

LIVING LIFE NEXT TO A RAIL TRAIL *and selling homes near them*

By Craig Della Penna

One of the most notable things about New England that most people don't realize is the super-abundance of unused former steam railroad corridors. In fact, since the 1960s, there have been over 70,000 miles of former steam railroad corridor taken out of the nation's inventory, and the majority of this mileage is here in the Northeast. Within a 125-mile radius of Northampton, there are currently about 200 projects underway that will provide non-motorized options for day-to-day use. The network of off-road paths that can be built in eastern New York and southern and central New England is simply unmatched anywhere else in the U.S., and they connect right where people live, work, play, and attend school. The link between the residential, commercial, and institutional is thus most evident.

We live on Chestnut Street in Florence and on the trail adjacent to our house each day begins with pretty much the same scenario. Starting at around 5:30 a.m., or the crack of dawn, joggers and power-walkers pass by. By 7:30 a.m., the dog walkers are out and by 8:00 a.m., school kids pass by. In fact, scores of kids. Most are walking, but a substantial number are on bikes and even a smattering on roller blades. So many kids here walk/bike/blade to school that I would hazard a guess and say one or two school buses aren't needed because of this safe route to school. And speaking of schools, in 1969, approximately 50% of children walked or bicycled to school, including almost 90% of children living within one mile of school. Today, fewer than 15% of schoolchildren walk or bicycle to school. Walking or biking to school can be a convenient way for kids to get exercise, and we're seeing that here in Northampton. To call these facilities "bike paths" is a misnomer, as there are too many walkers and joggers. In fact, to call them "recreation trails" is a misnomer as well, as they are true transportation facilities. The city has come around to this realization as well because a few years ago, they began plowing the trail in the winter so it can be relied upon as a "Safe Route to School." Around 8:30 a.m., a number of utilitarian bikers ride by—people biking to work. At midday, the users are mostly retirees and mothers pushing baby carriages. The dog walkers are back out late in the afternoon. Finally, the evening strollers, joggers, and walkers pass by. My wife, who is a dedicated power-walker, is on the trail twice a day for a two-mile walk with our Scottish Terrier-ist, Ivan.

On weekends, the complexion of the path changes. There are more bicyclists, who tend to be tourists, but the local joggers, power-walkers, strollers, and dog walkers are still out there in force.

Being only 8 feet away, our house was one of the closest houses ever to have a railroad built next to it—and, conversely, it is certainly one of the closest houses to sit next to a rail trail. When I was doing advocacy work full-time, getting communities to build out these projects—sometimes in the face of extreme opposition—it was invaluable to be able to speak from experience about what it is like living near a formalized, popular trail. When I became a realtor in 2003, I knew I'd have to develop a niche. The most successful realtors are those who have an identifiable niche—or even two. In my real estate practice, I specialize in houses near rail trails, greenways, or other conservation lands. I also specialize in antique or historic houses and have sold some of the most dramatic and interesting antique houses in the Valley. And, of course, lesson number one of niche marketing is to stand out from the crowd—to be able to differentiate yourself from the others. In the realm of where the trails are currently located, where they're going to be built next, when they'll be built, etc., I am the expert. And, you might ask, how does one find buyers for such places? Well, I'm going to have to say that I'm pretty much an expert on that, too. I am not only one of the top Realtors at our firm always, but I am also one of the top performing Realtors in the area as well. And a sizable portion of my sales is of houses very close to a rail trail—and historic or antique properties.

My niche of specializing in this area has been recognized in the real estate press. I have been featured in two National Association of Realtors trade magazines, the Massachusetts Association of Realtors trade magazine, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Boston Globe*, and, oddly enough, the United Airlines in-flight magazine, *Hemispheres*.

SMALL TOWN, CHARM, BIG PICTURE THINKING...

In a place like here, where land preservation, smart growth and sustainable development are the watch words, shouldn't your realtor also be a change agent? Shouldn't you be dealing with a Realtor who gets it, and doesn't just talk the talk?

For the past 18+ years, I have been in the forefront of not only most of the rail trail development in the Northeast,