

From The Morning Call

Palmer Twp. hopes for a compromise on trail plan

Proposal would create a 3-mile bike path on former railway bed.

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Officials from Forks and Palmer townships met last week over an embattled sliver of railroad bed property in Forks slated to become part of a 3-mile bike path link.

And while a municipal representative in each community expressed optimism Tuesday about the ability to reach a compromise with a group of Forks residents fighting the bike path, that outlook was not shared by a spokesman for the residents.

"We're not going for nothing," said Friendly Tavern Lane resident Tom Gillen. "If it was 100 yards away, it would not be a problem. It would be a different story."

Gillen said while residents have not been contacted about meeting with Forks and Palmer officials, they continue to believe the rail-bed land is theirs.

Gillen said residents have expressed concern about the proximity of the proposed bike path to their homes. Gillen has estimated his backyard pool is 30 feet from the proposed path. One home is much closer.

"We want our land and that's all," he said.

Residents have also complained that vandalism, theft and trespassing have resulted from people using the existing cinder rail bed. Gillen has said there are problems with speeding all-terrain vehicles and snowmobiles using the trail.

Forks Township Manager Cathy Kichline, one of those upbeat about the prospects for a solution after last week's session between Forks and Palmer officials, said the immediate goal is merely to get all the parties together to talk about the issues and possible solutions.

Kichline said Palmer Township needs to hear what measures might be requested by the residents and then determine if they're feasible. She said Forks was acting as a facilitator for discussion between Palmer officials and the Forks residents.

"I think a lot of it [concern] is buffering," Kichline said. "It's workable. It's really workable."

Kichline said she believed a rock wall had been discussed by the residents. However Gillen said that had been proposed for the front of the Friendly Tavern Lane properties as a flood-control measure along the Bushkill Creek.

The residents went to Northampton County Court in late December to stop Palmer Township from condemning any interest they might have in the land so the bike path link can be built. Palmer acquired miles of unused rail lines in the Easton area from Conrail over the years and plans to use grant money to build a new section that will run on the Palmer side of the Bushkill Creek, south from near Tatamy Road, briefly cross into Forks in the Friendly Tavern Lane area and then cross back into Palmer. Forks Township is not a defendant in the suit.

To get the grant money, Palmer has to show it has the rail bed property free and clear of anyone else's rights. The residents say their property deeds show the rail property was supposed to revert back to them when the line was abandoned.

"It's a very important [trail] link," Kichline said. "We want to make sure the residents down there are comfortable with what's going to happen."

Palmer Supervisor Vice Chairman Robert Lammi said he shared Kichline's optimism. He said the rail right of way is much larger than the actual proposed 12-foot-wide bike path, adding the Friendly Tavern Lane residents may be looking at the right of way as the boundaries of the actual path.

"The next step will be talking to the neighbors and seeing what kind of buffering they would like to see," he said. The part of the property that is not the path will be grass, trees and bushes. "I think once we start to work up the details of it and present it to the neighbors, hopefully they will get a better feel for what this is going to look like."

The Forks residents' attorney, William Coffin of Easton, was not available for comment Tuesday. Lawyers for Forks and Palmer also could not be reached.

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