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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

FEBRUARY 28, 2008

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Rail-trail project clears first funding hurdle

Transportation Bond Bill would provide \$500,000 for engineering, design costs

BOSTON – Wakefield’s long-awaited rail-trail project cleared its first funding hurdle this week when the state gave its initial approval to providing \$500,000 in financing for the project’s design and engineering costs, according to Senate Minority Leader Richard R. Tisei and Representative Mark V. Falzone.

The funding received preliminary approval as part of a comprehensive Transportation Bond Bill released by the Joint Committee on Transportation on Wednesday that authorizes a total of \$4.822 billion in spending over three years. The bill includes \$2.93 billion in state bond funding and another \$1.892 billion in anticipated federal contributions for eligible road, bridge and transit-related projects.

The bond bill is expected to go before the Joint Committee on Bonding, Capital Expenditures and State Assets for further review before being voted on by the Legislature. If the bill is approved by the House and Senate, the final decision on when to release the funding would be up to Governor Deval Patrick.

“This is tremendous news for Wakefield,” said Senator Tisei, who lobbied for the inclusion of the funds. “This project will provide numerous environmental benefits and recreational opportunities for local residents. This latest allocation of state funding represents another piece in the puzzle that will help move the project one step closer to completion.”

“I am pleased the Transportation Committee has recognized the importance of funding this project, and I will continue to advocate for the rail-trail and final passage of its bonding funds,” Representative Falzone added. “This is a great win for Wakefield and Lynnfield as this rail-trail has critical environmental, transportation, health, and recreational benefits.”

This is not the first time the state has committed funding assistance for the rail-trail project, which will extend 4.5 miles between Wakefield and Lynnfield along an existing MBTA rail corridor. A previous earmarking in the Fiscal Year 2006 supplemental budget, sponsored by Tisei and Falzone, provided \$30,000 for a feasibility study of the project.

Two years ago, Tisei and Falzone inserted language in the Economic Stimulus Bill to shield Wakefield and other communities pursuing rail-trail projects from potential liability for any site contamination. The language was vetoed by former Governor Mitt Romney, but was later restored by the Legislature through an override.

As a result of these efforts, Wakefield is now eligible to access matching grant funding through the Department of Economic Development to purchase environmental liability insurance protection. This coverage is vital to ensuring that the Town and local taxpayers will not be exposed to potentially costly litigation in the future due to any contamination identified at the site.

The planned bicycle and pedestrian pathway will follow the rail corridor that runs from the junction on Main Street in Wakefield near the Galvin School to the intersection of Water Street and Vernon Street. It will then continue into Lynnfield and extend another 2.5 miles to the Lynnfield/Peabody border.

Tisei and Falzone said they will continue to work closely with Selectman Al Turco and other key proponents of the rail-trail project to ensure that the new funding allocation is retained in the final bond bill.