

# Northern Strand Community Trail Case Study

Prepared by [Empower Success Corps](#) (ESC) in partnership with the Solomon Foundation and Barr Foundation

## **Primary Sources**

Steve Winslow, Herb Nolan, and ESC

## **Project Summary**

Upon completion, the Northern Strand Community Trail will be a continuous 11.5-mile shared-use path from the Mystic River to the Lynn seashore. Soon tens of thousands of residents in Everett, Malden, Revere, Saugus, and Lynn will have a new way to connect with each other and with the natural beauty of their marshes, rivers, and beaches. Nine and a half miles will be a rail-trail through Everett, Malden, Revere, Saugus, and Lynn. This rail-trail ends partway into Lynn and will continue as a separate and safe on-road facility for two more miles through downtown Lynn to the seashore. In addition to being an active transportation route bypassing some of the most congested roads in the region, this path has been designated to be part of U.S. Bicycle Route 1 and will serve as a key link of the 2500-mile East Coast Greenway that reaches from Florida to Maine.

## **Background**

For over a quarter-century, since 1993, Bike to the Sea, a volunteer-driven, grassroots advocacy group, has spearheaded the effort to build a rail-trail along the former Saugus Branch Railroad that ceased passenger service in 1958. Once established, Bike to the Sea quickly secured conceptual support from all five communities that readily saw the promise of changing an eyesore into an asset. A 1996 study by the Boston Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) established the feasibility of the trail.

During the process of building local support, Bike to the Sea realized that the location of the trail in a congested urban area made it regionally significant, so the Trail was included in the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) regional bicycle trail and the DEM (now DCR/EEA) statewide trails plan. At about the same time, the East Coast Greenway organization developed its vision for a “Trail Connecting Cities” from Maine to Florida, so Bike to the Sea advocated for its trail to be included on the route between Boston and Maine.

In 2003, at the suggestion of community partners to broaden the appeal of the trail beyond bicyclists, Bike to the Sea changed the name of the proposed route from “the Bike to the Sea Trail” to “the *Northern Strand Community Trail*”, envisioning the Trail to be the northern anchor of a regional trail system extending up from the Emerald Necklace in Boston.

After hopes for a quick build in conjunction with a gas pipeline project were dashed in 1998, Everett and Malden spent nearly a decade spearheading lease negotiations with the property

owner, the MBTA. The MBTA's initial model lease contained several "deal-breaker" clauses related to general and environmental liability. Everett and Malden joined a coalition of communities that worked to pass legislation that provides the MBTA relief from both general and environmental liability when it enters into leases. Bike to the Sea co-founder, Stephen Winslow, served as the lead attorney for Everett and Malden during those negotiations. Rails to Trails, MassBike, and the Mass. Department of Environmental Protection, using funding from the US EPA, developed a protocol for addressing environmental contamination along rail-trails in order to implement the amendments to M.G.L Chapter 21E related to rail trails. In 2005 Everett and then Malden entered into 99-year leases with the MBTA, with Saugus and then Revere eventually following their lead.

With the leases being secured, Bike to the Sea members became impatient when the effort to obtain state and federal funds proved difficult, especially due to a state policy that required communities to front the costs of planning and design and then go through the arduous process to secure TIP funding for construction. The communities with many low and moderate-income residents lacked both the staff and the financial resources to make such an upfront investment. Bike to the Sea members also expressed impatience with the expected delays, especially when some long-term funding plans indicated only one major trail, the Bruce Freedman trail, would be funded before 2025. Rather than wait, Bike to the Sea and the communities figured out ways to advance the trail as soon as possible.

In 2005, eight years after its founding, Bike to the Sea hired a part-time trail manager, Clay Larsen, who helped with community outreach, advocacy, and project management until 2019. Clay helped organize the *rake and wheel barrel brigades* that built the first 1000-feet of the trail near the Madeline English School in Everett.

Everett, Malden, Saugus, and Revere first built trails made of inexpensive recycled asphalt. Rails to Trails, REI, and many local donors helped provide funding to Bike to the Sea to provide matching funds for these initial trail building efforts, some of which were also funded by the Recreational Trails program. Iron Horse Preservation, a non-profit from Nevada, worked with Everett, Saugus, and Revere to remove tracks and ties and to build a rough trail using funds from the sale of the rail. The rough trails proved popular with residents but also immediately led to calls for pavement. Everett eventually used state Gateway Parks funds to pave its section of the Trail while Malden funded its section using the meals tax and general revenue bonds. Smooth pavement made all the difference. It would have been far more efficient to skip ahead to that final solution rather than move incrementally, but the low-cost approach helped build momentum. Malden's Mayor Christiansen described the trial as a "unifier" in his diverse city and a symbol of progress.

The Solomon Foundation emerged as a key backer of the Trail when Iron Horse failed to complete construction of the Revere section of the trail and Bike to the Sea had difficulty securing support from the City and residents of Lynn.

In Lynn, numerous barriers had to be overcome. Several initial efforts by Bike to the Sea to plan and build a recycled asphalt trail for the Lynn portion failed after they met with sustained resistance from neighbors whose first priorities were to address sewage back-up and crime issues. Once neighbors and the City of Lynn had tackled those priorities, neighbors wanted to be sure that their ideas for the trail took precedence over the needs of a regional bike trail. The City had no process in place to identify and select from alternate routes to Lynn Beach. An unfavorable legal opinion of the MBTA lease caused Mayor Kennedy to withhold her support for the Trail. Bike to the Sea's role as both an advocate and planner made it difficult to fully build trust with the City and neighbors necessary to resolve these complex problems. Without the support of the City and neighbors, Bike to the Sea could not credibly raise funds for alternative analysis and design. Progress in Lynn clearly required a neutral third party with the resources to help fund the alternative routing analysis and secure the funding for the full design and construction of the Trail.

With the successes in Everett, Malden, Revere, and Saugus, Bike to the Sea knew that Lynn would eventually come around but was at a loss of how to proceed beyond helping with cleanups and installing murals along the future trail. Revere expressed interest in paving its section of the trail but lacked sufficient resources. The Town of Saugus lacked staff that could secure funds and manage a project to pave its section of the trail. In 2016 the Solomon Foundation became involved in supporting Bike to the Sea with grants and technical assistance to help advance the decades-old effort. Herb Nolan re-engaged and helped to reinvigorate their activity. A year later, through effective advocacy, the Office Energy and Environmental Affairs (EEA) stepped in to fully fund the design of the entire 11.5-mile trail as a unified facility.

'Why now?', after 25 years of effort, one might ask. Support from the Governor's Deputy Chief of Staff and MassDOT was beginning to transform the way the state partnered with municipalities and non-profits to get trails designed and built. The Solomon Foundation met with the Deputy Chief of Staff who recognized the potential and encouraged the advocates to view this as a statewide project, rather than doing it city by city, path by path. The Governor's Office was instrumental in enlarging the vision for this project *and* in securing Gateway Cities Trails Funding through the Executive Office of Energy and Environment (EEA). The Northern Strand was emblematic of a new consensus and partnership approach at the state level.

Some obstacles remained, however. Not wanting to repeat mistakes of the past, the Solomon Foundation partnered with the new mayor of Lynn, Tom McGee, to fund the Lynn Walking and Bicycling Network Plan in order to identify alternative on-road routes and reach a local consensus on the preferred route. Lynn recognized the value of the Gateway Cities Trail Funding and aggressively pursued its section of the Northern Strand to utilize those funds while still available. The City of Lynn reported that cities and towns just do not know how to pull off these projects and that the Solomon Foundation was instrumental in helping the City do this. A consensus plan emerged that provides a framework for the extension of the Northern Strand to downtown Lynn and beyond to the seashore. With the urging of the Executive Office of Energy and Environment, the Solomon Foundation next reached out to the City to partner on a detailed parking study for Market Street in an effort to clear the way for an optimal design

outcome. The Foundation staff have played a pivotal role in bridging between stakeholders at the neighborhood, city, and state level.

Construction of the nine and a half mile rail-trail section is scheduled to begin in 2020 and should be completed within two years. Design of the on-street Lynn section of the Northern Strand is further refined. Design documents should be completed in 2019. No definitive funding sources for the Lynn section have been identified as yet, but the state leadership is optimistic that this will happen in the next few years.

### **Timeline of Activity Milestones**

#### *Historic*

<b>Year</b>	<b>Milestone</b>
1993	Bike to the Sea began advocacy for the Northern Strand Community Trail.
1996	Boston MPO study establishes the feasibility of the Trail.
2005	Everett enters into a lease with the MBTA, soon followed by Malden, Saugus, and Revere.
2010	Everett portion of trail cleared, then paved.
2012	Malden portion of trail cleared, then paved.
2012	Saugus trail cleared and railroad bridge decked.
2015	Revere portion of trail cleared. The city takes over from Iron Horse.
2016	Joint meeting of trail advocates at the Saugus town library.
<b>2016</b>	<b>Solomon Foundation begins involvement.</b>
2017	The Executive Office of Energy and Environment commits to full design and implementation of the Northern Strand Community Trail. Hires Brown, Richardson & Rowe to lead the design team.
2018	Solomon Foundation partners with the City of Lynn to fund the study of the on-street portion of the Northern Strand Community Path.
2019	Lynn Bike-Ped Plan for trail completed by Kittelson and Associates, Inc. Kittelson would not have been included as a design firm to which Lynn sent out its RFP if Herb Nolan hadn't suggested them. (They are a small firm, and their work had been primarily Boston-based.)
2019	Brown, Richardson, and Rowe, Inc. completed the design of rail-trail segments.
2019	EEA secures \$11M funding for implementation of a rail-trail section through Everett, Malden, Revere, and Saugus.
2019	Art installation, the Artline, completed in Malden.

#### *Anticipated*

<b>Year</b>	<b>Milestone</b>
2020	Start of construction.

2021	Completion of the Northern Strand rail-trail section.
TBD	Secured funding for Lynn for on-street section.
TBD	Construction of the on-road section of the Northern Strand.

**Key Players and Stakeholders**

- Bike to the Sea, Inc.
- MA Dept. of Energy and Environmental Affairs
- Solomon Foundation (with Barr Foundation support)
- City of Lynn
- City of Saugus
- City of Revere
- City of Malden
- City of Everett

**Funding Sources**

- Gateway Cities program
  - \$1.5 M design
  - 11 M construction of Northern Strand
  - 8 M construction of Lynn on-street section (projected)
- A Greener Greater Boston (Solomon & Barr Foundations)
  - \$102,500
- City of Lynn
  - \$37,500

**Lessons Learned**

- Start with easy wins and build momentum.
- Document success.
- Build bridges between different branches of local and state government.
- Hold off on naming or branding things until you know the political landscape.
- Work from the bottom up and top down to meet in the middle.
- Reach out to multiple stakeholder groups and describe the benefits for each of them separately.
- Don't give up.

**Nagging Issues**

- What entity is going to steward this corridor as a whole and continue to enhance it over time?
- Will the cities involved have the flexibility to program their sections of the trail for such things as community gardens and cultural programs within the constraints of the lease?

- What additional connections/spurs will help add additional value to the trail?
- How to build support for safer trail crossing—especially across busy, state numbered roads?

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## CASE STUDY 2: Watertown Riverfront Park

### **Primary Sources**

Herb Nolan and ESC

### **Project Summary**

The Watertown Riverfront Park is the result of a ten-year public-private partnership between the Solomon Foundation, the City of Watertown, and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. It was initiated with the Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) in 2006 as one of the Foundation's first public-private projects. For a mile below the Watertown dam, the neighborhood was walled off from the Charles River by an impenetrable tangle of vines and shrubs. The narrow asphalt trails were so heaved by roots and broken up that few people ventured along with them. The collective intent was to fully restore access to this mile of riverfront and make it a destination for everyone.

Today the Watertown Riverfront Park is part of a river walk that circles the upper basin and serves tens of thousands of people in the cities of Boston, Newton and Watertown. It is a critical link in a regional path system leading from Waltham to downtown Boston. Visitors have access to river overlooks, sculptural benches, and playgrounds. People who are visually impaired can now enjoy the freedom of the outdoors as they follow a braille trail.

Phase II, which still remains to be implemented, will complete the Watertown Riverfront trail to the Squibnocket Park just downstream. Funding for that second and last phase of work could come from \$500,000 in funding contributed by Simmons University in 2012 as part of their long-term lease of Daley Field and, possibly, from I-cubed funding from Athena Health negotiation.

### **Design Phase**

This project was initiated in 2006 after a bicycle ride along the length of the Charles River Basin by Steve Burrington (DCR Commissioner), Dan Driscoll (DCR), Herb Nolan, and David Solomon. Having senior DCR leadership see the poor condition of the park and the potential for improvements first-hand was a critical first step. The Watertown waterfront had already been identified as a priority in the Charles River Basin master plan which Herb Nolan managed as a consultant with Goody Clancy. There was broad community support for the project going back decades.

Following the bike ride, the Solomon Foundation proposed a public-private partnership with DCR whereby the Foundation would pay for and manage the entire design process from conceptual design through working drawings and DCR would provide oversight and get the project built as funding became available. Generally speaking, it was not the lack of capital dollars that was preventing the agency from getting more done to meet its mission. Rather, it was the difficulty of getting projects identified and vetted by the community and then far

enough along in design to understand the costs and benefits. The Solomon Foundation was asked to fill this role. A broadly representative working group of advisors was formed, which later became the Friends of Watertown Riverfront with a three-year grant from the Foundation. It included several city councilors, the president of Perkins School for the Blind, the president of the Watertown Savings Bank and several members of the community living near Charles River Road. DCR assigned a project manager to the effort to monitor progress and provide feedback to the partners. Together with senior staff at DCR, Herb Nolan led a visioning exercise to listen to the concerns and ideas of stakeholders and to work through alternative programmatic ideas. The Solomon Foundation paid for a conceptual design by Sasaki Associates to give form to the ideas coming out of the visioning process and, after approximately 18 months, a consensus plan emerged. Sasaki was then hired by the Foundation to complete working drawings and obtain all necessary permits.

### **Construction Phase**

Despite the broad support locally and within the agency, the project did not receive the funding needed for rapid implementation. In the interim, a smaller project for the restoration of the nearby Saltonstall Founder's Monument, however, did receive matching funding from the agency and was considered a modest win by the community. The onset of the recession delayed the park project for several more years during which the leadership of DCR changed several times. The leadership turnover might have sealed the fate of the project but for the efforts of Representative Jon Hecht and the Friends of Watertown Riverfront Park. With Solomon Foundation support, they continued to advocate for the project and its funding over the better part of a decade—and the project was not allowed to be forgotten. Part of their pitch for this park was the proposed sensory trail that Perkins School for the Blind was helping to shape. Ultimately the Watertown Riverfront Park made its way to the very top of the Federal Land and Water Conservation Fund list.

Once funding was secured, DCR's Dan Driscoll took full control and brought in a new consultant, Chester Engineers, to refine some of the shoreline treatments and advance the sensory trail, a critical part of the challenge. With the DCR managing the project, Solomon Foundation's role came to an end. Knowing that access for the blind had to be handled with great care and creativity, Herb Nolan recruited Mitch Ryerson, a talented local sculptor, to work with the DCR and Perkins School for the Blind to design the sensory trail and sensory garden. Mr. Ryerson, ultimately, became the subcontractor for the sensory garden since he was the only person qualified to fabricate these unique sculptural elements.

In 2016 after a two-year construction process, the Watertown Riverside Park was opened with great fanfare and began to be used. With broad new paths and cleared views of the river, park use has increased tremendously. The Watertown Riverfront Park is held up as a successful public-private partnership.



### **Post Construction Assessment**

Ironically, one type of user that still remains underserved are people with visual impairments. Despite the best efforts of the design team, the braille trail and sensory garden create barriers for people who are visually impaired. This was evident in a visit with students and teachers from Perkins School for the Blind in the spring of 2019. Their inability to find their way to the start of the trail, to find the elements intended for their use including the braille plaques on the tops of the posts, or to navigate through the open sensory garden space pointed out some basic flaws in design thinking. All of the designers were sighted individuals who lacked a deep understanding of the unique experiences of people with visual impairments. This situation points to a shortcoming of the design process. Students and adults with visual impairments should have been more involved in the design process, and certain elements such as the braille trail should have been mocked up on-site to test ideas and inform the final design. This is something the Solomon Foundation could have supported in an ongoing relationship with the DCR project team. Handing off responsibility for a project from one leadership team to another—private to public—is essential, but some level of continued collaboration is important to a successful outcome.

Some of the shortcomings of the braille trail and sensory garden could be fixed with a public-private partnership with the active involvement of visually impaired individuals.

### **Role of the Foundation**

The Solomon Foundation played a key role at several critical points along the way from conception to final design: its instigation of the initial bike ride, convening of the key stakeholders for two full years to reach consensus on needs/design, funding of the design process, recruitment of the artist, advocating for funds to help build the park, and its ongoing investment of time and effort over a period of ten years. Solomon partners reported that they could not have been successful partners on this project without the Solomon Foundation’s guidance, conceptual plan, and commitment. The Foundation’s expertise and commitment to the project helped to buoy the spirits of all partners and allies—and to keep the project alive and moving forward over a decade.

### **Timeline of Activity Milestones**

#### *Historic*

<b>Year</b>	<b>Milestone</b>
2006	Project Scoping
2007	Conceptual Design
2008	Restoration of Saltonstall Founder’s Monument
2014	Groundbreaking
2016	Ribbon Cutting
2019	Post Construction Assessment

### **Stakeholders, Partners, Allies**

- Solomon Foundation
- Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR)
- Friends of Watertown Riverfront Park
- Perkins School for the Blind
- City of Watertown
- Representative Jon Hecht
- Sasaki Associates
- Chester Engineers
- Mitch Ryerson, Artist
- Watertown Savings Bank

### **Funding Sources**

- Solomon Foundation - full design and permits
  - \$150,000
- Land and Water Conservation Fund, DCR, City of Watertown, Perkins School for the Blind, Watertown Savings Bank, private citizens
  - \$2,850,000

### **Lessons Learned**

- Tell a good story.
- Serve multiple user groups.
- Find and support champions in the community and in the agencies.
- Patience and persistence over time are essential.
- Keep private partners engaged to address key problems.
- Create room in the schedule and budget to engage special users in the design.
- Esteem for Solomon Foundation's expertise was an invaluable anchor.