

March 10th, 2021

Laura Ginsburg, Chair
Tunbridge Planning Commission

Dear Commissioner Ginsburg:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input as the Tunbridge Planning Commission works to develop a policy recommendation for the use of the Town's legal trails.

To put the Town's 2.45 miles of legal trail ROW's in context, see Map 1 in the attachments. I've colored the legal trails in red on the Town's official highway map, and have also overlaid the property boundaries for parcels that abut the legal trails, along with the owner's last name(s).

Legal trails in Tunbridge represent a relatively small portion (3%) of the Town's ROW's. None of the legal trails is more than 0.75 miles in length.

They include:

- Legal Trail 1 - **The Crossroad** (Farnham, Mullen, Mullen/Berger, Tobin) **0.73 miles**
- Legal Trail 2 - **Baptist Hill Road** (Echeverria/Pratt, Miller, Larocque) **0.7 miles**
- Legal Trail 3 - **Orchard Road** (O'Brien, Echeverria/Pratt) **0.72 miles**
- Legal Trail 4 - **Falls Hill Road** (Heminway) **0.3 miles**

Lacking a Selectboard policy or town ordinance restricting the public use of the Town's legal trails, they can be accessed by a variety of means, including motorized vehicles. The Selectboard, however, is authorized by Title 19 V.S.A. §§ 303 and 1110 to place restrictions on the use of a town highway, including legal trails.

It is my understanding that the focus of the Planning Commission's policy recommendation is whether or not the Selectboard should impose restrictions on wheeled vehicle use (motorized and non-motorized) of the legal trails. I'd like to keep my comments focused on bicycle use, as it has been the wheeled vehicle use that is responsible for triggering this process.

GROWTH OF GRAVEL BIKING

In recent years there has been a dramatic shift in the cycling industry and among cyclists. The genre of "gravel bikes" (sometimes called "all road bikes") has been experiencing explosive growth. Drawing from both the mountain bikers and road bikers, in addition to those just coming into cycling, the gravel riding segment of the industry is proving to be more than just a fad.

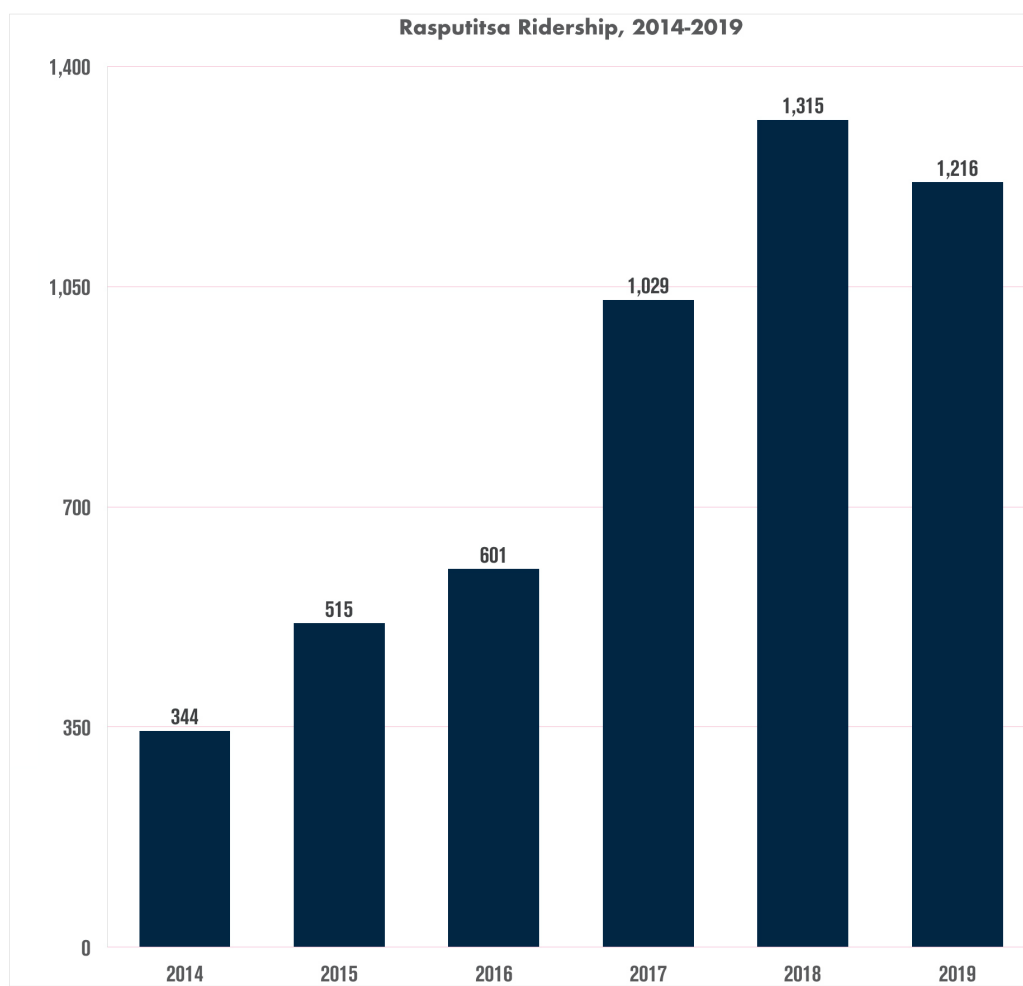
With more miles of gravel than pavement in Vermont, along with our proximity to large population centers to the south, the state has quickly become a popular destination for gravel riding tourism.

A quick review of gravel biking web sites reveals a common theme - Class IV roads and legal trails are highly sought after, often referred to as the "holy grail" for gravel enthusiasts. Here in Tunbridge, an annual "gravel enduro" event, the Ranger, was introduced in 2017 and had grown to over 400 riders by its third year (2019). The ride was cancelled in 2020 due to the pandemic, but the Bozeman, Montana-based organizer is planning a return in 2021.

A banner on the Ranger's web site (therangervt.com/event) exclaims "**Welcome to Tunbridge, Vermont's Gravel Playground.**" The event's 40-mile route through town was designed to include as many miles of Class IV road as possible (Frye Road, Taylor Road, Hoyt Hill Road, Kelsey Mountain Road, and Clay White Hill Road). In 2019, The Crossroad legal trail was added to the route. If landowner objections had not been an issue, Orchard Road would have likely been included in the route as well.

A second, smaller Tunbridge-based gravel enduro event, run as fundraiser for Royalton Community Radio has also contemplated adding the Orchard Road connection, but has held back due to landowner objections.

To get a sense for the growth potential of gravel enduros, and gravel riding in general, one can look at the events elsewhere in Vermont that the Ranger was modeled after. Those events draw upward of 1,500 participants each year, with the Rasputitsa event (www.rasputitsagravel.com) in West Burke being intentionally scheduled during the height of Vermont's mud season to further increase the challenge. The graphic below was generated from the Rasputitsa registration data.





Above is an image from the web site of the annual event hosted by the Woodstock-based, Vermont Overland, showing the mass start of their annual 50-mile ride. (www.vermontoverland.com/overland/)

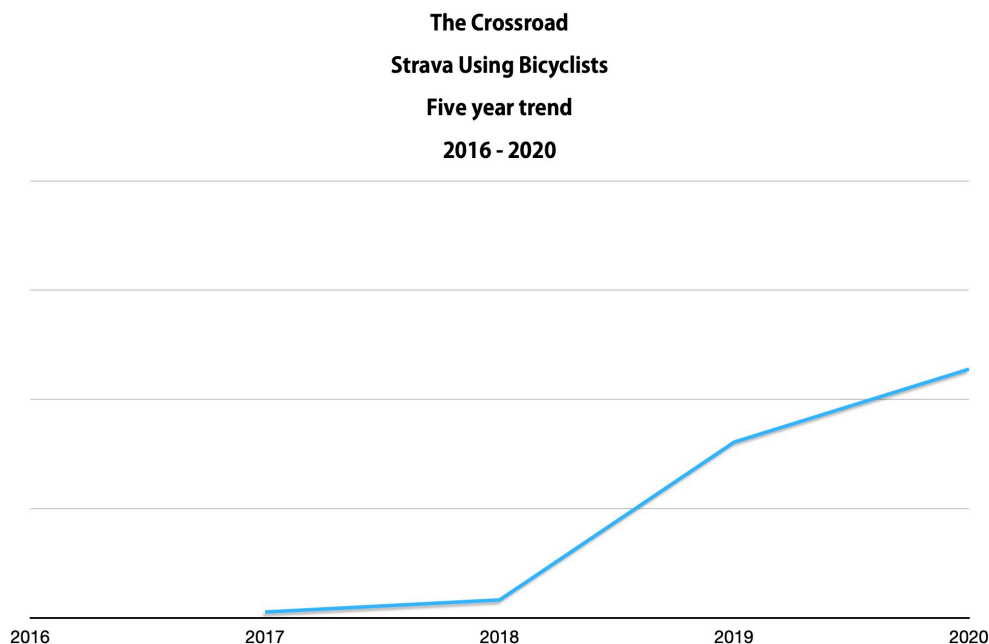
Below is a pair of images from the web pages of the annual Rooted Vermont ride in Richmond. Water, mud, and steep elevation gains/drops are part of what draws cyclists to the backroads. (rootedvermont.com)



While the above referenced gravel riding events in Vermont are only run on a single date each year, the residual impact continues throughout the year. Participants in these events primarily come from outside the area and, after “discovering” a place, there are riders that return on non-event dates. There is also word of mouth and social media buzz in the aftermath of an event that draws additional riders to an area in the wake of publicity. Then, there is the power of crowd sourcing phone apps such as Map My Ride, Ride With GPS, and Strava that are widely used by cyclists to document and share their routes.

Using the Strava example, riders running the app create a GPS enabled digital record of each of their rides. Not only are the recorded rides/routes shared among users, but they are aggregated to a continuously updated “heat map” on the Strava web site. The heat map graphically shows the volume of riders on all road and off-road routes for others to use when planning their own rides. Mass events like the Ranger, although only single day events, greatly contribute to the appearance of popularity (“heat”) on the map and fuel the growth of riders drawn to an event’s route throughout the rest of the year.

The resulting growth in bicycle traffic on Tunbridge roads popularized by these crowd sourcing apps (recording event participation as well as solo or small group rides) has been dramatic. From 2016 through 2018, Strava user traffic on The Crossroad had been minimal and relatively flat. Beginning in 2019, the first year that the Ranger event included The Crossroad, the graph below shows the growth trend on that legal trail.



Another significant insight found in the user data is that approximately 80% of the bicycle traffic statewide is tourism related. Here in Tunbridge, the number of local gravel riders is very small and, due to our population demographic, is unlikely to expand to an extent that would create a large volume increase. The tourism component, however, greatly increases the growth potential for bicycle use on our unmaintained town roads.

The bottom line is that, due to our proximity to large metro areas within a few hours drive, there is tremendous potential for the growth of bicycle traffic on our gravel roads and legal trails in the future. As can be seen from the experiences elsewhere in the state, we should be considering the bicycling impact on our legal trails from a rapidly growing, tourism-related standpoint in which it is well within the realm of possibilities for 1000+ event riders in a single day, along with many more over the course of the spring, summer, and fall months to be coursing through the legal trail connection between the Farnham's and the Mullen's, or along the legal trail that connects the Dodge Farm property with the Land Goes Farm property. In addition to landowner concerns about privacy, the Town will need to consider the maintenance needs of its legal trails which will become necessary due to the increased traffic.

It should be noted that the 4-town gravel route committee that has been working to develop a gravel riding tourism resource for the area decided that it could not responsibly include unmaintained roads among its mapped routes in light of the maintenance budgets (or lack thereof) for Class IV roads and legal trails.

USER CONFLICTS AND SAFETY ISSUES

I'll begin with an anecdote about my personal experience with gravel bicycling use on the Class IV road that runs along my property. Prior to the introduction of the Ranger event in 2017, I'd see very little bicycle traffic on the road, with the only tracks coming from my own bicycle or those of a couple of neighbors. Since 2017, however, the volume has increased ten fold (according to Strava data, not including those that flow through on the day of the Ranger).

Since 2017, my wife and I have put the date of the Ranger on our calendar and do not plan any trips on the road for that day. Riders careening down Frye Road at speeds of 30mph seem to assume that the road is all theirs and that the only other traffic they need to worry about comes from other competitors in the event who are traveling in the same direction. In 2019, I happened to be walking along the edge of the meadow when a group of riders at high speed flew past me and quickly disappeared around a blind corner. As soon as they were out of view, loud screaming erupted.

"What the f*&k are you doing here!" one rider yelled, soon to be echoed by the rider immediately behind him, and then the next, and the next.

Jogging down to see what had transpired (half expecting to come upon a crash scene), I saw a lone cyclist, unassociated with the event (and perhaps unaware of what he was headed toward) who had been biking up the hill in the opposite direction of the ride. The group of cyclists at the edge of control on the descent had been using the entire road width and had nearly collided with the unsuspecting rider. In their mind, it seemed to be the uphill rider's fault for having been there. (Screams that include "Clear the trail!" are commonly used directives by speeding cyclists announcing their descent to slower moving users or those traveling in the opposite direction.)

The screaming, cursing, and name calling continued until the downhill riders were out of earshot and the lone uphill rider had wisely decided not to continue up the road and turned around.

It must be pointed out that a bicycle, both by legal and practical definition is a vehicle. As with off-road vehicles, ATV's, motorcycles, e-bikes, etc., the bicycle is capable of moving its rider at speeds that are far greater than non-wheeled vehicles. On downhill sections of a trail, gravel riders can (and do) achieve speeds in excess of what automobile or other motorized traffic might be capable of on the same trail. One has only to watch a video of the popular bicycle downhill riding that has become common during the summer months at our ski areas to understand the potential. Those speeds, especially with limited sight lines and limited time for

reaction on trails, are generally not compatible with hikers and horseback riders. Up until recently, I had not been concerned about being broadsided by a bicycle as I drive out of my meadow, or taking a bike and rider over the hood as I return up the hill. Other uses along the road (on foot, horseback, or even vehicular) have been minimal and typically slow moving, but the dynamic has changed since cyclists have started free-falling down the 12% grade in increasing numbers.

A study sponsored by The Federal Highway Administration and The National Recreational Trails Advisory Committee describes conflicts on multiple-use trails "as problems of success -- an indication of the trail's popularity." The report goes on to state that, "The National Recreational Trails Advisory Committee identified trail-user conflicts on multiple-use trails as a major concern that needs resolution."

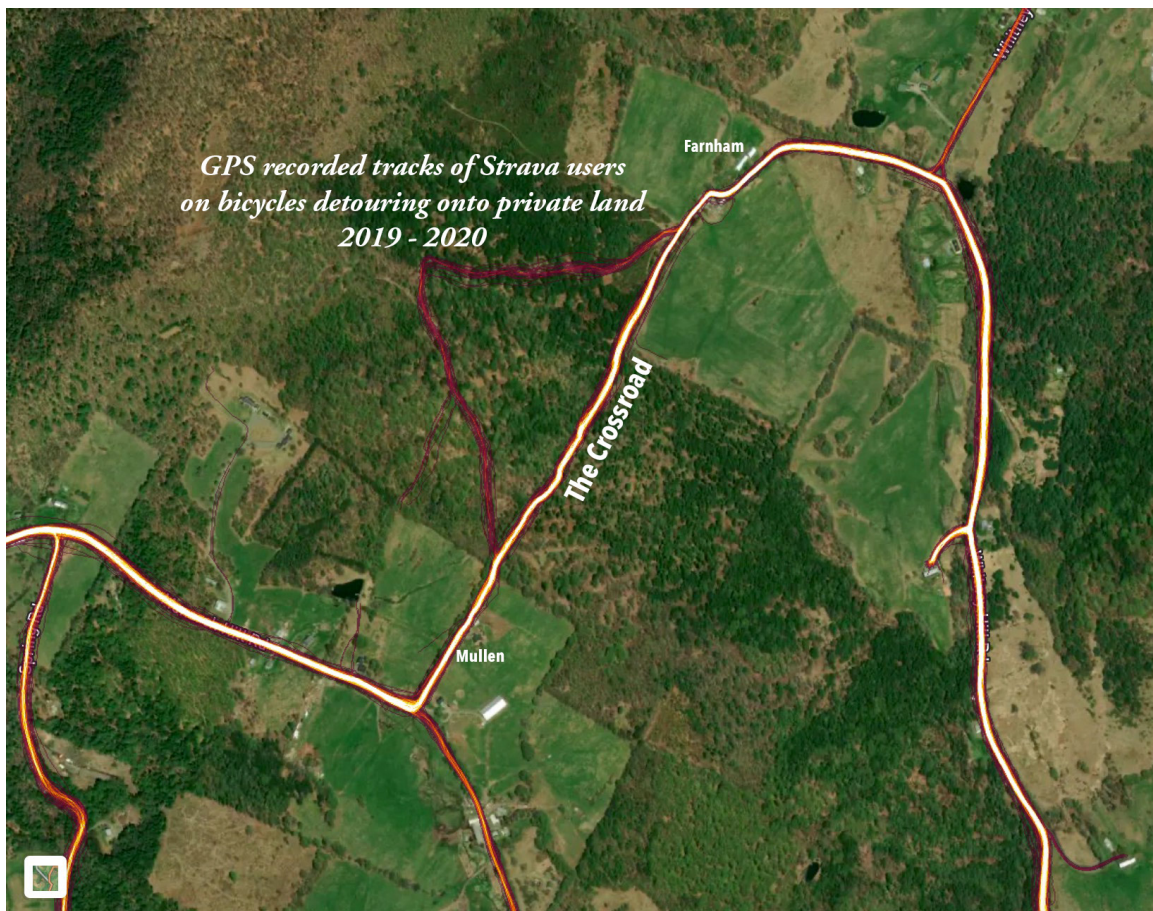
Until the recent growth in the popularity of gravel bicycles, the use of our legal trails has been relatively limited, or in some cases, virtually non-existent. The current explosive growth in bicycle traffic on our legal trails, however, will come with its own "problems of success" and will need to be addressed if rising tempers, shouting matches, degraded experiences, and, unfortunately, accidents, are to be avoided.

BICYCLING IMPACTS ON THE TRAIL, ADJACENT PRIVATE LANDS, AND THE SURROUNDING NATURAL COMMUNITIES

Cut a single narrow channel on a steeply sloped gravel surface and allow water to collect and flow along it, even for a brief period, and there will be erosion. The RASTA representative, Zac Freeman, who spoke to the Planning Commission during the first of the public hearings on the topic suggested that our roads and trails "self heal." I disagree with that assessment. I don't think we would recommend a "self healing" approach on our Class III roads, nor should we expect that we can allow heavy usage on our legal trails (or any trails, for that matter) without regular maintenance.

In addition to erosion coming from water and sediment runoff, trail widening is a common problem on unmaintained trails. Low spots collect water, for instance, and users typically seek an alternate route around, creating a widening of the trail. This impact can be seen on both the Orchard Road and The Crossroad legal trails.

Beyond a widening of the trail, in cases where the combination of moisture, blow downs, and other impediments get in the way, trail users can stray well outside of the right of way in search of alternate routes. This impact has become quite pronounced on The Crossroad, where bicyclists have begun adopting a new route that strays nearly a quarter mile away from the legal trail ROW into the Farnham property. (see below image) Even if they were to leave no trace, their digital footprints provide navigation assistance for those who follow using handlebar mounted mapping apps.



The impact of increasing use should also be considered for surrounding natural communities. The Orchard Road legal trail, for example runs through lands that have been identified within the Town Plan as a Priority Connectivity Block, whereas The Crossroad passes through a Priority Interior Forest Block. All of the Town's legal trails fall within areas that have been identified as Working Landscape and Resource Conservation Areas in the Town Plan.

As we come to better understand and implement management strategies for controlling forest fragmentation, we should consider the impact of expanding the use of legal trails within the context of natural communities and wildlife corridors.

Our neighbors in Strafford, with an active trail sub-committee within their Conservation Commission, have started to consider developing a set of criteria for evaluating the suitability of lands for trail development. It has been suggested that the Trails For People And Wildlife planning guide developed by the NH Fish and Game Department be used as a model. The following is an excerpt from the introduction.

Hiking, mountain biking, bird watching, and horseback riding are just some of the ways we get outside to enjoy nature and relax. However, even these seemingly low-key activities can have a negative impact on wildlife by reducing their abundance, reproductive success, or even survival. The purpose of this guide is to help landowners, conservation groups and natural resource professionals develop a thoughtfully located network of well maintained trails that allow people to get outside to enjoy nature while minimizing disturbance to wildlife. This guide can be used to decide where best to route new trails or to consider where it is best to maintain, reroute, or decommission existing trails.

LANDOWNER IMPACTS AND COMMUNITY RELATIONS

Consider the recent article in the Herald about warning shots fired by an abutting landowner in Randolph when a user of the Rochester/Randolph Area Sports Trails Alliance (RASTA) network strayed from the trail. The incident prompted RASTA to immediately close that legal trail section. They are now working to relocate that section of trail. RASTA's founder, Zac Freeman was quoted in VT Ski and Ride after the incident saying, "I don't think anyone would want a steady stream of skiers going by their kitchen window."

Unfortunately, that is exactly the scenario that has been rapidly escalating landowner tensions here in Tunbridge. With the exception of the 0.3 miles of the Falls Hill trail, our legal trails all literally pass "by the kitchen window."

The above referenced article in VT Ski and Ride went on to describe a well publicized cyclist/landowner conflict in West Burke. The author writes, "Last year, Kingdom Trails – the network of 100 miles of mountain biking trails in the Northeast Kingdom— suffered a blow when three landowners pulled their properties from the heart of the trail system, gutting main connector routes. This may have followed an altercation between mountain bikers and one of the landowners, but it built on village-wide complaints about excess noise, traffic and illegal parking around the trails."

I have listened to all of the public input presented at the Tunbridge Planning Commission's series of public hearings on this issue, including those making the argument that the public has a legal right to use the legal trail ROW without restriction (which, to be clear, unless otherwise restricted, includes motorized vehicles). It has saddened me to witness how community relations have become strained in the process. It is especially concerning that the efforts by a few members of the community have created such a divide, primarily for the benefit of bicycle tourists who are drawn to "Vermont's Gravel Playground," yet those cyclists won't have to deal with the bad feelings that are left behind in their wake.

FINAL THOUGHTS

In light of the above considerations, I would encourage the Planning Commission to adopt a policy recommendation that implements, at the very least, interim use restrictions on wheeled vehicles on its legal trails, while not infringing on historical human-paced activities that many members of our community have long enjoyed.

As a next step, the town should consider stepping back from the narrowly focused issue of legal trails alone. We need to consider the broader outdoor recreation perspective, including an initiative to explore the comprehensive trail needs of all users, town-wide (and in coordination with neighboring communities).

From there, the Town might consider adopting a set of priorities and criteria for evaluating potential trail networks while establishing trail development and maintenance budgets along with identifying funding sources. I would also recommend that the Town consider cooperative trail development models, similar to the VAST approach, or the one that is being used by the Strafford Conservation Commission's trails committee. Ultimately, trail development and use should bring us together, rather than tearing us apart.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment!

Respectfully submitted,

Kevin Rose