WATERTOWN COMMUNITY PATH

Linking Watertown’s Past to its Future

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Tufts University Urban + Environmental Policy + Planning
The Watertown Community Path
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ABSTRACT

For years, bicycle and pedestrian advocates in Watertown have envisioned the creation of a multi-use path that would provide a link in the regional network of paths and facilitate safe and easy access through the community for those traveling on foot or by bike. While some groundwork has been laid and a small portion will soon be constructed, a vital section through the heart of Watertown has yet to be formally planned. This report is the first major step in the development of that section, the Watertown Community Path. This report studies the feasibility of developing the Community Path and recommends preferred and alternative routes. Due to constraints related to private property, the preferred route includes a cycle track and extended sidewalk on the eastern portion of the Path. The preferred route calls for a multi-use path for the majority of the remaining portion, except on the westernmost section where on-street bike lanes are recommended. This report also includes an analysis of existing conditions along the Path corridor, design standards, recommended cross sections, conceptual designs, and strategies for implementation. The goal of this report is to provide concrete recommendations that will help the Town of Watertown move forward with the development of the Community Path.
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Pedestrian and cycling advocates have long pushed for the creation of the Watertown Community Path, a proposed multi-use path through the heart of the town. They have envisioned developing the path along a former railroad right-of-way (ROW) in Watertown, which would make the town into a more livable, attractive and sustainable community. The proposed path would provide a link in the regional network of paths while facilitating safe access between East Watertown, Watertown Square and the Charles River. This report examines the feasibility of developing the Community Path, taking into consideration community input, design standards and site constraints.

Unlike a typical rail-to-trail conversion, a large portion of the former railroad ROW in Watertown has been sold and developed by private parties. Siting the Community Path along this corridor therefore requires extensive cooperation from property and business owners. Recognizing this, the Field Projects research team placed a strong emphasis on community engagement. Outreach to residents and property owners began when the team mailed a survey to abutters of the corridor. A subsequent community meeting was held to solicit input on design ideas and to learn about potential obstacles. The community meeting and more than 250 survey responses were decisively in favor of the Community Path. The surveys, however, highlighted a few concerns about safety, lighting and street crossings. The other major concern centered on the construction timeline, as residents desired a quick completion.

To reach out to businesses along the Community Path corridor, the research team conducted in-person interviews with more than a dozen business owners and managers. Many of those interviewed voiced strong concerns regarding the redistribution of parking spaces. The vast majority, however, thought the Community Path had the potential to bring more customers to their shops and improve the community.

The research team also visited the Path corridor multiple times to assess site conditions and consider preferred and alternative routes based on existing constraints. Major obstacles along the corridor include private...
ownership of properties along the former railroad ROW, a bridge that stands in the way of the route, busy and dangerous crossings for pedestrians at several major intersections, and municipal parking lots in Watertown Square.

With these obstacles in mind, the team researched multi-use paths in other communities with similar circumstances and reviewed current best practices in cycling and pedestrian infrastructure design. The team concluded that attempting to develop the Community Path through private property would create unwanted backlash towards the Town of Watertown and potentially derail the project. In cases where private property could not be avoided, the preferred option is to site the Path along perimeters, disturbing the properties as little as possible. The research also showed a preference for separated bike lanes, or cycle tracks, to improve safety, and it recommended widths for paths shared by different transportation modes. The research team did not heavily consider cost as a factor in selecting the Community Path route, though attempts were made to provide potential lower-cost alternatives. The team’s research resulted in the following recommendations:

- Create an on-street cycle track along Arsenal Street from School Street to Irving Street;
- Create a graded slope on vacant parcels abutting the Patten Street Bridge, which would allow the Community Path to avoid a congested commercial corridor;
- Install a raised crosswalk with a pedestrian island on Mount Auburn Street between Taylor Street and Baptist Walk;
- Reconfigure the municipal parking lot in Watertown Square to accommodate the Path along the northern boundary;
- Reconfigure the municipal parking lot behind the Watertown Free Public Library to accommodate the Path without a net loss of parking in Watertown Square;
- Make improvements to the Linear Park path, such as widening it near Saltonstall Park and beginning the process of creating a mural on the concrete wall; and
- Redevelop the Watertown Department of Public Works staging area to include the Community Path.

A series of maps that show the preferred route for the Community Path and an extensive site analysis are included in Chapter 5 of this report. A complete list of short and long-term actions is provided in Chapter 7.

Developing the Community Path is a critical step toward making Watertown a more livable and sustainable town. It will provide a safe route through much of the community, increase the amount of open space, and support local business development. The Community Path will make Watertown a more attractive and desirable place to live.