Bridge project to aid bike network

By AMY ASH NIXON
STAFF WRITER

MONTPELIER — A plan to create a more than 2-mile bike and pedestrian trail parallel to Route 2 in East Montpelier along the Winooski River, including a 200-foot-long bridge, is coming closer to reality, but organizers still need to raise $200,000 to seal the deal.

The long-envisioned path would connect with the Montpelier bike path at Gallison Hill Road and continue to East Montpelier and points farther east, according to the vision of the Cross Vermont Trail Association.

The total cost of the East Montpelier project is estimated to be $1.6 million, and organizers have been told they are eligible for over $1.2 million in federal grant support on the condition they meet a local match of 20 percent, or about $325,000. With more than $100,000 already pledged or in hand from local fundraising, an additional $206,000 remains to be raised to formally claim the grant dollars.

A kickoff for the public phase of the Build the Bridge campaign by association will be held at the Vermont College of Fine Arts in Montpelier on Nov. 22 at 6:30 p.m.

In an announcement of the fundraising campaign, the association said, “The project will provide a critical connection between the bike path network being developed in Montpelier, Barre and Berlin and other trail projects

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Cross Vermont Trail: The build-a-bridge campaign

Think about it. What could be better than a trail extending from Lake Champlain to the Connecticut River, along the Winooski and through the Wells River Valley — a trail that invites safe, scenic, accessible, four-season recreational travel on foot, bicycle, snowshoes or skis?

This would be a trail removed from the dangers, noise and irritations of the road, a trail for all ages and abilities. Sounds good, doesn’t it?

“It’s lofty project,” Bill Merrylees said, “but very doable.”

Merrylees, a board member of the Cross Vermont Trail Association, spoke at a recent fundraiser.

“These are 90 miles of community and local trail systems knit together into a network,” Merrylees said. “There are a lot of reasons to build this trail. It is family-friendly and safe for kids where it is separate from roads and cars. It provides a route for nonpolluting nonconsumptive transportation, owned by the public and preserved forever. Most of all, it is a way to get out into nature and to experience the joy of traveling through it.”

His enthusiasm for construction of a bridge across the Winooski in East Montpelier was supported by a packed house, members of the Central Vermont community who had come together for the showing of a new ski movie shot primarily in Alaska, some good food, and camaraderie.

Montpelier’s mayor, John Hollar, an avid cyclist, pointed to thriving cities across the nation that protect and provide for pedestrians and cyclists.

“Bike friendliness says a lot about a community, the community’s commitment to fitness, health and the environment,” he said.

With successful paths in Burlington and Stowe, and planned bike lanes on Montpelier streets, and the anticipated connection with the CVT, Hollar said he is committed to helping Montpelier become an internationally recognized bike and pedestrian community.”

These are local hopes and dreams. Lt. Gov. Phil Scott made the link from local to national.

“Cycling is one of my passions,” Scott said. As he described his first road bike — the one he bought from Onion River Sports, the one on which he has logged nearly 40,000 miles, the one that he painted the same green as his race car, and the one he is still riding — the audience cheered.

Scott, however, went deep. It’s easy to link cycling to Vermont’s economy. Tourism is the state’s No. 1 industry. Trails are huge attractions. “We must up the ante to remain competitive with other states,” he said.

Yes, the economy is a big concern for Montpeliers. There is another as well.

“We talk about health care,” Scott said, “What we don’t talk enough is prevention. We need to develop more trails and get healthy, and drive that message home.”

What could be better than the trail described above? Reaching the funding goal would be the best. Much progress has been made, and the end is in sight (see www.crossvermont.org).

“It’s like ‘Field of Dreams,’” Scott said. “Build it and they will come.”

The movie “The Dream Factory,” aptly named for this event, is a big mountain film that parallels big dreams of both individuals and communities.

Extraordinary footage of equally extraordinary skiers and boarders is mind-boggling.

Perhaps, however, it is the narrative by participating athletes that speaks most appropriately to the goals and dreams of the CVT.

Alaska demonstrates a “history of hope and potential.” It is a place you can “make it big.” It is a place “where dreams become reality.” See what I mean?

The movie closes with the musings of one of the narrators: “It’s not a question of budget, but motivation. If you want it, you’ve just got to go do it.”

Yes and no. Do it certainly. But there’s usually a price tag. That’s where CVT is right now — paying the price to make a dream come true.

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