

Cross-island trail fruit of regional planning on Aquidneck Island, R.I.

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Boating, scenery, shopping, open space, wildlife, history—there are many reasons for Aquidneck Island residents and visitors to hop out of their cars and explore the island. Rhode Island Sea Grant/Coastal Resources Center and the Aquidneck Island Partnership hope that a proposed cross-island trail might help them do that while decreasing congestion and improving air quality. And seeing the island's natural and cultural resources close-up might spur conservation efforts.

These weighty considerations haven't dampened the enthusiasm of URI senior landscape architecture students "contracted" by the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission (AIPC) and the city of Newport to create a master plan for the Newport leg of the trail. (The Aquidneck Island Land Trust is heading up the Portsmouth and Middletown sections.)

Early in the fall 2000 semester, the students, led by Will Green, URI landscape architecture professor, met with Newporters to gather information and discover what they wanted from the proposed trail system. The students canvassed the city to familiarize themselves with the area. They studied features of trails worldwide, especially sustainable trails, which might link different modes of transportation, use recycled materials for boardwalks, and are ecologically friendly. They found that though varied, successful trails began as community efforts. According to Green, they also found that trails were shown not to increase crime—one potential fear—but rather that they increased property values since people wanted to live near them.

The students gleaned information from the Rhode Island Geographic Information System, sought the advice of an internationally known greenways expert, and held a follow-up workshop for Newport residents. Recommendations included protecting and enhancing environmental quality, improving quality of life for residents, and incorporating transportation needs for people using the trail. The students then devised 16 trail concepts for Newport and presented them to Newporters. One trail proposal highlighted art: Artists and students would design panels for the path, which would incorporate artwork while maintaining pristine views, and have sculptures indicate links between historic, environmental, or commercial sections of the trail. Other trails considered issues of access to the trail by public housing residents, safety, coastal access, enhanced ferry service, and even wildlife photography.

Eight students continued the project in the spring semester, combining the 16 concepts into a preliminary master plan, and refining ideas about trail location and enhancement. For instance, one student suggested Newporters could donate memorial benches to be used in Memorial Park, which takes its name

from its location and not from having any actual memorials. Finally, the entire class put their design to the test by biking the trail—a three hour tour—and discovered that designing a trail and actually using it are two different things. "Everybody's really sore," said student Chris Kantorek.

In May, the students presented their preliminary master plan to the city. Residents and representatives from the R.I. Department of Transportation and R.I. Department of Environmental Management were impressed with the concepts the students developed.

For more information, contact Kelly Woodward, AIPC coordinator, at (401) 849-4027 or kwoodward@aquidneckplanning.org. The Aquidneck Island Land Conservation Strategy, of which the trail is a part, is available at seagrant.gso.uri.edu/scc/scc_pubs.html.