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MORE INSIDE

EDUCATION

New charter schools eye north of Boston

By Steven Ryan
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Parents may soon have another option for their children's education, as a group looks to expand an Everett-based math- and science-focused charter

school to communities further north of the city, with Saugus and Woburn being eyed as potential locations.

The Pioneer Charter School of Science, which already has a campus in Everett, is proposing new

campuses in Woburn, Saugus and Billerica, according to a prospectus filed with the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

The new schools will follow the same model as in Everett, which

has a student body of about 360 from grades 7 through 12, with a curriculum focusing on math and science.

"Something we've been seeing is now-existing charter school operators interested in opening

networks of schools," said J.C. Considine, spokesman for the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

"I think it's encouraging," he said.

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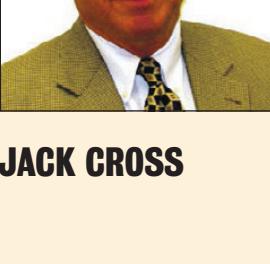
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JACK CROSS

PRINT EXTRAS

Here is what you find exclusively in the print edition of this week's Medford Transcript:

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RECREATION

RECREATION



Bryan Hamlin and Walter Kittredge prepare to walk a trail on Saturday, July 29 at Gate 21 off of Fallon Road.

WICKED LOCAL PHOTO BY NICOLE GOODHUE BOYD

Dispute over Middlesex Fells trails intensifies

By Nicholas Iovino
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Nestled between five communities north of Boston, a rocky landscape of trees, crags and lakes stretches across four square miles. The picturesquely plot of land appears an unlikely scene for a battle, but for the last 25 years, two groups have quarreled over access to trails at one of the state's largest

urban parks.

In 1987, the New England Mountain Biking Association (NEMBA) formed in response to what many bikers viewed as "efforts to restrict equitable access" to trails. What followed was a quarter-century-long battle between NEMBA and one of the park's most well-established user groups, the Friends of the Middlesex Fells.

In January 2012, the state Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) unveiled a long-anticipated Resource Management Plan (RMP) for the Fells, paving the way to open new miles of trails to mountain bikers.

The decision was celebrated as a victory by NEMBA,

which fought tooth and nail to make more single-track trails legal for bikers. For members of the Friends of the Fells, it was a devastating blow — one they feel will ultimately place the safety of hikers in jeopardy and

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HISTORY

Books recall rich West Medford history

By Nicholas Iovino
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The collection of homes dotting the roads south of High Street in West Medford might look to the unsuspecting eye like any other neighborhood. But for those who know the stories behind people who made the community what it is today, West Medford is much more.

To help preserve that rich history, the West Medford Community Center published two new books this year that will benefit the center.

"A Legacy Remembered:

The African American Community of West Medford" was the culmination of a four-year research project through Tufts University's Tisch Scholars Program.

At the same time, resident Will Tenney helped preserve the West Medford Afro-American Remembrance Project exhibit for future generations in the book, "Race, Place and Memory."

For the remembrance project, a group of volunteers working with Tufts and Brandeis universities

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PLACE, RACE, AND MEMORY: Remembering West Medford's African American Community



West Medford resident and book designer Will Tenney presents the 'Race, Place and Memory' book to Assistant Library Director Barbara Kerr. WICKED LOCAL PHOTO BY NICHOLAS IOVINO



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MIDDLESEX FELLS

Questions linger over state management plan

By Nicholas Lovino
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Resource Management Plans, or RMPs, are required for all state parks under the statute that created the Department of Conservation and Recreation in 2003.

While an RMP is not required before policy changes can be made, several outside groups insisted the state complete an RMP for the Middlesex Fells Reservation before making any changes.

DCR Commissioner Edward M. Lambert Jr. said the agency did not enter into the Fells RMP process with a premeditated agenda to change policies.

"There were requests from groups to see if an RMP process could help facilitate a clear path for users and how everyone could

share in that resource," said Lambert.

Friends of the Fells Board of Directors Chairman Bryan Hamlin said DCR officials assured his group the RMP process would be open, fair and that the Friends would be involved. Once it got underway, however, Hamlin said the Friends were not consulted enough and concerns were not addressed.

"We were trying to point out, 'Hey, you're talking of opening up this trail to bikers, but this is a priority one habitat. There are rare plants in that area. It's a wetland,'" Hamlin said.

For the last few years, Hamlin and his fellow Friends of the Fells board member Walter Kittredge have worked on a detailed study of plant life at the Fells.

In 2011, the pair

submitted a proposal to reclassify the Fells as a Forest Patch Preserve under the Forestry Visioning process.

Adam Glick, who heads NEMBA's Greater Boston Chapter, responded with a letter in November 2011 calling the proposal a "red herring designed to obfuscate and sabotage the DCR's Fells Trails Plan."

"They were the first people to trash the plan," said Glick. "They immediately started beating on DCR. This is the process they themselves asked to create."

While the RMP did state that skidding and spinning by mountain bikers could have a greater impact on soil displacement, the RMP also cited several studies reporting no considerable difference between hiker and biker impacts on the land.

Hamlin and other Friends of the Fells

members disagree with DCR's conclusions.

"As a botanist, the bikes bring a lot of unwanted seeds," said Hamlin. "The bikes turn up the soil much more. A bike tends to cut a rut with narrow wheels. That's how farmers plow a field. About 35 percent of all the plants in the Fells are non-native."

Hamlin maintains DCR never addressed the safety and environmental concerns his group raised during the process or after the first draft of the RMP was unveiled.

"We tried to address everyone's concerns," Lambert said of the RMP process. "At the end of the day, when a plan doesn't come out exactly the way someone wanted it to come out...

if your concerns are counter to the concerns of others, then at some point a

decision needs to be made, and we try to balance those."

Conflicting rules

The Fells is one of the only parks in the state where mountain biking is forbidden unless specifically allowed on certain trails. That's because the park is still governed by rules of the former Metropolitan District Commission.

The MDC and Department of Environmental Management merged to form the DCR under Gov. Mitt Romney in 2004.

The former DEM used a separate set of rules, making trails open to all non-motorized activities unless specifically posted as closed.

The DCR plans to adopt a new, standard set of guidelines for all its parks by the end of this year. The

new guidelines would allow all non-motorized equipment on trails unless specifically prohibited.

Currently, mountain bikers are allowed to ride about 36 miles of the wider 'carriage roads' or 'fire roads' and about 1.6 miles of single-track trails at the Fells.

Glick has for years blasted the unfairness of restricting mountain biking to only 1.6 of about 120 miles of single-track trails at the park.

The narrower, single-track trails are considered more desirable for both mountain bikers and hikers.

"Those represent the best kind of trail experience," said Glick. "A narrow trail that winds through the woods... you feel every connected to whatever you're experiencing."

FELLS

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disturb the park's natural habitats.

The dispute has stirred strong feelings of mistrust and animosity between the two user groups. The two sides have accused each other of unscrupulous tactics, secret deals, homophobia and even physical violence.

DCR acknowledged the growing tension in the final draft of its RMP this year, noting the RMP itself was one of the issues responsible for fostering a lack of cooperation, lack of empathy and mistrust between groups, including DCR.

"Our mission as an agency is a challenging one," said DCR Commissioner Edward M. Lambert Jr. "We have a responsibility to protect these incredible resources, but at the same time, allow access to them. We have to make sure we

preserve the resource for future generations, but we also have a responsibility to allow for reasonable access."

Reservoir trail

DCR's recent dismantling of stone steps on the Reservoir Trail in the northwest part of the Fells reignited tensions around the issue this July.

Responding to the incident, Friends of the Fells Executive Director Mike Ryan wrote a scathing editorial, chastising DCR for "destroying a revered section of the trail."

He called the incident "heartbreaking" for Fells hikers, especially for volunteers who spent countless hours building the trail improvements over the course of several years.

"Why couldn't the bikers go on a parallel trail?" Friends of the Fells Board of Directors Chairman Bryan Hamlin asked. "For us, it confirmed our fears that

it's not conversion to multi-use. It's conversion to bike use only."

Adam Glick, who heads NEMBA's Greater Boston Chapter, strongly disagreed with those sentiments.

"What happens if you have two hikers passing?" Glick asked. "Someone has to politely... there's an engagement there. People say hello. It's the same thing for a mountain biker and a hiker."

Glick said the original plan was to keep the stone steps in place and to build a bypass or boardwalk for bikers. However, he said the Stoneham Conservation Commission refused to approve those alternatives, which forced DCR to remove the steps.

However, Stoneham Conservation Commission Chairman Robert Conway said the commission never rendered a decision because DCR never submitted a formal plan for the bypass.

"You don't just point to

places and say 'We're going to move it here,'" said Conway. "They were going to submit a plan to our satisfaction, which they never did."

Conway said from his understanding, DCR decided to sidestep the commission by building a bypass trail outside of its jurisdiction. He believes DCR removed the steps in order to encourage visitors to use the new bypass trail.

DCR spokesperson SJ Port described the state agency's actions in an e-mail.

"The trail was re-routed around wetland areas to avoid impact to those sensitive areas... As part of the naturalization process, the stone steps, which were created in 2007 without DCR's consent, were dismantled," she wrote.

An issue of safety

Despite perceptions to the contrary, Hamlin says the Friends of the Fells is not against the mountain bikers.

"The Friends is not against biking," said Hamlin. "We're just for biking that is in compliance with national safety guidelines and protective of nature."

Hamlin said he wants DCR to follow the same safety guidelines for multi-use trails as the National Parks. He said the federally managed parks require a width of at least four feet for trails to be designated multi-use.

However, an expert with the National Park Service, who literally wrote the book on sustainable trail planning and design, said he is not aware of such a standard.

In his book, the "National Park Service's Guide to Sustainable Mountain Trails, Assessment, Planning and Design," Hugh Duffy states that "front country" trails, or trails three to five miles from a trailhead, should have a recommended width of two to five feet.

"I can also visualize areas that might even have 18 [inch] wide trails in NPS units in the front country," Duffy wrote in an e-mail.

DCR follows its own Trails Guidelines and Best Practices Manual to determine which trails are safe for multi-use designation.

"While width is an important consideration in determining the range of uses that would be allowed, it is less important than the volume of use, conditions and design requirements for the diverse user groups (equestrians, bicycles, pedestrians, wheelchairs, etc.)," Port explained in an e-mail.

Bad blood

Over time, several incidents have added venom to the already acrimonious relationship between the Friends of the Middlesex Fells and NEMBA.

In 2008, NEMBA proposed a plan to create new, legal single-track trails at the Fells and to "clean up the

mess of 'spider-web' trails that have been created by men-seeking-men in Dark Hollow Pond and hopefully, bring in positive use to displace a negative use."

Hamlin said that deal was interpreted by some gay rights groups as unfair and discriminatory. Glick vehemently denied NEMBA was in any way anti-gay. He said they simply wanted to help curb an activity that is both illegal and causing environmental problems at the park.

"To say someone's targeting a particular group, that's crazy," said Glick. "For that part of the park, we needed some plan to address it. We presented the plan to make it shared use. Hopefully, people start using that portion and it will be a benefit."

Glick added NEMBA embraces people of all races, creeds, genders and sexual orientations.

Rumors of a quid pro quo between NEMBA and DCR has recently emerged. Supposedly, by helping to drive out the individuals engaging in "male cruising," mountain bikers would gain new swaths of legal biking trails.

Glick said he resented the rumors and allegations. He added his group never intended to take on the role of "enforcers" at the park, and he denied ever striking a backroom deal with DCR.

"We always follow an extremely professional, open process with all land managers," said Glick. "There was a formal proposal to DCR, and they approved it."

Another event that added fuel to the fire was a letter Glick wrote in November 2011, attempting to discredit Hamlin and Fells board member Walter Kittredge survey of plant life at the Fells.

Glick also accused Kittredge of claiming to be a Ph.D when he was not one.

Hamlin accepted blame for accidentally listing Kittredge as a Ph.D on the Friends of the Fells website, but said it was an honest mistake.

Glick maintains Kittredge presented himself as a Ph.D at multiple public meetings. The Friends deny the allegation.

Heated encounters on the trail tend to intensify the animosity as well. Hikers say incidents of dangerous and illegal biking on restricted trails go unreported. Mountain bikers counter that threats and attempts at violence against them go largely unreported as well.

"There have been incidents of booby traps being created to harm people," said Glick. "On the orange trail, which is legal for riding, someone has placed about a dozen logs across the trail that are effectively barriers for people riding."

Hamlin once received a phone call from a DCR official, asking if his group was responsible for placing a high metal wire across one of the trails to harm bikers.

He was appalled by the accusation.

Hamlin said while extremists exist on both sides, no one who sits on the Friends of the Fells Board of Directors would ever advocate violence or harm.

Reconciliation?

Since the Friends have grown more vocal in their criticism of DCR, they claim the state agency has started to isolate them and become more "cozy" with their rival, NEMBA.

In April, DCR sponsored a two-day trail symposium in Petersham, Mass. A representative from NEMBA and five other Friends organizations were invited, but the Friends of the Fells received no invitation.

Hamlin believes the organization was intentionally snubbed.

Lambert said DCR does not punish organizations for criticizing the state agency. In fact, he said the agency welcomes public debate and discussion.

"Criticism or public comment is part of the process," said Lambert. "It's part of what makes us better. We hope that critical expression is fair and balanced. We'd ask for it to be honest. No user group would or should have their usage affected by what they say."

NEMBA resented the implication of a cozy relationship with the state agency.

"For 25 years, we have almost zero access to the most desirable trails, and after 25 years, we go from 1.6 miles to 9.5 miles... because we're excited about that, we want to participate and be engaged, that makes us cozy," Glick questioned.

"We just want to help and do good stuff. We'd love to see other people stepping up and doing this."

While the Friends and NEMBA share some common goals in maintaining trails and keeping the park's natural habitats clean and protected, it looks as though both sides see too much red right now to find a reconciliation any time soon.

"It would be very difficult with their current leadership to find common ground," said Glick. "We just want to move forward. We want to do good work. We are tired and done with the negativity promulgated by the Friends of the Fells."

Before becoming involved with the Friends, Hamlin spent years working for a non-governmental organization, trying to facilitate understanding between Israelis and Palestinians. The Friends board chairman joked that finding common ground between the hikers and bikers at the Fells can sometimes seem a more arduous task than bringing peace to the Middle East.

Both groups tend to demonize each other at times, Hamlin said, but he believes a reconciliation is still possible.

"I do think it's possible," said Hamlin. "Tricky, but possible."

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