

Aziz Dehkan is the recently hired executive director of the Shoreline Greenway Trail, the organization's first.

Mile by mile, shoreline trail pieces together expanded coastal access for variety of uses

By Judy Preston

The Hammonasset section of the Shoreline Greenway Trail in Madison is my favorite. It's easy to get to, with plenty of parking, and is wide enough and even-surfaced enough to accommodate the many people and uses it receives.

This section winds through woods, passes Route 1 in a few spots, and hugs the edge of Hammonasset Beach State Park as it enters bird-filled tidal marshes with the glint of Long Island Sound beyond.

On the first really crisp day of the fall season, I met bikers, joggers and a lot of people out with their dogs. Most expressed appreciation for the opportunity to get outside—made that much more important by the returning surge of COVID-19. And most were from local coastal towns, with only a couple first-time visitors. Angela Werner and her husband, from Madison, walk the Hammonasset section of the trail every day with their corgi.

"We adore it," she said. "My husband is a photographer and this is such a good place to find birds."

Brittany Ciarcia, from Clinton, comes to the Hammonasset section often, but this was the first time for Shawn Punzalan, who is from Niantic. Both were walking their energetic dogs. When asked if the shoreline trail feels like access to Long Island Sound, they said they enjoyed the proximity, but Ciarcia said she opts for the state park when she wants to be near the sea.

"I usually take the dogs into the park to get to enjoy the shore," she said.

Judy Miller, from Branford, is chair of the Shoreline Greenway Trail's volunteer Board of Directors and an early advocate.

"One of our goals is to provide a means of alternative transportation for shoreline residents, and these trails are part of that system," she said.

In 2001 a handful of volunteers came up with the idea of a trail across the Connecticut coastline—not the entire stretch, but a modest 25-mile distance through four towns: East Haven to Madison, which includes Branford and Guilford. The effort was incorporated into The Shoreline Greenway Trail in 2003, the same year groundbreaking was celebrated for the first section of the trail in East Haven. Now there are trail segments in three of the four towns, and work to connect them and expand farther continues to gain momentum.

The Shoreline Greenway Trail vision is not just about coastal access, although that is central to its appeal. The overall vision, as Miller explained, is for a connecting corridor to provide access to the visual amenities of the coast that is also a means for commuters to get to work, and town centers to benefit from tourists seeking exercise and amenities such as food, drink and shops. It's seen as a way for nature enthusiasts to access tidal marshes and coastal woodlands, and for residents and visitors alike to get physical activity while exploring the Connecticut shoreline in something other than a car on the interstate.

In Connecticut, where most of the coastal landscape is spoken for, that means being creative and working with existing access and trails. It requires working with towns and land trusts, for example, and connecting the possibilities. Each town has something to offer.

"Each of our trail sections is unique," Miller said.

Access to Long Island Sound is of great interest to Connecticut Sea Grant and the other partners in the Long Island Sound Study—all working together to protect this national estuary through research, education and efforts to ensure the stewardship and restoration of its coastal resources. The 350 years of colonization since Adrian Block first explored Connecticut's coastline has led to a complex pattern of development and ownership resulting in limited public access to the Sound. This is particularly true for urban

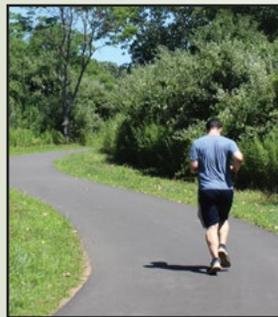


FARM RIVER STATE PARK

MADISON



EAST HAVEN



BRANFORD

populations and underserved communities, including those further inland and up the watershed that need to travel to the coast.

Giving more people the chance to experience the Sound is essential to advancing the goal of protecting the estuary. Of Connecticut's 332 miles of coastline, estimates suggest only 36% is publicly owned. Our public beaches—such as those at Hammonasset State Park—are well-used, and few and far between for a state that hosts one of the densest coastal populations in the country.

Walking farther along the trail that fall day, I encountered another local couple walking their dog who also use the Hammonasset section often. They noted that this past summer when the capacity of the park was reduced to allow for social distancing, visitors parked nearby in residential neighborhoods (until “no parking” signs went up). Others used a local town park and walked along the narrow shoulder of Route 1. Clearly people want to get to the coast, and Long Island Sound, and finding safe trails is key.

But the challenges are considerable. Private property along the coast is expensive, and shoreline towns rely on the property taxes these parcels generate. Private land owners who are willing to provide public access across their property may reconsider when faced with the potential for liability if someone is hurt, and there can be concern (justifiable or not) about property damage. Even Amtrak has been unwilling to take on liability for public access to its admittedly preeminent piece of real estate through the coastal landscape.

Clockwise from top: Perching ospreys and views of the Farm River greet walkers on the Farm River State Park trail section, as dog-walkers, runners and roller-bladers pass views of tidal marshes on the Madison portion. On the Branford section, Judy Miller has led efforts there, where a labyrinth and fresh water pond can be found along the path. In East Haven, Barbara Brow has been helping provide access through woodlands for cyclists, hikers and others. Photos: Teala Avery, Judy Benson, Judy Preston

For the organizers and volunteers involved with the Shoreline Greenway Trail, maneuvering through the complexities of local land use commissions in Connecticut's towns makes every effort to find land and access for a trail system downright daunting.

"Trails teach you to be persistent," said Barbara Brow, a longtime organizer who has been involved in the East Haven section of the trail since the beginning.

In July of 2020 the Shoreline Greenway Trail's Board of Directors announced the next bold step for the initiative: hiring its first part-time executive director. Aziz Dehkan, a native of New York City, brings a wealth of expertise to the job. In the announcement of his selection, he was described as a "change-maker and ardent advocate for public space." His other hat, incidentally, is leading the Connecticut Roundtable on Climate and Jobs, and he recently addressed the Governor's Council on Climate Change about progress on mitigation strategies.

Dehkan recognizes the challenges not only inherent in the shoreline trail concept, but in finding ways to engage people that are pandemic safe. Hosting first-Saturday-of-the-month walks—which took place in September and October on the Branford and Madison sections—is a start. The events tapped into the extraordinary increase in public use of trails throughout the state as a means of socially distant, outdoor exercise. The Hammonasset section of the Shoreline Greenway Trail saw a 115% increase in use in 2020: in March 2019, an embedded trail counter recorded 5,199 users. In March 2020, that number grew to 11,145—360 people a day.

Though challenging, the possibilities of a shoreline trail system is, like any great idea, worth the effort, and what makes it visionary. The group's long-term concept is of an interconnected shoreline trail from New Haven to the Connecticut River.

Dehkan cites the power of collaboration: connecting with many organizations—perhaps Connecticut Sea Grant and other partners in the Long Island Sound Study, and towns and individuals who will benefit. Statewide, there are a variety of open space areas designated as "greenways," but the Shoreline Greenway Trail is unique among them, Dehkan believes.

"Long Island Sound differentiates us," he said.

Miller said that the shoreline trail was able to build on existing trails and access areas as starting points.

"The Shoreline Greenway Trail is fortunate to have trails so close to the shoreline," she said.

Organizers, she noted, are also embarking on complementary projects, including a butterfly-pollinator garden in conjunction with local groups. Although not all the trails can be as accommodating as the Hammonasset section, the Shoreline Greenway Trail is an idea ahead of its time, and with the persistence and vision of its volunteers will continue to grow.

MORE INFORMATION:

[SHORELINEGREENWAYTRAIL.ORG/](https://shorelinegreenwaytrail.org/)

MADISON

In Madison, the Shoreline Greenway Trail stands out on the Hammonasset section, where the first segment was opened in 2014. It is the showpiece for the idea of the trail system, illustrating what's possible. Completed in 2016, it is now nearly one mile long, and one of the most popular walking and biking trails in Connecticut. In fact, the segment is one of the top four most-used trails in the state.

"People can walk, run, bike, stroll, wheel and cross-country ski, taking in the spectacular scenery in and adjacent to the Hammonasset State Park," according to the trail's website. It also allows travel between the park, downtown, Madison's beaches and shoreline recreational and tourist destinations while avoiding the more congested area of Route 1.

Trail map from Hammonasset Beach State Park: <https://shorelinegreenwaytrail.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/SGT-Madison-Trail-Map.pdf>

Trailhead address: 1288 Boston Post Rd, South of I-95 Exit 62, Madison, CT 06443-3444

EAST HAVEN

This section of the Shoreline Greenway Trail provides visitors with a beautiful place to walk, hike, bike, stroll, wheel, cross-country ski and connect with nature. To date, approximately one mile of trail has been completed, connecting the former D.C. Moore School (82 Elliot St.) to Short Beach Road via Pevetty Drive and the scenic Farm River State Park (<https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/DEEP/stateparks/maps/FarmRiverpdf.pdf>). The Shoreline Greenway Trail is helping the town of East Haven use this trail segment to provide students with exercise and recreation, and teach them about science and nature while building environmental awareness.

Trail map: (<https://shorelinegreenwaytrail.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/SGT-East-Haven-Trail-Map.pdf>)

North Entrance: From East Haven center follow Main Street (Route 100) east and turn south on Hemingway Avenue/Route 142. Follow Route 142 for 1.6 miles to parking area on the right (south) side of Route 142 (now Short Beach Road) between Fairview Avenue and Stone Pillar Road.

Mansfield Grove Road Entrance: follow Main Street (Route 100) east from East Haven center and turn right (south) on Route 142. Follow for 1.4 miles to Mansfield Grove Road. Turn right (south) on Mansfield Grove Road and travel for two-thirds mile to gravel parking area on left (east). Access is vehicle restricted but can be arranged (foot traffic okay; 1,500 foot walk to river).

Directions to Farm River State Park: <https://portal.ct.gov/DEEP/State-Parks/Parks/Farm-River-State-Park/Getting-Here>

BRANFORD

In Branford, existing trails (<https://branfordlandtrust.org>) have provided the foundation of the Shoreline Greenway Trail. To date, about one half-mile of Shoreline Greenway Trail has been completed in two sections—Pine Orchard/Birch Road and Tilcon Drive.

Trail map: <https://shorelinegreenwaytrail.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/SGT-Branford-Trail-Map.pdf>

Trail end points: Tilcon Road (Pine Orchard) and Thimble Island Road (Stony Creek).

Trolley Trail: <https://branfordlandtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/TrolleyTrailGossVedder.pdf>