

Heavy lifting boosts trail project Volunteers join bridge-building effort in New Hampshire



Volunteers Martha DeYoreo (left) and Dave Cole nailed a board to a bog bridge while Chris Williams kept it in place as part of a trail project that could soon link Durham and Newmarket.
(Patricia McDonnell for the boston globe)

By Tim Wacker, Globe Correspondent | October 25, 2007

NEWMARKET, N.H. - It was an hour before lunch and Martha DeYoreo already was an expert bridge builder.

"You take two 4-foot logs and work them into the ground," she said. "Then you take one of the planks and send the nails in at an angle and pound away."

Not exactly state-of-the-art civil engineering, but DeYoreo is just the kind of construction worker a coalition of Great Bay nature groups was looking for last weekend. The 16-year-old from Newmarket joined about 30 other volunteers Saturday to build bog bridges along a 3.8-mile section of a wilderness trail that could soon link downtown Durham with the shores of Great Bay in Newmarket.

"Just think," said Durham Conservation Commission member Robin Vranicar, "people in the city are going to be able to say they are going to walk to Newmarket and they won't have to get on the road."

That prospect is still a few months off, but the turnout Saturday was a very promising beginning to the end of an effort that started more than a decade ago, said Rachael Stevens, one of the organizers of the daylong event.

In 1994, a coalition of nature groups called the Great Bay Resource Protection Partnership started piecing together for public use properties on the western shore of Great Bay. Now it is piecing together a trail through those properties so the public can use it, Stevens said.

"The community is working on an asset that's largely for the community, so it's a two-way street," Stevens said. "If we don't have these bridges built, then people are going to be getting wet when they walk here."

About 30 volunteers from surrounding communities got wet Saturday to prevent that prospect. They braved swamplands to shoulder logs and planks soaked from rain the night before, carrying them a half-mile or more into the woods.

Some carried 100 pounds or more of lumber as the new trail often melted into the surrounding forest. As more people use the path, it probably will be easier to follow, but the organizers aren't worried about the place being overrun, Stevens and others said.

"We are strategically blazing this trail to do minimal impact on the environment," said Joanne Glode of the Nature Conservancy's Great Bay field office in Newmarket.

"In springtime, it can be pretty wet and mucky here and we don't want people getting wet," she said. "But we also don't want them walking through these sensitive areas and damaging them."

The bridges are 10-foot spans of cedar stretched across low-lying areas where snowmelt accumulates. The new trail will link existing paths from city-owned land at the end of Long Marsh Road in Durham to a preserve the land the Nature Conservancy owns at the end of Lubberland Creek in Newmarket.

It's hoped that when the project is done, the bridges and the sections of trail they connect will also provide a degree of access for specially modified wheelchairs, Stevens said. It will pass through a stretch of wetlands and woods that everyone should have a chance to enjoy, Stevens said.

"This is the largest unfragmented piece of land we have in the area," she said. "All the surrounding land is either protected or already has houses on it, so it's going to remain the way it is."

The path snakes alongside swamps and woodlands that sit on top of an outcropping of bedrock that catches a lot of rain in spring and makes the area wetter than normal year-round, Stevens said. It's ideal habitat for many rare species of wildlife, making the area educational.

Talks are underway to link that path with 4 miles of trails owned by the University of New Hampshire, called the East Foss Farm Trail in Durham, Stevens said. That would open 8 miles of trails from the southern reaches of the town to the Newmarket shore.

That's great news for Bob LeMarque of Durham. His home abuts the Foss trail and he's looking forward to the prospect of walking 8 miles through the woods to Great Bay in Newmarket.

"Instead of going out for an hour now, I'll be able to go out for two hours," he said. "There are a lot of families around that are going to make good use of this."

About half the roughly 45 bridges needed were built Saturday and there are other construction projects planned before the trail is finished.

It's not light work, but the sandwiches, scenery, and camaraderie were enough to get Gerry Bresnahan and her friend, Ken Courtney, both from Newmarket, to sign up for the day.

"When the day is like this and the colors are like this, I don't mind the work," Bresnahan said. "I think there are a lot of people who would love to be out here."

"I don't know anything about this," Courtney said as he shouldered a sledge and walked off into the woods. "I don't now where it starts or where it ends. I guess I will at the end of the day."■