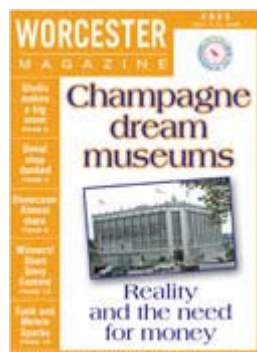




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# Build it

The persistent foot-dragging on the part of MassHighway with respect to building the Blackstone River Bikeway has reached epic proportions. The money has been identified; the political will is there; the public support is there; and now there's even a bill filed in the state Legislature specifically to compel the department to do what is essentially its job. It ought to be easy, but it's not.

This notion of a bicycle path to Providence has been ripening for the better part of a decade now, and it has grown from something of a fringe notion to a mainstream mandate. What was once easily dismissed by the truck-and-heavy-equipment crew has become widely accepted as an element of progressive civilization. They do it in Europe, used to run the refrain; now, as it turns out, they even do it in Rhode Island. Just not here.

The 28-mile Massachusetts segment has been in the works since 1996, with little to show for its longevity but maps and planning documents. The three-mile segment completed in Millbury and Worcester has been successful enough to tantalize bikers aching to stretch their legs and demonstrate that these things are actually used. Project advocates have bemoaned the snail's pace of progress on the remaining 25 miles, however, which has dragged despite strong advocacy for completion by the likes of Congressman Jim McGovern. Rhode Island, meanwhile, is slated to have more than half of its 20 miles completed within a year.

The delay does not appear to be a question of money, according to those close to the project. Bike trails are distressingly expensive enterprises after factoring in land-acquisition, bridges and the like, but some \$25 million has already been allocated in combined state and federal funding — theoretically, enough to cover the \$1 million-per-mile estimated price tag. The delay has consistently been attributed to departmental inertia and discontinuities in leadership — the fact that there has been no consistent and decisive internal resolve to get the job done.

This is where Senate Bill 1929 comes in, which has passed its public hearing and currently resides with the Committee on Transportation. Co-sponsored by a quartet of state legislators representing the stakeholder communities, it seeks to exert the kind of concerted political leverage that can break bureaucratic inertia.

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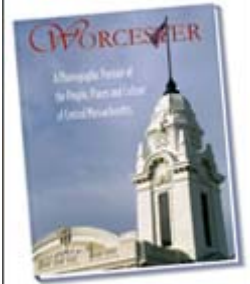


The bill also mandates that all sections of the bikeway should be designated as "Class 1," or off-road, a provision that should have particular meaning for Worcester. Somehow, the MassHighway bureaucracy has been able to designate the shoulder of Ballard Street as the bike path through Quinsigamond Village, when any sentient being who considers the matter understands that it should run along the Blackstone River. These bikeways are, to a large degree, family, recreational fare. The difference between riding cheek-to-jowl with traffic and riding along the banks of the reclaimed river — just as they do in Rhode Island — should not be underestimated.

Bikeways have been demonstrated across the country to be tremendous community assets — enhancing quality of life, sparking economic development and reinforcing cultural tourism — and there is every reason to believe the same would happen here. The prospect of being able to bicycle down into the Blackstone Valley and all the way to Providence is no longer a vain or fringe notion; it is a very real and popular concept that is well within our reach. This bill should be supported to break the inertia that stands in the way.

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