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Planning Department

INTERDEPARTMENTAL COMMUNICATION

To: Don P. Johnson, Town Manager **Date:** October 31, 2003
From: Roland Bartl, AICP, Town Planner
Subject: CPA proposal for the Assabet River Rail Trail (ARRT)

Attached is a copy of the CPA funding proposal for the ARRT. It is ready to go should the Selectmen decide to submit it.

Assabet River Rail Trail (ARRT)**PROJECT APPLICATION FORM****Applicant:** Town of Acton **Submission Date:** November 14, 2003**Applicant's Address, Phone Number and Email** **Purpose: (Please select all that apply)**

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Open Space
 Community Housing
 Historic Preservation
 Recreation

Town Committee (if applicable):**Project Name:** Assabet River Rail Trail (ARRT)**Project Location/Address:** South Acton commuter lot south to Maynard town line**Amount Requested:** \$248,000.00**Project Summary:** In the space below, provide a brief summary of the project.

The 12.5-mile ARRT runs from Acton via Maynard, Stow, and Hudson, to Marlborough. The 5-community steering committee has advanced the trail since 1995. Federal grant applications are made jointly, but each community must raise its own local match. ARRT, Inc. is a non-profit citizens group with many Acton members. It promotes the ARRT since 1992. A section of the trail in Marlborough is finished. Another, from Marlborough through Hudson, is under construction. Several parts have been reassembled from private ownership, while others still remain to be purchased. Local appropriations, federal transportation grants, and ARRT, Inc.'s public relations efforts have moved the project forward. At this time, funds remain for acquisition in Acton, Hudson, Maynard, and Stow.

The Acton portion of the ARRT begins at the South Acton commuter rail station, crosses south on Main Street over the active track and then, starting at Maple Street, follows the old railroad right-of-way south, more or less parallel to Main Street to the Maynard town line. The right of way is obstructed by a building near the Maynard town, but an easement detour has been agreed upon with the landowner.

The requested amount is the required local match for the design and construction of the ARRT in Acton. The appropriation would position Acton competitively to apply for Federal Transportation Enhancement Grants for the additional \$1.17 million needed for a total estimated project cost of \$1.42 million.

The project addresses three of the stated CPA purposes:

Open Space – The acquisition of the 1.3-mile / 7.9-acre open space corridor preserves it whereas it might otherwise succumb to development pressures. The purchase is paid for from previous Town and federal funds. Acquisition negotiations are ongoing. Construction of the trail will make the corridor accessible to the public for enjoyment of the Mill Pond and of the adjacent fields at Stonefield Farm.

Historic Preservation – The ARRT preserves the old railroad corridor as part of South Acton's history. Construction will restore the timber trestle across Mill Pond and re-deck it for rail trail use. The right-of-way includes an old turntable. Remnants remain. It could be restored as a landmark along the trail.

Recreation – Heavily subsidized with federal funds for their value as transportation alternatives, rail trails are equally important recreation facilities. The ARRT offers opportunities for recreational biking, walking, rollerblading, cross-country skiing in winter, and bird watching and nature study on Mill Pond, at five Assabet River crossings, and along the swamps that the trail transects.

Estimated Date for Commencement of Project: 2005**Estimated Date for Completion of Project:** 2008

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Narrative:

Attached please find a copy of the 2001 Assabet River Rail Trail Implementation Plan. Section 1 provides an overview of the entire project. Details about the Acton Segment of the ARRT are in Section 2, pages 64 to 72.

1. Consistency with the Acton Community Preservation Plan Goals

The ARRT project meets several of Acton's Community Preservation Goals:

a. *Open Space* (see also ARRT Implementation Plan, p. 70 – Nature)

The ARRT will preserve and make accessible for use a 1.3-mile / 7.9 acre open space corridor that ranges in width between 40 and 70 feet. The corridor starts at the corner of Main Street and Maple Street in South Acton and follows an abandoned railroad right of way in a southerly direction to the Maynard town line running more or less parallel to Main Street. It was formerly the Marlborough branch of the Boston & Maine Railroad and is now owned by the MBTA. The MBTA is actively seeking to dispose of its unused rights of way to raise cash, but has committed to give rail trail projects priority. Without the ARRT, the MBTA could sell the right of way to abutting landowners. In some cases this would simply increase their yards; in other cases the additional land could create new building lots.

At Maple Street, the right of way begins at two town-owned properties between Main Street and Mill Pond, which are sometimes referred to as Mill Pond Park. Just south of Maple Street, the right of way temporarily widens to 140 feet to include the site of a former turntable. The area of the turn table contains remnants of this former installation that could be restored in a park-like setting providing a sense of its former function and use. From there, a timber trestle carries the tracks across the Mill Pond.

The area along and across Mill Pond offers wildlife viewing spots and scenic views of the pond and its shoreline east towards Main Street and west towards Martin Street. Mill Pond is a Fort Pond Brook impoundment. Fort Pond Brook is one of two green belts designated in the Town's Open Space and Recreation Plan. Continuing south, the right of way enters a wooded area with intermittent views across the fields of Stonefield Farm to the west.

The southernmost portion of the right of way is obstructed by a building. The Town and the building owner have agreed in principle to an easement detour that will lead the trail across the rear parking lot, and from there onto a +/-800-foot long boardwalk through an extensive Red Maple swamp back to the original railroad right of way near the Maynard town line. The boardwalk will provide multiple viewing points of the area's swamp habitat.

b. *Recreation* (see also ARRT Implementation Plan, p. 18 – Nat. Resources & Recreation)

The ARRT is a regional bike trail project as called for under Recreation Goals of Acton's FY 04 Community Preservation Plan. The ARRT will offer opportunities for recreational biking, walking, rollerblading, cross-country skiing in winter, and bird watching and nature study on Mill Pond, at five Assabet River crossings, and along the swamps that the trail transects. Along its 12.5 miles through five communities, the ARRT links existing recreation facilities, parks, conservation lands, the Assabet River National Wildlife Refuge, historic villages and downtowns, and schools and colleges, with many neighborhoods and employment locations.

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Since major funding is coming from federal grant programs, the ARRT must comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act. Therefore, the ARRT will be handicapped accessible.

c. *Historic Preservation*

The ARRT will preserve the old railroad corridor, which is part of South Acton's commercial and industrial heritage. Construction will restore the old timber trestle across Mill Pond and re-deck it for rail trail use. The right-of-way includes remnants of an old turntable that could be restored as a historic and educational landmark along the trail. Rail trails in general help stimulate and revitalize local economies through the recreation and commuter traffic that they bring to an area. Business and property owners in South Acton Village will benefit from the existence of the ARRT trail head in South Acton, and with that will be better able to maintain and restore their historic properties (see also ARRT Implementation Plan, p. 16 – Economic and Cultural Development).

2. Consistency with Town Planning Documents

The ARRT is consistent with all relevant Town of Acton planning documents:

a. *1998 Master Plan Update*

The ARRT implements the following broad Master Plan goals and objectives:

- strengthen Acton's traditional pattern of village centers
- preserve natural and human-made features that contribute to Acton's character
- promote pedestrian circulation
- create green belts
- provide recreational opportunities for families with young children
- provide facilities that will encourage walking and bicycling
- regional ... cooperation in transportation planning
- reduce dependency on the automobile
- improve connectivity and circulation

For the most part, the above are carried over from the 1990 Master Plan and thus are long-standing Acton planning goals. The Master Plan Update specifically discusses the status of the ARRT in 1998 and includes in its action recommendations to "continue meeting with the ARRT communities to move construction forward" (p. 173).

b. *2002-2007 Open Space and Recreation Plan*

The Open Space and Recreation Plan dedicates an entire section of its Inventory of Lands of Conservation and Recreation Interest to two planned rail trails in Acton, one of them being the ARRT (p. 99).

The authors of the Open Space and Recreation Plan conducted a survey of Acton residents. The plan reports that the answers to the question: "what are the top-five recreational facilities most needed in Acton", returned bike trails as the overwhelming top preference (p. 111). Accordingly, the development of the rail trails is a fundamental tenet of the Open Space and Recreation Plan. "Promote the development of the two regional bike trails planned to run through Acton" is one of its five recreation goals (p. 122). The rail trails also were mentioned in the 1996-2001 Open Space and Recreation Plan.

c. *1995 South Acton Village Plan*

Among the South Acton Village Plan goals are to "build bike ways", to "develop additional public open space and park bordering Mill Pond", and to encourage small business

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development in South Acton Village". A high priority action recommendation is to "pursue the development of a bike way toward Maynard". Pages 44 ff. for the first time discuss the trail in detail and the steps necessary to build it (its name, ARRT, did not exist at the time). The trail's eligibility for federal enhancement grants is highlighted.

3. Feasibility

The 1997 ARRT feasibility study by the State's Central Transportation Planning Staff found the project physically feasible (copy attached). Local and federal funding for the project to date, and demonstrated progress on acquisition, design, and construction has proven its feasibility, including financial feasibility. See also separate section on feasibility.

4. Population Served

At present, there are no off-road or on-road bicycle ways in Acton. Narrow streets and high traffic volumes make bicycling for commuting and recreation a dangerous proposition. A survey in the 2002-2007 Open Space and Recreation Plan reports that respondents considered bicycle ways by far the most needed recreational facilities in Acton.

5. Serving Multiple Needs and Populations / CPA Focus Areas

The ARRT will be used by commuters and recreation seekers alike. In addition to bicycling, the ARRT is available for walking, rollerblading, cross-country skiing in the winter, observing wildlife, and enjoying nature. Motorized vehicles will not be allowed except for emergencies and maintenance. The ARRT will be accessible to persons with disabilities in compliance with Americans with Disabilities Act.

The ARRT addresses three CPA focus areas:

- Open Space
- Recreation
- Historic Preservation

(see section 1 of this Narrative)

6. Other Funds

To date, the ARRT has received roughly \$2 million in donations, funding, and donation/funding commitments from private and public entities, town appropriations, and the Federal Transportation Enhancement Program (see ARRT Implementation Plan, p. 2 – History). Acton Town Meeting has appropriated its \$30,000 local share for trail acquisition in 1998. Federal funds for acquisition in Acton totaled \$150,000. The MBTA has pledged to transfer its portion of the right of way to the Town at no charge.

The \$248,000 requested in this application will leverage an additional \$1.17 million in federal funds for a total estimated project cost of \$1.42 million to complete the ARRT in Acton. The requested amount represents the estimated required local match for the estimated total design and construction cost in fiscal year 2007. Appropriation of the local match puts Acton in an advantaged position to apply for federal grants in a highly competitive funding program. The application will most likely be made together with the Town of Maynard for a joint ARRT project segment leading from South Acton Village to downtown Maynard.

7. Relationship to Other Town-Owned Assets

Ownership and development of the ARRT along and across Mill Pond in South Acton enhances the Fort Pond Brook Greenbelt. The Town of Acton already owns two parcels on Mill Pond.

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8. Consistency with Recent Town Meeting Action

In 1998, Town Meeting authorized the acquisition of the ARRT route by eminent domain, purchase, gift, lease, easement, license or otherwise, and appropriated a \$30,000 local match, which leveraged an additional \$150,000 in federal acquisition funds.

In 1999, Town Meeting voted that the Town enter an inter-municipal agreement with the other ARRT communities to advance the rail trail. The agreement was executed a year later.

9. Competency

The Town of Acton has a proven ability to implement the proposed project.