

Chappy bike path study ignites firestorm

By Nelson Sigelman

A group of Northeastern University civil engineering students, scheduled to make a public presentation tomorrow on design concepts for a bike path on Chappaquiddick, will receive a real world lesson in heated local politics.

Publication last week of a notice of a public meeting at 11 am Friday in the Edgartown selectmen's meeting room, when the students would present their findings, has created a furor among opponents of a bike path on the town's small, eastern island community. They see the student project and its public presentation at town hall as an officially sanctioned end run, intended to push forward a project that does not have widespread support.

Bike path proponents have countered that the presentation is no more than an opportunity to learn about alternative possibilities at no cost to the town.

A group of 20 Chappy families donated money to fund the study, titled "Presentation of findings and alternative concepts for a potential bike path on Chappy," according to an emailed invitation.

The students plan to solicit comments from Edgartown residents on the various options and incorporate that feedback into their plans. The project needs to be completed by late April for the students to graduate, the

invitation explained.

Opponents, now known as the “sharing Chappy roads” committee, and proponents, members of the Chappy path Committee, have been battling for years.

The latest skirmish took place in December at a meeting of the Edgartown selectmen. Dick Knight, a proponent of a path from the ferry landing to Dike Bridge, told selectmen that a group of graduate students under the guidance of Northeastern University Professor Dan Dulaski had offered to create several designs for a bike path.

Geoff Kontje, an opponent, told selectmen, “Before we even get to the need, we need to step back and establish need.”

While selectman Art Smadbeck opposed the design project, selectman Margaret Serpa and Chairman Michael Donaroma saw no harm in it. “If he can come up with a plan for free, I’m not going to bury my head in the sand,” Mr. Donaroma said. “We might learn one thing from it. After that you can shred it.”

Georgianna Greenough, planning board assistant, this week took responsibility for striking a match to the kindling.

Ms. Greenough said that, at the request of Edgartown highway superintendent **Stuart Fuller**, she placed a notice in the Vineyard Gazette Friday under the planning board heading to advertise the presentation. That was a mistake, she told The Times Tuesday, because her board was not aware of the notice and it created the impression of an official sanction. “I was totally in error when I added the

planning board heading,” she said.

The notice generated a quick response from bike path opponents. An email dated February 20 and signed by the committee criticized the process and the presentation. “This Friday’s meeting suggests a foregone conclusion that there will be such a path,” the email said.

The email urged readers to contact selectmen and planning board members to explain their position regarding a mixed-use path on Chappy and object to the placement of a notice. “We would ask that your letter reinforce the question which needs to be determined before anything else, do we need a bike path and why are we not debating that issue before discussing designs?”

In an effort to calm the storm, Ms. Greenough sent an email response to letter writers. “The Planning Board is not hosting a public hearing, nor is it hosting a discussion,” she wrote. “The Planning Board is neither supporting nor rejecting the concept of a bike path on Chappaquiddick. The Northeastern students are merely presenting the results of their project to whomever is interested in listening.”

In a telephone conversation Tuesday, Mr. Fuller told The Times that the town’s willingness to provide a venue for the students to present their findings does not represent a commitment. “We are getting a free look at an evaluation and some options,” he said. “This is just an opportunity to learn and see what some of the options are.”

Comment on mvtimes.com

