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State project eyes consistency, safety for Emerald Necklace paths

Posted by Matt Rocheleau November 24, 2010 10:36 AM

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(Courtesy: Department of Conservation and Recreation)

The above map shows the project's focus between Boylston Street in the Back Bay Fens and the Casey Overpass by the Forest Hills MBTA stop in Jamaica Plain.

By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

State and local park officials are developing guidelines to improve the safety, accessibility and consistency of the routes used by cyclists, pedestrians and joggers through the Emerald Necklace corridor.

The project to improve connections across the urban parkland's pathways, sidewalks and crosswalks will also aim to balance the needs of all the different types of users, while still preserving the corridor's historic character, according to the state Department of Conservation and Recreation, which is coordinating the project along with the Emerald Necklace Conservancy, a nonprofit public-private partnership.

Plans, presented at a public meeting in October which was covered by the Jamaica Plain Gazette, focus on the parkland area along the city's border with Brookline that runs through parts of Fenway, Longwood, Mission Hill, and Jamaica Plain, between Boylston Street in the Back Bay Fens and the Casey Overpass by the Forest Hills MBTA stop in Jamaica Plain.

The area includes the Emerald Necklace parkland trails and 78 crossings

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under the state conservation department's jurisdiction, state officials said.

State conservation department spokeswoman Wendy Fox said that the idea for the project came about because, "Paths and crossings are treated in many different ways along the Emerald Necklace, so this is an opportunity to develop a consistent approach to them that can be used throughout the Emerald Necklace."

The pathways come in varying forms – cement sidewalks, paved paths, stonedust paving, dirt trails and trails. Sometimes the trails are not officially recognized, but instead have been created by continued use.

Path conditions also differ. The parkland conduits can be too narrow, not universally accessible, lack proper directional signage, have erosion or drainage problems, and can diverge or be discontinuous.

Crossings also have issues, including non-compliant ramps, a lack of distinguishable or consistent crosswalk painting, difficult crossing areas with no signal, poor sightlines, lack of warning signage for motorists and some areas are prone to collecting water, sand and dirt.

"This beautiful stretch of urban parkland deserves all the care we can give it," state conservation department commissioner Richard K. Sullivan Jr. said in a release. "Enhancing the safety and experience of all park visitors is an important and worthy goal."

The recommendations and guidelines being developed now, after an initial public survey, meeting and comment period in October, are expected to be presented at a second public meeting in January and finalized before a third meeting slated for March.

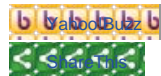
No expected cost, start or completion date has been set for the project. An advisory committee convened by the state conservation department and the parkland's conservancy will help guide the project.

There are about one dozen "working groups" involved with the project and around nine other projects underway or being planned in the project's area.

However, neither figures are out of the ordinary for such a project, Fox said.

When asked about the possible difficulty of balancing those groups' concerns, along with the concerns of pedestrians, cyclists and motorists simultaneously, she said: "It's always a challenge to get folks on the same page – but it's a good challenge and we're looking forward to it."

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