiring author, his trip, and the low-cost water transport that made Lowell competitive with Manchester England.

Segment 2 –Riverneck Road and Canal Street to Bruce Freeman Rail Trail

Original Idea

- Connect to BFRT south of tunnel
- Run along highway right of way, far below traffic, like Yankee Doodle beside Route 3
- Easement at east side of 191 property to Riverneck Road
- Riverneck Road over Rt 3 and under Lowell Connector, to Middlesex Canal via Canal St, thence Yankee Doodle to Bedford



Alternate Idea

- Avoid dealing with MA DOT by using town open space and Water District road

Common Factors

- Public land ¾ mile from BFRT to highway ramp 495 to 3
- Need to squeeze between ramp and buildings and cross private land for last couple hundred yards



Segment 3a, from BFRT/110 to Schools, 0.7 miles, would be relatively easy to construct



Starts just across the Cross Point parking lot from east end of BFRT (old Middlesex Canal route)

Pipeline (west route):

OK as is for walking/running or mountain bike

Six 1-2 foot stream jumps
Enter from Alpine Butcher

Powerline (east route):

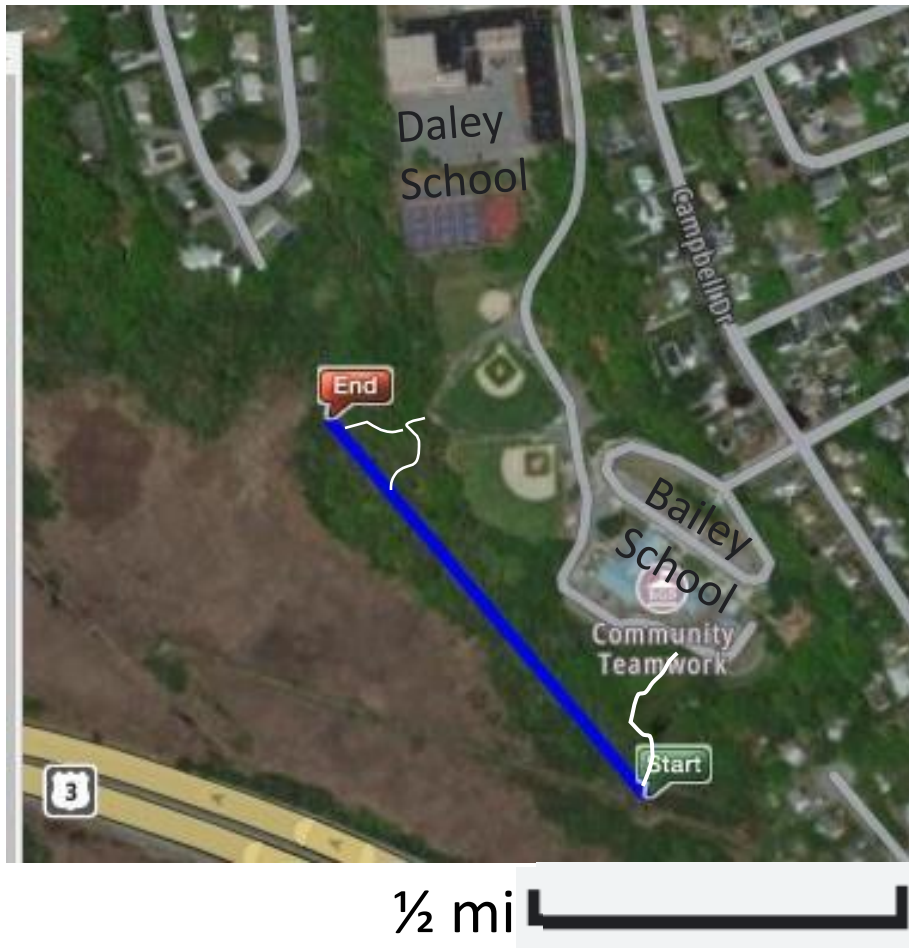
Flat and level but overgrown
Enter behind brick pump house

Paths overlap in some places

Either one is almost as good as a railroad right of way to build on
Choice depends on easements and safety rules

All land owned by City or Electric Co

3.B Easy Park and Nature Trail: Swamp to Schools = 0.3 miles



Flat woods:

- Above the waterline
- Downhill from schools and ball fields
- About 1000x200 feet (5 acres) of flat land
- Good for nature trail, park, picnic tables, etc
- Well-worn easy paths already
 - “Start” to Bailey School
 - “End” to ball fields

All land in this segment is owned by the City of Lowell

Park & Nature Trail



Five acres of flat land down hill from the schools

Segment 4a contains one of the best-preserved canal segments but is hard to access. Schools to Local Streets or Canal, 0.3mi.

Westview Rindo Park Sanders



1/2 mi

East side - Hard to find a good route that is:

- Above the waterline
- Flat, smooth, and gentle enough for bike path

West side – 3 possible not perfect routes:

- #1 to Westview
- #2 to canal
- #3 side trip to canal

Land owned by:

- City
- Eastern Salt Co
- a few private owners

4b Schools to Merrimack River **still has** multiple options

Rourke Bridge Project with bike lanes



- Not as easy as other sections
- At least 4 options, none of them perfect
- Mostly residential streets
- Solid blue is most likely route

Canal route now buried

Baldwin St

Canal visible

Old Dump

Canal visible on golf course

1/4 mile of beautiful canal

Westford Street

Westview Road

Two "paper streets"

Swampy and would need easement from Eastern Salt

Daley School baseball field

Scale: See mile marker

Summary and Conclusions

Why is This Important Now?

- COVID created an additional demand for high quality outdoor active recreation infrastructure.
- An unprecedented amount of money is (was?) available for active transportation infrastructure projects.
- A network of connected trails is being developed, potentially opening up access to the Middlesex Canal to a much wider population of recreational users if the Middlesex Canal is connected to that network.
- At least one segment of the Thoreau Path is on the MassTrails Priority Vision Map, making the Canal Commission's priority a MassDOT priority.
- The biggest remaining gap in the Eastern Mass trail system is the Greater Lowell area.

Next steps

- Integrate plans for trails along Middlesex Canal into municipal and regional plans
 - Municipalities are the project initiators for most of the trail projects developed using transportation funds
 - Projects may not be eligible for funding unless they are in regional plans
- Select a segment to move towards project initiation to learn about the project development process
- Expand volunteer base to cover all nine municipalities once served by the canal
 - Develop alliances with existing bike and pedestrian groups
 - Work with local historical societies

Part B

Update

As of March 2025

- FORTT
- Lowell
- Chelmsford
- Billerica
- Funding

FORTT Update

- Friends of Regional Towpaths and Trails (FORTT)
 - Founded in 2024
 - Informal group of trail advocates
 - Bill Kuttner, J Breen, Marlies, Andrew, and Doug
- Working to advance

Lowell Update

- Connector trail from BFRT to Concord River
 - Well underway by LP&CT, no longer a FORTT job
 - Passable from Route 3 to behind Target Store on Plain St
 - Crossing 6-track rail yard still an obstacle to Concord River
- Cross Point to Merrimack
 - FORTT priority is working with Lowell city and LP&CT on this
 - Lowell Bicentennial is a schedule driver
 - South of schools: route is easy and obvious
 - North of schools: rough terrain, easements, and city streets complicate route to river
 - Now arranging a drive/walk tour of the route for LP&CT and city (week of 24 March)
 - (Detail was left in Part A Review regarding this segment)

Chelmsford Update

- Chelmsford drafting or revising two plans in 2024
 - Town Strategic Plan
 - Open Space and Recreation Plan (OSRP)
- FORTT activities
 - Maintained liaison with Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committee (BPAC)
 - Attended Strat Plan meetings and agitated for multi-use trails
 - Attended OSRP (with BPAC chair)
 - Got agreement to add wording for coordinating multi-use trails with surrounding towns (e.g. Lowell and Billerica)
 - (Unfortunately these words disappeared in later editing)
 - Monitoring Planning Board re future Riverneck Road (Mercury Computer) development

Billerica Update

- NOAA/OARS dam removal project
 - Members of MCA and MCC continue the fight to force adherence to “Section 106” historical review law
 - Loss of dam and Summit Pond would cause irreversible damage to historical site
 - Remediation efforts could include support for trail crossing of Concord River
 - *Open question? Will end of federal “easy money” era halt dam removal? Or just halt remediation funds?*
- Yankee Doodle
 - Work continues on the trail to which we will connect

Funding Update

- FORTT worked in 2024 to keep our proposed trail connections on planning docs
 - Without listing on state and municipal planning documents, future funding is a non-starter
 - MassDOT and other state and county priority
 - Also on Lowell, Billerica, and Chelmsford plans
- Future funding predictions?
 - For example, the Chelmsford OSRP is entirely based on serving Environmental Justice (EJ) communities
 - How far down the chain will the recent pivot of federal priorities extend?

Appendix A

Existing Connecting Trails

Bay Circuit Trail (BCT) Overview

Bay Circuit Trail

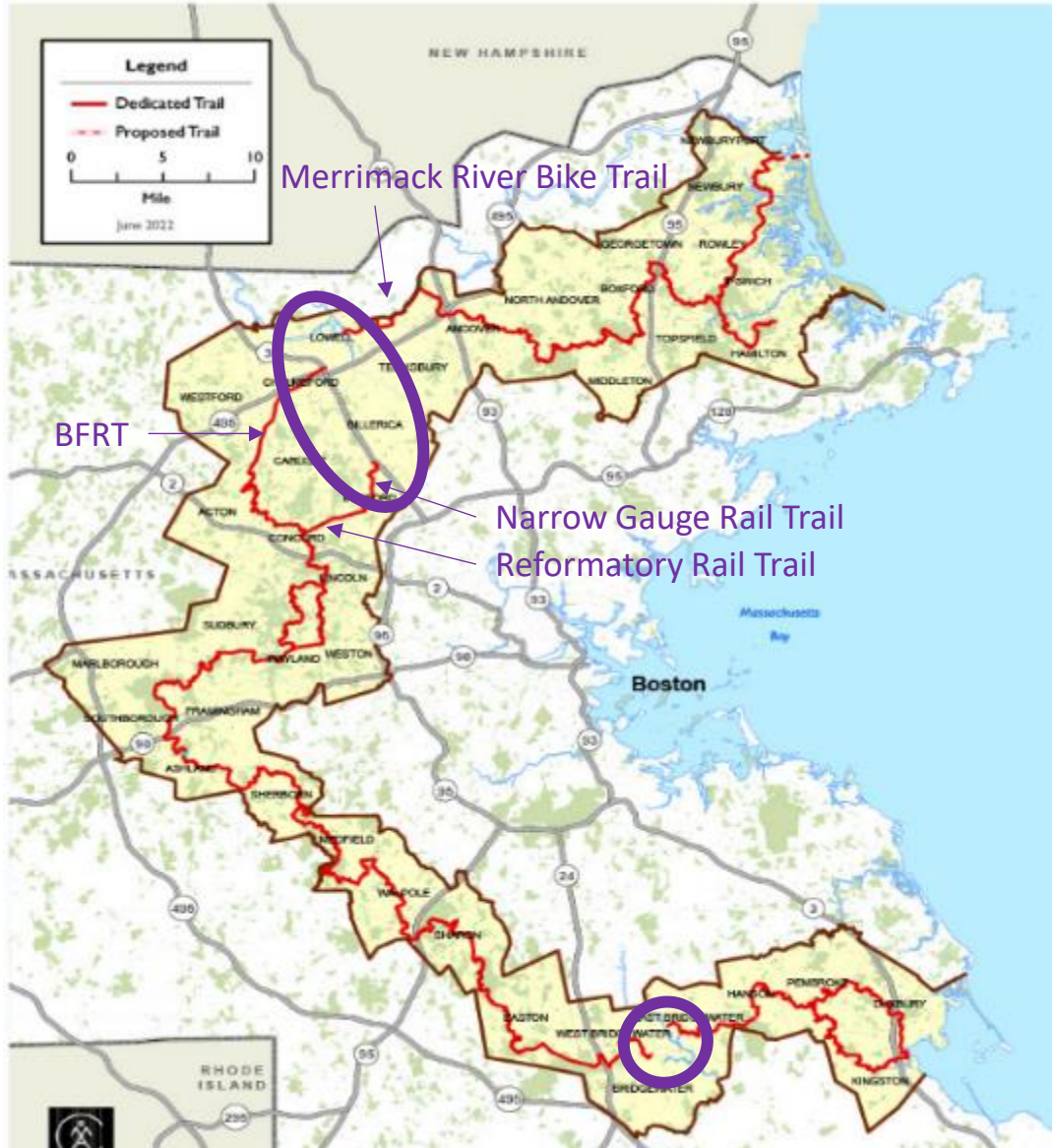
“The Bay Circuit Trail and Greenway or Bay Circuit is a Massachusetts rail trail and greenway connecting the outlying suburbs of Boston from Plum Island in Newburyport to Kingston Bay in Duxbury, a distance of 200 miles.”

[Wikipedia](#)

In over 200 miles of trails assembled from trails in 37 towns linked together, there are some gaps left to complete the circuit.

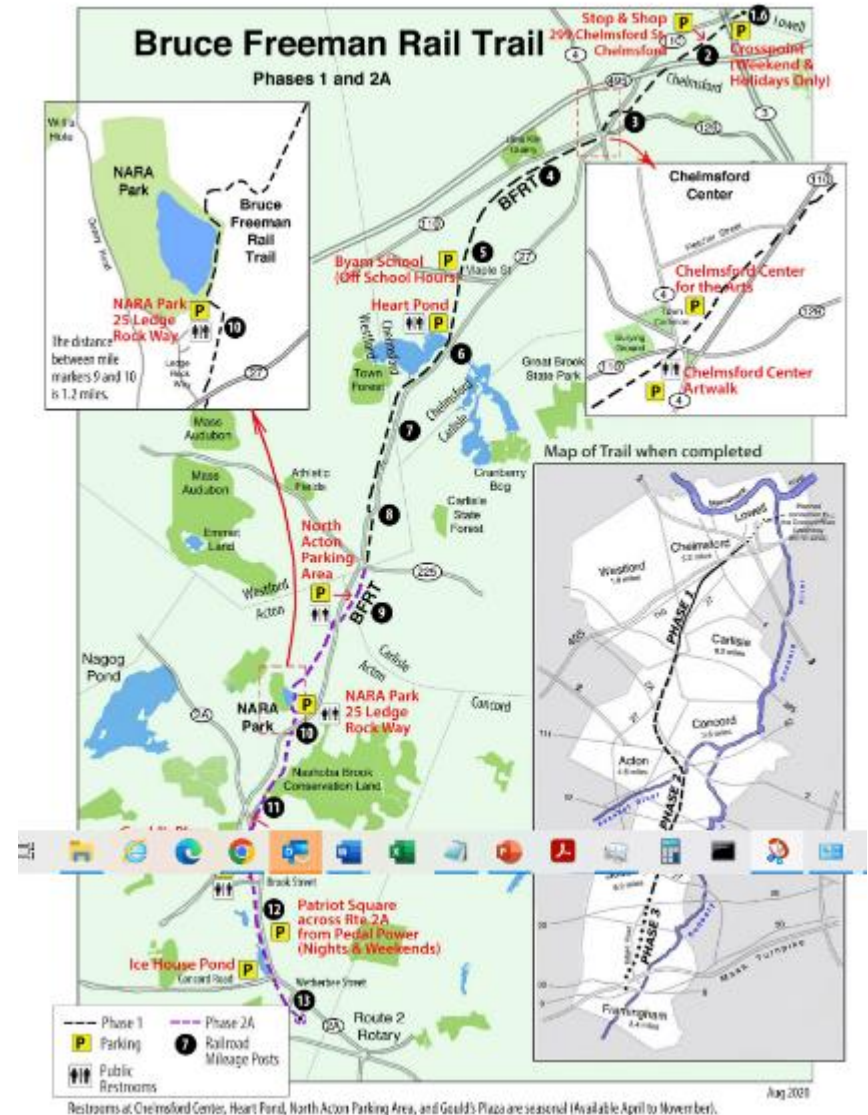
Greater Lowell and Bridgewater are the notable gaps.

Note east & west branches north of Concord



Bruce Freeman Rail Trail (BFRT)

- Acton/Carlisle/Westford/Chelmsford section of the BCT west
- Starts near Concord rotary
- Perfect trail all the way:
 - good surface
 - guard rails wherever needed
 - crossing signs on small roads
 - automatic flashing signs on major roads
 - bridge over 2A in Acton
 - tunnels under 495 & 3 at Lowell
- Formal BFRT ends just into Lowell at Cross Point (Wang) Tower
- Extension in progress and passable up to behind Target just off the Connector
- Gap getting to Concord River Greenway and thence BCT to Newburyport



Scale: See mile markers

Bruce Freeman Rail Trail (BFRT)



Fall trail in Acton



Westford DPW workers Jacob Rowe and Rick Savory removed a downed tree that was blocking the trail after a late summer storm.

Pix from <https://brucefreemanrailtrail.org/>



Concord River Greenway

← North

~1.5 mi

South →



The Concord River Greenway fills a missing link in the Bay Circuit Trail and Greenway, which is a 200-mile network of trails around greater Boston.



A long-term vision for the Greenway is to connect to the Bruce Freeman Rail Trail (BFRT), which

currently ends in Chelmsford at a tunnel under Route 3 (at CrossPoint Towers). BFRT will eventually connect Lowell to Framingham through this recreational trail corridor (25 miles total).

The Connector Trail will extend the BFRT into Lowell, through CrossPoint and under the Lowell Connector, with construction scheduled in 2022.



Extract from pamphlet by:

LOWELL PARKS & CONSERVATION TRUST

Appendix B

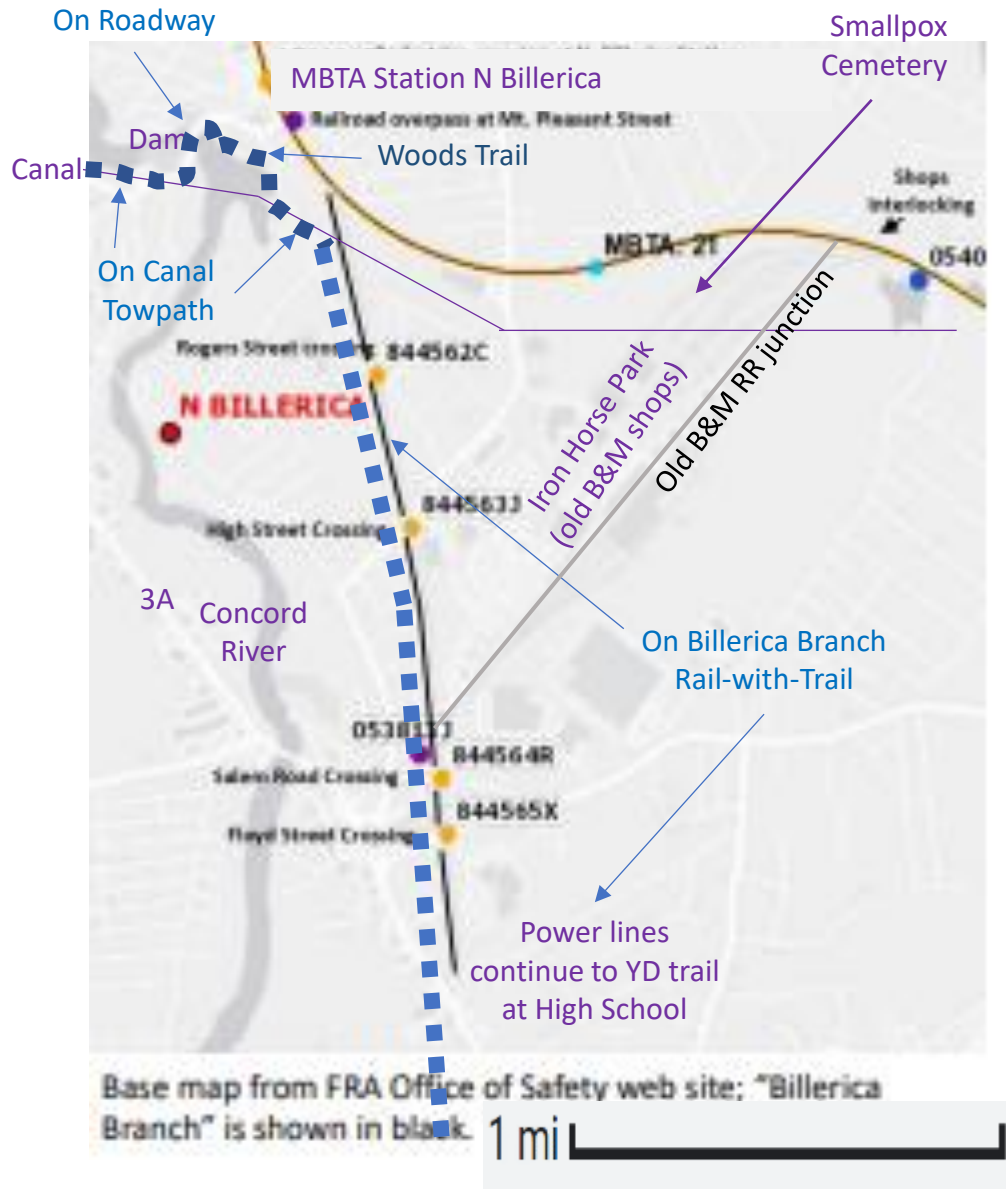
Related Projects

Connecting to other MassDOT
priority trail projects
not related to Middlesex Canal

- Billerica Branch
- Bruce Freeman Rail Trail – Concord River Greenway connection

“Billerica Branch” of old B&M RR

Originally the Billerica & Bedford Narrow Gauge RR

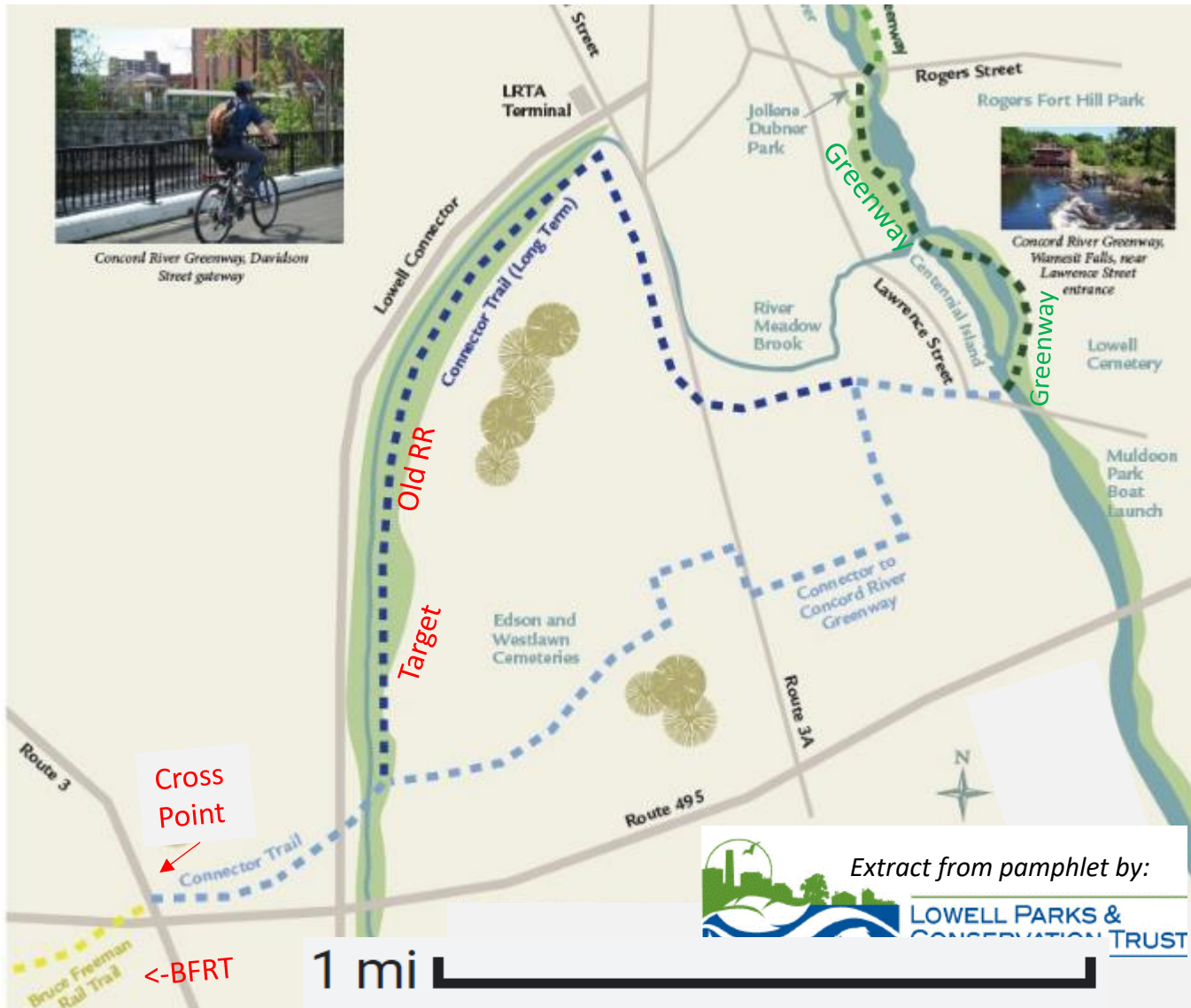


- The line is a little less than 2 miles long, extending from a switch off the inbound track of the Lowell Line south of Mt. Pleasant street to almost Heritage Road.
- There are no rail served industries on the line.
- A connection to tracks in Iron Horse Park is located north of Salem Road.
- For this presentation I have described this line as the “Billerica Branch” because
 - That was the name given to the branch in a Boston and Maine employee timetable
 - it avoids confusion with the existing “Narrow Gauge Rail Trail” in Bedford
 - it is a distinct project from the “Yankee Doodle Bike Path Phase 1” even though it is a logical addition to that project



From “MBTA’s Billerica Branch”, Presentation to Billerica’s Open Space and Recreation Plan Committee”, 13Jan2023, Andrew Jennings

Multiple options are being considered for the Bruce Freeman – Concord River Greenway Connection.



Riverneck Project put on Town of Chelmsford Assessor GIS Map

