

A sliver of the Swampscott rail trail completed

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The first segment in the protracted the Swampscott Rail Trail construction has been completed, Swampscott Assistant Town Administrator for Operations Gino Cresta confirmed in a Wednesday afternoon interview with the Swampscott Reporter

The 10-foot wide, stone-dust path runs from Beach Bluff to the Marblehead line, connecting the neighboring town's rail trail with Swampscott's. A split-rail wooden fence lines the flat, nearly 600-foot segment in a Swampscott residential neighborhood.

“We finished that segment last week,” said Cresta, “and that’s it for that segment.”

In mid-June, the Swampscott Board of Selectmen voted to permit Swampscott Administrator Sean Fitzgerald to execute a contract with Aqua Line Utility Inc. The Weymouth-based company earned the job with a \$112,068 bid.

A \$100,000 state grant and \$20,000 private grant covered the segment's \$118,293 construction costs.

The grant award was originally earmarked for the construction of a half-mile section — which came with a \$475,668 price tag — of the planned 2-mile Swampscott Rail Trail. The section eyed ran from Swampscott Middle School to Humphrey Street.

Swampscott received the \$20,000 private grant from the Solomon Foundation.

“While the Solomon Foundation often supports front end planning and design work, we understand the importance of constructing the first section of the Swampscott Rail Trail as a concrete accomplishment,” said the foundation wrote to Fitzgerald. “We hope this demonstration project will help build momentum to implement the next section.”

They, however, abandoned those construction plans for now, in exchange for the Beach-Bluff-to-Marblehead-line segment for several reasons, Swampscott Director of Community and Economic Development Marzie Galazka has said.

Once constructed, officials said residents, walkers, bicyclists, runners and students will have access to playgrounds and play fields, the middle school, Stanley Elementary School and the 7-acre Ewing Wood Conservation Area among other points along the planned stone-dust, 10-foot-wide path.

An ongoing Swampscott Conservation Commission process — which will culminate with the possible issuance of an order of conditions — did not comport with MassTrails deadline. The state required the town to expend the \$100,000 before July 1, 2020. Meanwhile, costs associated with the half-mile section were way too high, Galazka has said.

MassTrails accepted Swampscott's application for a so-called grant amendment to change the project from the original half-mile to the Beach-Bluff-to-Marblehead-line segment.

The rail trail has been an divisive issue in Swampscott: All of this comes three years after the Swampscott electorate, in a June 2017 referendum election, affirmed Town Meeting members' vote the month before to expend \$850,000 toward the Swampscott Rail Trail's designs and engineering and land acquisition.

During the 2017 annual Town Meeting season and public debate before the referendum election, officials promised the trail's construction would not become Swampscott taxpayers' burden. They pledged private donations and grants would cover construction.

"There are no town funds that are being used for the trail consistent with the Town Meeting vote that was taken," Galazka said in June.

Cresta said the rail trail will be completed in segments.

"Marzie is now searching for more money to fund the next segment," Cresta said.

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