The East Coast Greenway Alliance:
A Model for Grassroots Greenway Initiatives

Highlights of ECGA Progress
Rhode Island and Massachusetts

Ann Chapman
104 Shays Street
Amherst, MA  01002
1. Introduction

The U.S. greenway movement in the U.S. is a relatively recent phenomenon. Although historically, Frederick Law Olmsted and others created projects as early as the 1860s which we would today term “greenways”, the term itself wasn’t used until the 1950s. The contemporary U.S. greenway movement was given important encouragement when the 1987 President’ Commission on Americans Outdoors publicly endorsed the concept. At that time, there was virtually no professional literature on the subject. However, an author’s query by Charles E.Little, placed in a variety of professional journals asking for information on active greenway projects resulted in over one hundred responses. Based on these responses, Little wrote a book, published in 1990, entitled *Greenways for America*, which was the first major book published on the topic (Little, 1990). Since that time, several other books and numerous articles have been published on various aspects of greenways. These include aspects of the planning design, and management of greenways in the U.S. and abroad. A good summary of the greenway movement here and abroad may be found in *Greenways: The Beginning of an International Movement* (Fabos and Ahern in 1996).

An important element in understanding the diverse array of projects in the burgeoning greenways movement can be gained by categorizing them. As defined by Fabos (in Fabos and Ahern 1996 p. 5), the majority of greenways fall into three major categories: 1) ecologically significant corridors and natural systems (e.g. along rivers, coastal areas, and ridgelines); 2) recreational greenways (e.g. urban or rural trails, often with scenic components); and 3) greenways based on the historical/cultural heritage of a region. In actuality, these categories may overlap. Indeed, there has been an increasing emphasis on “multi-use” corridors in recent years.

Whatever the type of greenway, an important component of success tends to be grassroots support. According to Fabos (Fabos and Ahern 1996 p.2), “Nearly all greenway planning…takes the form of grassroots projects.” In order to understand the elements necessary for success, it is helpful to examine case studies of successful grassroots initiatives. One project that can set a valuable example is the East Coast Greenway Alliance (ECGA). The organization, founded in 1991, is working to establish a 2300 mile trail connecting major urban centers along the east coast,
extending from Maine to Florida. Although only eight years old, the project has been extremely successful in attracting support, and in creating an effective structure for the project’s success. The East Coast Greenway was recently one of 16 trails nationwide to be designated a national Millennium Trail (ECGA website www.greenway.org/2ktrail.htm). This paper will focus on some key aspects of the ECGA success, and will highlight current projects in two states, Rhode Island and Massachusetts.

2. Material Studied, Methods

Information for this study was obtained from published sources on greenways (books and review articles); ECGA publications (hard copy as well as website materials) including their Annual Report and Newsletters. In some cases, phone interviews, class lectures by guest experts in the field, and email correspondence were used to supplement printed research materials.

3. Results

Key Elements of the East Coast Greenway Alliance Plan.

The East Coast Greenway Alliance (ECGA) is a nonprofit grassroots organization which was founded in 1991. The organizational vision is to create a “long-distance, inter-urban, multi-user transportation and recreation trail network”. The trail, when complete, will consist of a series of locally owned and managed trail segments. When complete, the trail segments will be joined to form a continuous paved spine route extending from Maine to Florida. The trail is designed for non-motorized vehicles and hikers, is primarily off-road, and will pass through major urban centers (ECGA 1999 Annual Report).

The idea for the trail originated during a brainstorming session by a group of cyclists and hikers in November of 1991. At that time, they conceived the idea of a multi-state trail through urban centers from Boston to Washington D.C. They formed the East Coast Greenway Alliance to help expedite their vision. In the summer of 1992, the new organization “tested the waters” to see if there was public support for the project with a 30-day exploratory bicycle tour from Boston to Washington D.C. The well-publicized tour passed through each community they hoped to include
in the trail, and at each stop they met with residents and local officials. There was great enthusiasm for the proposal, and as a result, the ECGA decided to expand its vision to include the entire eastern seaboard from Calais, Maine to Key West, Florida—a distance of 2,300 miles (ECGA 1999 Annual Report).

Implementing such a large vision required careful strategy. The trail route through each state needed to be defined, and a set of formal criteria for designation of trail segments needed to be established. As envisioned, the ECGA would not own or manage the trail, but rather local, county, or state agencies would own and manage trail segments, which would be connected to create a large, intact trail. In order for this to happen, each state needed to establish a committee which would take on the responsibility of creating and maintaining trail segments. In addition, the ECGA needed to publicize and promote the trail network through events, awards, written materials (such as maps and guides, and a website). Funding sources also needed to be identified, both for establishing the trail itself, and for organizational staffing (ECGA information sheet 1999).

**ECGA Highlights of Strategic Elements: Trail Design/Designation**

Aspects of strategy for trail design and designation are worth discussing in more detail, since they may be generally applicable to other large (multi-state or multi-town) greenway initiatives. Here are a few (more can be found on the ECGA website or printed materials). One key strategy of the ECGA was to create a trail tied closely to the main Amtrak route from Boston to Florida, so that there would be easy access to the trail from a variety of points. The East Coast Greenway trail segments are often near or directly adjacent to major rail stations. A second element to the organization’s success is the trail design/designation procedure. Trail design is a joint responsibility of the ECGA and each State Committee. Potential routes are first discussed informally by ECGA in consultation with the state committees and other interested parties. Nominations for formal designation by state committees must include an endorsement by the local trail-managing entity. The ECGA then reviews trail segment nominations against established criteria (ECGA website).

In Feb 1999, the ECGA Board of Trustees met to discuss several refinements to its trail vision and designation procedures. At that time, the Board confirmed that the East Coast Greenway vision was as a “primary spine” trail system (rather than a network). It did allow for “a limited number of ‘alternate’ routes”, particularly if a good alternative route exists and completion of the spine is
far off. The Trustees also adopted a list of 23 key cities through which the route must pass, and adopted 5 benchmarks for tracking the progress of the trail in each state (state by state compilation of data available). These are 1) Trail Route Identified; 2) Public Control of Trail; 3) Planning/Design Begun; 4) Construction Begun; 5) ECG Designation Completed. (ECGA 1999 Annual Report). Details of the sequence of steps required for designation of a “Class A” permanent designations of trail include criteria which can be found on the ECGA website “The Process”.

**Funding**

Funding to build the trail has come primarily from federal programs: the former ISTEA program has been replaced by “an even bigger TEA-21”, which provides millions of dollars to states and communities for the purpose of building bicycle and pedestrian facilities. This funding has been available for most parts of the trail (except Massachusetts—see below).

In addition, the necessary project coordination and expertise which come from permanent organizational staffing have come primarily from membership dues, foundation grants, and contributions from corporations or other groups. Merchandise sales for items such as T-shirts and maps have also contributed a small amount of income (ECGA 1999 Annual Report).

**Awards**

In 1999, the East Coast Greenway was designated as one of 16 National Millennium Trails by the White House Millennium Commission, along with such well known trails as the Appalachian Trail and the Boston Freedom Trail. Criteria for receiving the award included demonstrating: 1) how the trail would further the mission of the White House Millennium Council to “honor the past and imagine the future”; 2) how it would provide tangible, widespread benefits for future generations of Americans’ and 3) how it would “bring together individuals, groups, and organizations, both public and private, in collaborative support of the trail”. Bipartisan political support for the ECG trail designation was demonstrated. Over 50 members of the House and Senate signed letters to the President supporting the designation. A letter to the President was signed by “more than half of the senators from the 15 eastern seaboard states”. Some benefits from the designation are expected to include publicity, including media promotion, and a trail marker bearing the White House Millennium Council logo. A map and description of the trail will be included on the “Millennium Trails” web site, and each trail will be promoted through events as a “Trail of the
month”. The National Millennium Trails will also receive assistance to hold a “major celebratory event” on the trail (ECGA In Progress Summer 1999). The organization also won the 1999 Kodak American Greenways Award, awarded for distinction in the field of trail and greenway development (ECGA, In Progress Winter 1999).

Publicity
Publicity has been an important component of ECGA success since the initial 1992 bike tour of several states. Currently, a second bicycle tour, the “East Coast Greenway Wave” is under way. The event was kicked off in Key West, FL, and involves a bicycle relay which carries a bottle of Gulf water all the way up the east coast along the East Coast Greenway, and will terminate in St. John, New Brunswick, Canada. There are publicity events in each state along the way (ECGA website, www.greenway.org/wavenow.htm).

Highlights of East Coast Greenway Projects in Two New England States

Rhode Island
According to ECGA, the Rhode Island plan is one of the most advanced in the East Coast Greenway initiative. In 1999, the Rhode Island Committee was awarded the “State Committee of the Year” award from ECGA. The Committee, which has fifteen members, met eight times in 1999 to review route progress and discuss promotional events. As of January 2000, a projected 53 mile spine trail route for Rhode Island has been identified, along with an additional 6 miles of alternate routes through Providence. All 53 miles of the spine trail are currently in public control. Currently 5.8 miles of trails have been formally designated by ECGA, 10.3 miles are in construction (or have completed construction), and 42.7 miles are in the planning/design stage (ECGA fact sheet for Rhode Island, January 2000)

The identified route passes through a variety of urban and rural landscapes in two counties and eight municipalities. Highlights of the route include the Coventry Greenway, a 3-mile rail-trail conversion path which has been designated as an official segment of the ECG. This path was created through a partnership between Coventry town officials and a private contractor. The Blackstone River Bikeway will travel from Providence to Woonsocket in RI, then will extend into Massachusetts. A segment of the Blackstone River Bikeway in the town of Lincoln has also
recently been officially designated by the ECGA. Other segments of the Rhode Island trail will follow the Trestle Trail in western Coventry, and the Washington Secondary rail corridor, which passes through West Warwick, Warwick and Cranston (ECGA website material on RI trail status at http://www.greenway.org/gw-ri.htm)

For the purpose of coordinating the effort and expediting the trail completion effort, the spine trail has been divided into eight segments (with an additional segment for alternate route through Providence), with jurisdictions and contact persons defined for each segment. These include both state agencies (the Rhode Island Departments of Transportation (RIDOT) and Department of Environmental Management (RIDEM)), as well as city or town governments (Cranston, Providence, Coventry). Substantial federal funding has come from TEA-21. The Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor Commission awarded ECGA a $10,000 grant for the preparation of a Blackstone River Bikeway Map. The RI National Guard has also provided trail-building assistance. Other funding for the trail has come from town budgets as well as fund raising projects (RI Fact Sheet January 2000).

According to Eric Weis, Executive Assistant at ECGA, Rhode Island governor Lincoln Almond has been very committed to greenways in general, and to the East Coast Greenway in particular. Rhode Island state legislation which facilitates the process has been underway for some years. In 1995, the Rhode Island State Greenspace and Greenway Plan was finalized. A key goal identified by the comprehensive plan was the need to safeguard an additional 35,000 acres of open space, including greenways, by the year 2020 (this goal may be accelerated to the year 2010 of a proposed November 2000 bond issue for $50 million passes). The Plan also recommended the formation of a Greenways Council to help expedite the process. In response to the recommendation, Governor Almond created the Rhode Island Greenways Council by Executive Order. The Council includes executive appointments from both state agencies such as Departments of Environmental Management, Transportation, and Economic Development, along with non-governmental representatives. In 1998, Rhode Island passed a $15 million greenways bond issue. As a result, in 1999, $2 million was made available over a two year period for local bikeways and greenways. (Weis, personal communication; RIDEM press release August 31, 1998; RIDEM press release March 17, 1999).
Massachusetts

The East Coast Greenway will enter Massachusetts from New Hampshire in Salisbury. The Massachusetts Committee plans to make use of several bike trail initiatives already underway in Massachusetts. It will use the “Border to Boston” and “Bike to the Sea” Trails to get close to the Boston line. The Border to Boston trail is a proposed coastal Rail-Trail connecting New Hampshire (at Salisbury) with several Massachusetts communities including Newburyport, Newbury, Ipswich, Topsfield, and Danvers at its southernmost end (Border to Boston brochure). The Bike to the Sea Trail is a proposed multi-use bicycle and pedestrian trail which will pass through several Massachusetts communities, including Lynn, Saugus, Revere, Malden, Melrose, and Everett. It will pass near the Oakgrove MBTA Station (Bike to the Sea, Inc. brochure).

The ECGA Massachusetts Committee has been examining different alternatives for a route through Boston. Two possible routes include 1) a waterfront route with views of Boston Harbor which could then link to the Neponset Greenway; or 2) a more inner-city route which could pass through the Southwest Corridor Park, as well as Forest Hills cemetery, and an urban wildlife sanctuary on the grounds of the former MA State Hospital. From Boston, the greenway will travel to Worcester (possibly using in part a route provided by another Massachusetts Rail-Trail initiative, the Wayside Rail-Trail). From Worcester, the East Coast Greenway connects with the Blackstone River Bikeway, which travels from Worcester to Providence Rhode Island (ECGA 2000 website information on Massachusetts, www.greenway.org/gw-ma-htm; ECGA In Progress, Summer 1999).

In a phone interview with Stephen Winslow, new head of the Massachusetts State Committee, he commented on the East Coast Greenway as “a great idea—the right idea at the right time”. While the Massachusetts trail initiative is making progress, it has not moved forward as rapidly as efforts in some of the other New England states (most notably Rhode Island and Connecticut). Winslow discussed key obstacles as funding, and political support (Winslow, March 11, 2000).

At the state level, according to Winslow, the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Management (DEM) has been supportive (Winslow March 11, 2000). In 1999, DEM launched a statewide Greenway Planning Project. It is currently developing a Statewide Greenways and Trails Plan which will create a statewide vision. Through projects such as a recent series of
visioning workshops across the state, the planning project will encourage and provide a framework for the many greenway and trail efforts currently underway in Massachusetts. The Appalachian Mountain Club has been hired as a consultant to help prepare the plan, and the National Park Service, Rivers and Trails Program has provided assistance. AMC will produce a series of statewide and regional maps which show existing greenways and trails. Currently, the DEM Greenways Program currently provides small grants, along with information, technical assistance and coordination services for greenway planning in the state (Howard, 2000).

While DEM has been supportive, other agencies, most notably the Executive Office of Transportation, have not been. Massachusetts trails most other states in funding projects such as bike trails from ISTEA and TEA-21 funds (*the Federal Highway Bill for Trails and Enhancements). In Massachusetts, much of this money has been funneled instead into the Big Dig project in Boston. Indeed, a recent report by the Surface Transportation Policy Project and the Conservation Law Foundation indicates that, according to CLF transportation policy analyst Seth Kaplan, “Massachusetts systematically has shortchanged non-highway construction projects, ranging from transit improvements to bicycle paths, after they have been thoroughly reviewed and approved by the formal planning process.” According to the report, between the years 1992 and 1999, Massachusetts spent only 47% of the federal funds that had been identified as necessary to pay for transportation enhancements including bike trails and scenic easements, giving Massachusetts, according to Kaplan, the seventh worst record in the nation. Massachusetts bike trail projects which have been delayed without explanation include several which will be important to the completion of the East Coast Greenway in Massachusetts, including the Border to Boston Trail, the Bike to the Sea Trail, and the Wayside Rail-Trail (Conservation Law Foundation, March 22, 2000).

**Highlights of the Blackstone River Bikeway**

The Blackstone River Bikeway will be constructed over the next five to seven years, and will ultimately be a primarily off-road trail which will stretch along 45 miles, extending from Worcester, MA south to Providence Rhode Island. The route will pass through towns which were an important part of the American Industrial Revolution, and are now part of the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor. While under construction, the route will pass primarily along public roads in the two states (the map of the Bike trail shows both the temporary on-road routes,
as well as the future bikeway). The bike trail is being developed in large part with federal transportation funding, and with the joint cooperative efforts of the Departments of Environmental Management in both states, as well as the Massachusetts Highway Department, and the RI Department of Transportation, as well as with local community support. A recently published map of the Blackstone River Bikeway was funded by a grant to ECGA from the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor Commission (text from Blackstone Bikeway Map).

When completed, the Massachusetts portion of the trail will extend for 28 miles from Union Station in Worcester (currently undergoing renovation) south to Blackstone, MA before crossing the border into Rhode Island. When complete, the route will consist of mostly off-road trails, including rail trails, and will wind through historic mill villages, as well as the Canal Heritage State Park (in Northbridge and Uxbridge). Currently, the interim route travels from Crompton Park in Worcester at the northern end, and uses mainly public roads (both primary roads and side streets). A highlight in Uxbridge, near the southern end of the Massachusetts portion of the trail, is the River Bend Farm, which was once a pre-Revolutionary era dairy farm, and now serving as a Visitor Center (Blackstone River Bikeway Map).

Current highlights of the Rhode Island portion of the (interim) trail include Market Square in Woonsocket (there is a public parking lot off Main Street), with the Museum of Work and Culture. After passing through small historic mill villages and rural, sometimes hilly terrain, the route enters Pawtucket, with historic Slater Mill as a highlight. From Pawtucket, the bike route involves a ferry ride to Providence, and from there connects to other portions of the East Coast Greenway Rhode Island route (text, Blackstone Bikeway Map).
4. Discussion/Conclusions

The success of the East Coast Greenway Alliance shows what a combination of vision and effective strategy can accomplish. In addition to a large vision which inspires people to want to be involved, there are clear-cut means of accomplishing progress (without which the effort might easily founder). Success with individual trail segments can be measured, which is encouraging to the grassroots efforts in each state. While the rate of success varies in each state, the overall approach allows them to learn from each other’s efforts. While grassroots efforts are central to all projects, the importance of partnerships—whether with state agencies, national or state organizations or federal agencies, also make an important difference. The importance of having state agencies on board (and all on the same wavelength) is apparent as one key to Rhode Island’s exceptional progress to date. The East Coast Greenway Alliance has much to recommend it as a model to other interstate (or even intertown) efforts.
5. References


East Coast Greenway Alliance 1999. “Annual Report” (also available on ECGA web site)

East Coast Greenway Alliance, Summer 1999. In Progress. (also available on ECGA web site—see below)

East Coast Greenway Alliance, Winter 1999. In Progress. (also available on ECGA web site—see below)

East Coast Greenway Alliance (ECGA) website (http://www.greenway.org)


