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File photo

The Narragansett Town Council rejected a motion to designate the Town's community center as an end point to the William C. O'Neill bike path last week.

Town council rejects motion to designate end of bike path

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NARRAGANSETT — The William C. O'Neill Bike Path still does not have an official endpoint, after a recent vote by the town council to reject a motion designating the Narragansett Community Center as such.

While the bike path currently ends at the town facility on Mumford Road, there still exists sentiment from both town officials and residents to extend the route to the town beach. Last year, the Rhode Island Department of Transportation (DOT)

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denied the town's request to bring the path to the beach via Canonchet Farm and subsequently cut half of the predicted funding for the project, according to the council.

"We had received word from DOT that it would not entertain [the Canonchet Farm] options," said Narragansett Town Council President Matthew Mannix, the sponsor of the motion to designate the community center as the bike path's official terminus. "They didn't express reluctance, they rejected the option of going through Canonchet."

"The big thing is DOT is changing their focus from bike paths to roads and bridges and informed us there would be a reduction from \$8.3 million that was originally going to be used to go through Canonchet Farm down to \$3 million," Mannix continued. "They significantly reduced the funding by more than half and said to us that the [Canonchet Farm proposals] did not meet the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers criteria nor the [Rhode Island] Coastal Resource Management Council requirements. They have a report from consultants in their project review and they said that the Canonchet path would not be able to be completed without some form of environmental relief and they see no justification for that relief."

The William C. O'Neill Bike Path was conceived in the early 1980s as an alternate means for children to get to local schools besides being bussed in. Throughout the 1990s and into the early 2000s, the path competed with other developing cycling routes throughout the state, though 5.6 miles of path had been completed throughout South

Kingstown in 2003. The now seven-mile path begins at Kingston Train Station and travels to the Narragansett Community Center.

In 2016, 67 percent of Rhode Island voters approved a \$35 million Green Economy Bond. \$750,000 of that bond was earmarked for the completion of Phase 4A of the project, a minor extension from the path's previous terminus on Mumford Road to the community center that was completed last year. According to town officials, \$8 million, a combination of state funding and Green Economy Bond money, was intended to be used to complete the path from the community center through Canonchet Farm, but that amount was reduced to \$3 million last year after the state agency took issue with the town's proposed routes through the heavy wetland.

"They have told me at DEM that passing this motion as it is written on the agenda would be a detriment to the town," said Dist. 33 (South Kingstown, Narragansett) Representative Carol Hagan McEntee. "It would hurt any chance of a bike path in the future."

Hagan McEntee added that there was the sentiment at the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management to get the path to the town beach.

"The idea way back when was you get off the train in Kingston and you can literally go all the way to Narragansett Beach, stopping at restaurants and shops the whole way," she said. "And the community center? It's just...I don't know. I think you've got to be more forward-thinking. Bike paths, walking spaces are the wave of the future. This town proves that 100 percent. I understand the lack of money, but we have to keep working forward. I urge you to keep the dream alive."

Mannix's ultimately rejected motion at the town council's meeting last Tuesday would have designated the community center the endpoint of the bike path, with the council president stating his intent with the motion was to be "practical" in the wake of the DOT rejection of the Canonchet Farm route. Not everyone saw a reason for the motion's inclusion on the agenda, however.

"I don't think we had to make any sort of declaration about a terminus after the last phase," said councilor Jesse Pugh. "So I don't know why we would have to state that publicly now."

At an October workshop announcing the funding reduction, the town council pitched the alternate idea of bringing the path to the town beach via Wanda and Strathmore Streets, a proposal that originally came from the state, though many residents of the neighborhood testified against the concept, expressing safety and quality of life concerns.

"I do not want to see the path funnel into the streets. People from those neighborhoods spoke clearly that's not what they want," said councilor Rick Lema.

Other residents, when speaking on the motion, disagreed. One speaker, a student at Narragansett Pier Middle School, testified that he rode his bike home every day after school, and putting the path through Narragansett Avenue, with its busy summer traffic, instead of down the less-crowded Wanda and Strathmore Streets, was a safety risk.

"[The bike path] is a great town asset and we should extend it to the town beach," said resident David Ruede. "I apologize, I was not at the workshop. But I cannot understand why the neighborhood would think it's safer to send kids on

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bicycles down Narragansett Avenue in the summer with commercial and resident and beach parking on both sides of the street. How that is any safer than going through the neighborhoods of Wanda [Street] and Strathmore [Street] makes no sense to me at all. Privacy, I understand. But that's what this is about - 'not in my backyard.' I think it's an abomination to cater to 20 houses on two streets and force kids to ride on Narragansett Avenue in busy summer traffic with no bike lane on either side of the road other than what's already going to be taken up by other parking."

A resident of Wanda Street then testified that the neighborhood sees bicyclists on its roads "all the time," and that residents of the street, along with those on Strathmore Street, were objecting to the proposed changes to the neighborhood to accommodate the creation of the bike path, which included, according to the resident, making Wanda Street one way toward the beach and widening the lanes significantly. According to the speaker, residents of the streets questioned whether on-street parking would disappear if the bike path were constructed.

"It would completely change what our streets are now," she said. "It's not that we don't want people coming down our street."

David Smith, a resident and strong advocate for the bike path, said various state entities would be reviewing and revising the \$3 million slotted for the completion of the path through Canonchet.

"The \$3 million could be used on another bikeway, for paving or, more likely, a bridge project," he said. "RIDOT will be more than happy to move the money elsewhere. The Town of Narragansett will be seen as not interested in managing the completion of the bike path."

"The prudent course of action is to vote the motion down, stay in communication with RIDOT, present the objections to the proposed alternative routes, press for the permitting of the pass through Canonchet Farm and demand that the first use of the \$3 million be for a comprehensive traffic safety analysis. But whatever you do, don't throw in the towel," Smith added.

His wife, Rosemary Smith, agreed.

"The \$3 million reimbursement would not be returned to DOT," she said. "The plan RIDOT offered, to take the path down Wanda Street, is not considered safe by the residents, and we need help finding another, safe way for pedestrians and bicyclists to get from the community center to the beach."

Dist. 34 (South Kingstown, Narragansett) representative Teresa Tanzi echoed the sentiments of many who wished to see the path extend to the beach.

"I'm simply going to say the bike path must go to the beach," she said. "It's meant to go to the beach, it has been intended to do that from the beginning and it's imperative that it does. We need to keep that money to explore offroad design and the environmental feasibility study through Canonchet Farm."

"It may take us 15 years, but that's not important," Tanzi continued, repeating an earlier concern about the project's longevity. "It's a process and it will take as long as it takes. We need to do this right, it's a legacy item. This is the South County Bike Path and it matters. Not just for those in Narragansett now, this is a legacy for the entire state."

Ultimately, the council rejected Mannix's motion 4-1, with Mannix the lone vote of approval.