

## State Must Lead on Trails

**By Tom Condon  
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A week ago Saturday, a 1.7-mile segment of the Farmington Valley Greenway, which is the central portion of the Farmington Canal Heritage Trail, was opened in Simsbury. The section closed a gap that creates a continuous 15 miles of paved trail, from Red Oak Hill Road in Farmington to the Simsbury-East Granby town line. This is terrific.

The problem: It took 14 years to get it done. That is four years longer than it took to dig the entire Farmington Canal, 84 miles from New Haven to Northampton, Mass., with shovels in the early 19th century.

Let's go east of the river. For nearly a decade, planners and officials have been trying to complete the East Coast Greenway segment in East Hartford from Forbes Street to the Connecticut River. At the present pace, construction won't begin until 2009.

This is complicated by the new Rentschler Field development (which will have 7 1/2 miles of bike trails), but still. Trails are wide sidewalks. People love them. Why can't we get them built more quickly?

Connecticut has done pretty well creating multi-use trails, in large part because of hard-working volunteers. Bill O'Neill, Bruce Donald, Jim Cassidy and countless others have pushed to get 50 miles of the 180-mile Connecticut section of the Maine-to-Florida East Coast Greenway completed and another 50 miles in the design stage.

This is greatly commendable and I don't suggest they stop. But think how much more we could do if state government ever made trails a top priority.

While many local and individual state officials - I think of former Department of Environmental Protection deputy commissioner David Leff - have been major supporters of trails, trails have never remotely been a front-rank priority for state leaders.

That must change. Gov. M. Jodi Rell and Transportation Commissioner Ralph Carpenter must recognize that multi-use trails are important to this state. They are important for safety, smart growth, good health, energy conservation, open space protection, historic preservation and, not least, economic development.

This is not a secret. According to the November issue of Governing Magazine, cities across the country are working like mad to make themselves bike-friendly. They are adding bike paths and bike lanes, building shower and storage facilities and creating "bike boulevards," streets where auto traffic is limited and the design makes it easy to bike.

This isn't just tree-hugger cities such as Portland, Ore., but Phoenix, Lexington, Ky., and Louisville. Chicago has become a city of the hunched shoulders, Spandex-wearer, racker of bikes.

Why is this a good idea? Where to start?

With traffic as it is, how many parents are comfortable with their kids riding bikes in the street? The number of registered motor vehicles in Connecticut has risen from 970,000 in 1960 to 3,001,298 this month, on essentially the same road system. Streets are crowded and dangerous, so kids are driven everywhere.

In 1969, according to Federal Highway Administration figures, 50 percent of schoolchildren walked or biked to school. That number today is less than 15 percent.

Thus have we manufactured a crisis in childhood obesity (as well as adult obesity).

Look at Hartford from the air during rush hour. The four highways are jammed. The five rail lines leading into the city are empty. What if there were a bike path in each right-of-way?

As long as there were bike racks and showers, many more people would commute by bike into the city. We'd save on foreign oil, air pollution, buildings demolished for parking lots. A century ago, 10 percent of Hartford's workforce made bicycles. If the city were bike-friendly, maybe it would occur to someone to start making them again.

I can also argue that fixed-path transportation anchors a community; that people like trails so much that they will choose to live near them. This does two things; it encourages more dense development, taking the pressure off our dwindling open space, and it becomes a quality-of-life amenity for companies trying to recruit young workers. And, trails save historic rail and canal lines by giving them another life.

When the rail-trail movement started two decades ago, some property owners feared that criminals would ride by and break into their homes. This fear has overwhelmingly proven baseless (criminals find it easier to drive; it's hard to carry off a home theater on a bike). In short, there is no downside.

That's why so many volunteers, all across the state, are working for trails. The new Central Connecticut Bicycle Alliance, just formed last year, drew almost 150 people to its second annual meeting this month and is active on several fronts (see [www.wecyclelect.org](http://www.wecyclelect.org)). What the state can do now is help fill in the gaps.

The 15-mile trail in Simsbury is an exception; many of the trails we've got are fragments that are great for exercise but not useful for errands or work. A friend in Manchester told me she and her daughter got within a tenth of a mile of Buckland Hills Mall by trail, but that the last piece was terrifying. That is all too common.

If Gov. Rell and Commissioner Carpenter pushed to fill the gaps, they'd be filled, and this would be a better place for it.