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Bike Riders Have Say In Closing The Farmington Canal 'Plainville Gap'



Comments from residents in several towns will guide transportation experts as they figure out best routes for a Plainville section of a bike path that will connect Long Island Sound with western Massachusetts.



By **Bill Leukhardt** - Contact Reporter

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Citizen comments will guide planners in proposing the best route to close a challenging four-mile gap in a bicycle path that will run 84 miles from New Haven to Northampton, Mass.

Consultants hired to close the so-called Plainville gap will take suggestions made by bike riders and others in the last few weeks and come back in January with two or three possible routes based on places people said they would use the path to reach — businesses, schools and parks.

Recent workshops in Plainville and New Britain drew about 70 people who told consultants how they wanted to use the bike path. People were also asked how they would use a spur trail envisioned to connect the bike path with the new CTfastrak busway station in New Britain.

"We did a lot of work with push pins and string on a map to show areas where we would like to go," bicycle advocate James Cassidy of Plainville said Monday. "There were a lot of lines on the maps of Plainville and New Britain."

The Plainville gap is the largest missing piece in the Farmington Canal Heritage Trail. It follows a canal built in the 1820s and closed in 1848 when trains became the preferred way to move materials.

Much of the bike path now is built on top of abandoned train tracks. But Plainville is difficult because there are active freight lines in town, making it impossible to use railroad routes. For nearly 20 years, bicycle advocates have pushed — usually in vain — to find some way to get a safe bike and walking path through Plainville.

Now that seems more of a possibility with government emphasis on alternative transportation sparking interest in closing gaps in the trail and linking it with buses and other mass transit, Cassidy said.

"We hope that they come back with final options and we can choose one," said Cassidy, a founder of the Plainville Greenway Alliance and the new interim president of the Farmington Valley Trails Council. "Then we can go to the town for approval. Then it will go to the state for design and estimates."

The work will be financed by state and federal transportation funds. It will likely take several years to complete. There are other breaks in the Connecticut part of the trail but only Plainville has no proposed route. Other missing sections in Farmington, Southington, Cheshire and New Haven are either in the design phase or under construction.

At a recent meeting, consultant team member David Head of VHB civil engineering in Wethersfield said the team wants to suggest routes that allow people best access to places they'd like to walk to or reach by bike instead of car.

"About 80 percent of Americans want to live somewhere walkable to places they need," he said. There are health benefits for walking or biking instead of riding around passively in a vehicle, he said.

Men who walk or bicycle live an average of seven years longer than their sedentary peers while women who walk or bike can expect to live 10 more years than women who do not exercise, he said.

Consultants working since spring on the planning of a route said they are heartened by the public response so far and the resolve of people to champion the project.

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"You're in this for the long haul," consultant team member Dan Burden said. "But it will happen."

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