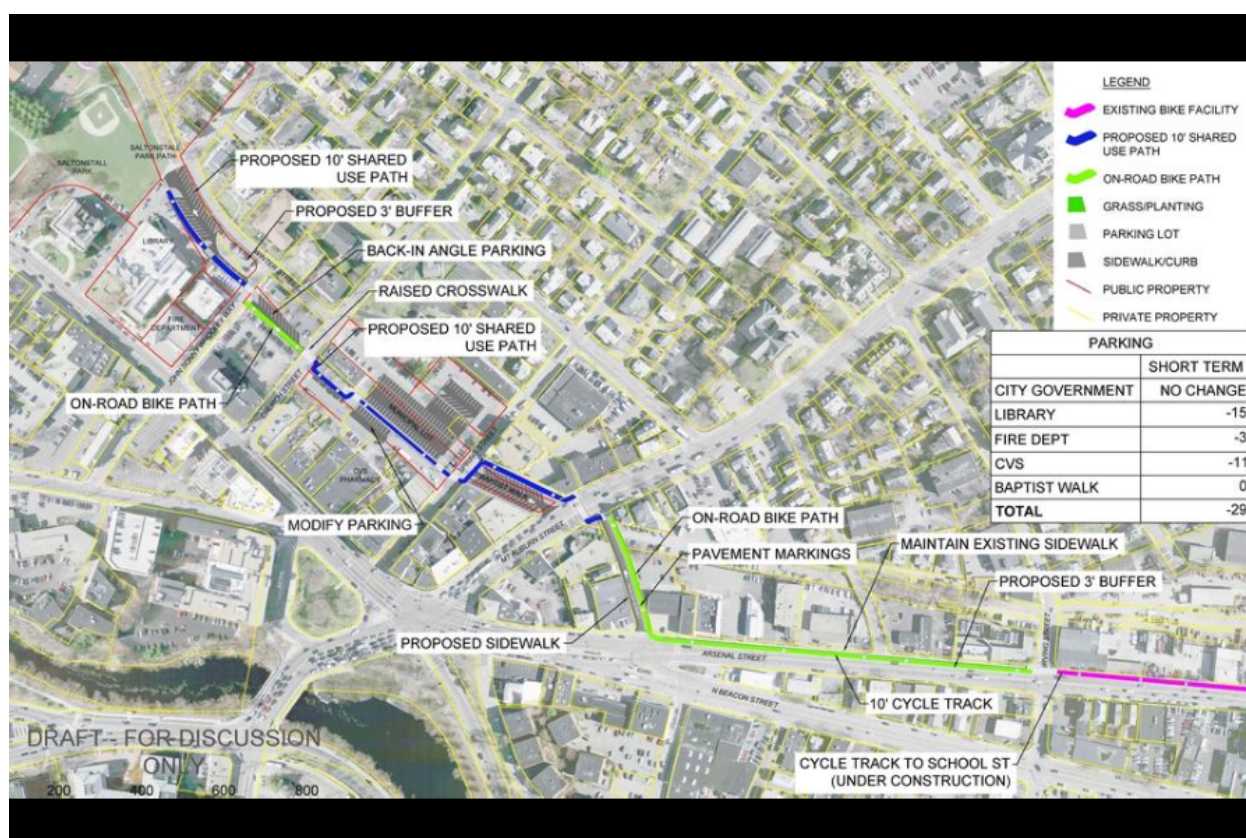


Plans to expand Watertown bike paths move forward



A draft of the final alignments for the community path between Irving Street and Saltonstall Park. Courtesy Photo / Watertown Planning Dept.

By: Dana Forsythe
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With the designs nearing competition, work is advancing on efforts to finally connect Watertown to the region's network off-road bike and pedestrian paths.

This week, the Watertown Town Council took another step in realizing the second phase of the Watertown-Cambridge Greenway plan when it considered to take 10 Winter Street, a property in Watertown Square. The Council is scheduled to vote on the measure at its Oct. 25 meeting.

According to Town Councilor Aaron Dushku, the land is an important connector and will allow stakeholders move ahead with some of the planning efforts while minimizing the loss of parking spaces in the area.

The state Department of Conservation and Recreation is collaborating with Cambridge and Watertown to build the second phase of the greenway. The project would continue the current path in Watertown along the former Watertown Branch Railroad right of way connect with the Fresh Pond trail, the Minuteman Bikeway, Mystic Greenway and the Cambridge and Somerville Linear Parks.

"Naturally, I'm very excited about the progress we're making," Dushku said. "We spend at least \$2.5 million a year on roads every year in Watertown but we need to also think about other more sustainable modes of transportation because our right-of-ways aren't getting any wider and traffic is a growing concern for our residents."

While the connection at Watertown Square will require the town funds, Dushku said, officials are leveraging private and state funds to make them happen. Exact plans are still being refined, he said.

"I give our planning department and a lot of engaged citizens a lot of credit for this work," he said. "In a few years, folks are really going to notice the efforts and I think that developing this network of trails in this way is a great asset that we're leaving for our future generations."

Progress on another front

Work is also proceeding on efforts to connect the existing greenway to bike paths along the Charles River in a project being called the Arsenal Park Connector.

Watertown's Senior Planner Gideon Schriber said work would extend an existing spur of the Watertown-Cambridge Greenway from where it empties onto Arsenal Street, next to the Watertown Mall Best Buy location, through Arsenal Park to the North Beacon Street Bridge.

The LivableStreets Alliance is helping the Town of Watertown Bicycle and Pedestrian Committee design the path over the next year. The exact route, however, is in question.

“Everyone agrees on the project's importance, but there are difference in how to bring it about. The current plan is provide an access point by the gates on Talcott Road,” said Watertown Bicycle & Pedestrian Committee Chair Ethan Davis. “The challenge is figuring out how to get across Arsenal Road so that cyclists and pedestrians have an way to go between the Charles River and the arsenal corridor and beyond.”

More funding needed

At the state level, state Rep. Jon Hecht, State Senators Will Brownsberger and Sonia Jehlen are starting to have conversations with state agencies to identify funding for construction of greenway's second phase.

“We expect it will cost around \$2 million,” Hecht said. “We are optimistic the state will prioritize Phase II. For one thing, it's the critical link between the Charles River paths and the Minuteman, Alewife Greenway, Cambridge Linear Park Extension, and Belmont Greenway paths, all of which converge at Alewife Station. Also, the state is emphasizing the importance of the bike path network both as an alternative to congested roadways and as a way to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.”

The second important project, Hecht said, is the Greenough Greenway which follows the Charles River from Arsenal Street to the Eliot Bridge, which is largely complete.

“By narrowing Greenough Boulevard from four lanes to two, DCR was able to greatly improve the bike path along that stretch of the Charles and expand the adjoining green space,” he said.

Funding for that project came from DCR and the Solomon Foundation, Hecht added.

Third, as part of the Daly Field project on Nonantum Road, funded by Simmons College, a new section of path has been built along the Charles river from the Community Rowing building to the ice skating rink, Hecht said.

This would be an alternative to using the bike path immediately adjacent to Nonantum Road.

State Sen. Brownsberger said the DCR has been doing a lot of maintenance on the riverside pathways that continue on from Watertown into Boston.

"Much of the path length has been repaved and there are projects underway or on the drawing board to improve some of the crossings, most importantly, the crossing at Cambridge Street which is very dangerous," he said. "These are flagship pathways and DCR does understand their value to the community and recently has been making the investments to continue to improve them."