LAMOILLE VALLEY RAIL TRAIL

Nearing Completion, Management Plan Shared With Senators

AOT's Rail Trail Manager Sees 'Huge' Economic Opportunity For Adjacent Towns

BY DANA GRAY
Staff Writer

Completion of the 93-mile Lamoille Valley Rail Trail missed a Feb. 1 mark, but it's imminent, and officials took time with state senators on Wednesday to promote the regional recreational asset.

Jackie Cassino, who serves as the Vermont Agency of Transportation Rail Trails Program Manager, appeared before the Senate Transportation Committee to share trail management plans. On the committee are two of the three Northeast Kingdom senators: Sen. Russ Ingalls, R-Essex, and Sen. Jane Kitchel, D-Caledonia. The trail passes through Kitchel's hometown of Danville.

LVRT is a four-season recreational trail that connects St. Johnsbury in the east to Swanton in the west. A section between St. Johnsbury and West Danville was praised by Cassino for its high volume of use.

Snowmobile riders travel onto the Lamoille Valley Rail Trail after crossing a bridge over Joes Brook in West Danville on Wednesday, Feb. 24, 2021. (File photo)

The creation of the LVRT has been many years in the making. Design and permitting began in 2009. The Vermont Association of Snow Travelers (VAST) started construction in 2014 on the segment from St. Johnsbury to West Danville. VAST completed about 33 miles in separate segments, which were funded through federal dollars, local town assistance, private donations and VAST's own money.

In 2018 VTrans assumed construction responsibility for the remaining miles. In 2020, funding for the completion of the LVRT was approved by Gov. Phil Scott who allocated $2.8 million of the FY2021 budget toward the construction of the LVRT. It was matched by $11.3 million in federal funds.

A six-mile segment between Hardwick and Wolcott Village is all that remains of the construction project. A year ago, officials believed the remaining segments could be finished by late fall. Complications pushed the date, and officials

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set Feb. 1 for completion, but that target was missed. A grand spring opening is still expected.

With completion, significant use of the trail is anticipated, said Cassino, and AOT has plans to manage its best and most effective use.

"If we do nothing else other than build and maintain the trails, people are coming. If we are a little bit more thoughtful about building out hospitality in terms of trailside amenities, lodging establishments, the amount of money being spent in a local community could be huge."

Management plans for the LVRT will be the model through which AOT oversees all of the state-owned rail trails. The LVRT is the longest trail but it's not the only one. There's Beebe Spur Rail Trail (6 miles) in Newport and Derby, the Delaware & Hudson Rail Trail (19 miles) and Missisquoi Valley Rail Trail (26 miles).

Cassino said AOT is responsible for local/regional coordination, maintenance, marketing, communications and general oversight of the trails.

She will be working with three regional committees that form the LVRT Rail Trail Council. For the region that spans Hardwick and St. Johnsbury, staff at Northeastern Vermont Development Association are coordinating the team.

"A well-managed trail system really needs clear policies and procedures for what can be done where and how and when," she said.

Cassino called the LVRT Rail Trail Council "the opportunity for municipalities to have a seat at the table."

Moving forward with a completed LVRT means working with municipalities through which the trail passes to create options and reasons for people to stop along their way, Cassino said.

"You can't overstate the importance of trailheads because they really serve as a gateway to the trail but also to the towns," she said. "We want people to access the trails but we also want to get them into the towns to spend money."

Grant funding to help towns welcome and entice trail users was made available, and Gov. Phil Scott is recommending $3 million in his proposed budget to fund further assistance to rail trail communities.

St. Johnsbury has been working toward maximizing its position on the LVRT by making a better way for users to reach the downtown. Plans are underway to link the LVRT with the Three Rivers Path that gets people to a pavilion on Bay Street and points them into the downtown via the Honking Tunnel.

Town Manager Chad Whitehead said the town has completed fieldwork including wetland and other environmental assessments and is preparing to submit permits. "We anticipate that we will be completing final design work through the summer and fall with the intention to go to construction in the summer of 2024," he said in an email.

The state has standardized plans for the construction of items like kiosks, benches and pavilions. The idea, Cassino said, is to save the towns money by sharing the plans but also make for a more uniform experience along the 93 miles of trail.

The state's trail management plan addresses issues around trail maintenance, trail operations and trail safety.

"These plans give us the opportunity to identify strategies to spur or complement economic development efforts and community development efforts, to improve the user experience and to provide connections to existing or planned facilities along all of our trails," said Cassino.

The negative side of increased visitors at locations along the trail was also discussed in the senate committee meeting.

"If you own a business with a big parking lot you can't have all your parking capacity taken up by people who would be parking there all day," said Kitchel.

Cassino shared a slide that featured what the state feels would be an ideal community connection point that includes trail-specific parking. It would include a bathroom facility, a picnic area and parking space that could accommodate trucks towing snowmobile trailers.