

## Holmes: The rebirth of the G&U Railroad

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*Ed Hopfmann*

Jon Delli Priscoli, owner of the Grafton & Upton Railroad, stands on an engine in the North Grafton railyard.i

By Rick Holmes/Local columnist

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When I first moved to Upton back in the mid-1980s, the train still rattled through town once a week. I remember walking my kids, just toddlers then, through the woods at the end of our street and down to the tracks to watch the little engine chug by.

The owner and main customer for the Grafton & Upton Railroad, the Draper Corporation of Hopedale, had by then pulled up stakes and moved to North Carolina. The new owners, I remember being told, had to run a train down the track from time to time to keep the railroad from being classified as abandoned. They owned a trucking company and there were tax advantages to owning a railroad, even one that wasn't taking anything anywhere. Federal law is riddled with special treatment for railroads, a legacy of the political clout of the 19th century railroad barons.

The G&U was built in 1873, at the height of the age of rails. It brought straw to the Knowlton mill in West Upton and hauled out straw hats for the nation. It brought raw materials to the sprawling Draper factory in Hopedale, which made the looms at the heart of America's textile industry.

But New England's textile industry followed the straw hat industry into oblivion, and the G&U slowed to a stop. Trees grew between the ties. Rails were torn up and grade crossings paved over on the stretch between Hopedale and Milford. Homeowners treated the G&U's right-of-way as extensions of their backyards. One man built a pool in the railbed. No one much missed the railroad, and people bought properties with tracks on their lot lines, blissfully unaware that the old G&U was sleeping, not dead.

Conservation-minded people in the towns along the tracks talked about converting the railbed to a rail trail. At the railroad's West Upton hub, a 22-acre site that is home to a former landfill, gravel yard and construction company, developers a few years ago proposed a mixed-use village, with boutique stores, townhouses, a ballfield, a town common and a new town library. People talked about putting an ice cream shop over on the railroad side of the property to cater to the hikers and cyclists riding the rail trail.

Then the economy crashed, and funding for the village development dried up. Upton voters had approved a new bylaw for the village, but they balked when the developers proposed the town buy the land.

Now, what's old is new again. The G&R is coming back.

The rails have been straightened, and thousands of new ties installed. The first of several sidetracks has been built at the now-capped Upton landfill, where containers will be offloaded onto trucks bound for all corners of New England.

"It's 19th century technology with a 21st century business model," the new owner of the G&U, Jon Delli Priscoli, told me during a recent tour.

The G&U is a "short line" a term familiar to railroad enthusiasts and Monopoly players. It connects to the main CSX line in North Grafton on one end and the Franklin rail line in Milford. Think of CSX as the wholesaler, interested in moving product in large quantities, Delli Priscoli explained, while short lines like the G&U take the freight to a distribution point.

One of Delli Priscoli's first customers is an outfit that makes wood pellets for stoves. Now, the pellets are shipped to New Jersey, and trucked to New England. Any day now, they'll start arriving by freight car in Upton, and be trucked from there to retailers throughout the region.

It's cheaper, he said, and greener. CSX says it can haul a ton of freight 423 miles on a single gallon of fuel. Fuel efficiency is the main reason the nation's rail traffic is expected to double by 2030, Delli Priscoli said.

Delli Priscoli is something of a one-man railroad revival. A commercial real estate developer who lives in Sudbury, he helped build the Greenbush commuter rail line on the South Shore, he created the Cape Cod tourist train and brought the Edaville Railroad in Carver back to life.

There are plenty of moving parts in his vision for the G&R. He owns a large warehouse next to the old Draper Mill in Hopedale he says would be perfect for light manufacturing. Several industrial areas along the line could be developed to take advantage of the revived railroad, including the Draper Mill, a firetrap Hopedale leaders have been trying to revive for 30 years. Officials in Milford and Hopedale want to see the commuter rail extended from Forge Park into their towns.

That may take awhile, but Delli Priscoli's rail revival is on track. He hopes to have the railbed repaired to Hopedale by next summer, and the link to Milford a year or two after that.

Delli Priscoli will have the 16.5-mile railroad operating in the time it takes to get a shopping center permitted. For that he can thank the railroads' special status under federal law. No planning board had to sign off on the G&U's design, no neighbors assuaged. No conservation commission had to be consulted, despite the miles of wetland the tracks traverse. No state environmental review was required.

Delli Priscoli says he wants to maintain good relations with local officials, and he responded to Upton's satisfaction last summer when neighbors complained about the smell coming from utility poles stored on his site. But he makes it clear that railroads answer only to federal laws.

Most of us who live within earshot of Delli Priscoli's railroad were less than pleased with news of the trains' return. There are 18 grade crossings on the line, most without traffic gates, and federal law requires the whistle be blown at each one.

But the train will go slowly, he said: less than 10 mph. And at each unprotected crossing, the train will be required to come to a full stop. A worker will step off the engine and halt traffic while the train crosses, then hop back aboard.

More to the point, Delli Priscoli expects his trains will make one trip a day going each direction, and some days none at all. In his dreams, he can see two trips a day, he said, and they will be daytime runs, laying to rest my fears of being awakened by midnight wood pellet runs.

Still, this isn't the future those who live along the G&R envisioned a short year or two ago. Where we saw a new town center, a yuppie village generating much-needed tax revenue, we'll get a noisy railyard spitting 18-wheelers onto small, town-maintained roads. It will provide a few blue-collar jobs 20 to 40, Delli Priscoli estimates and no tax windfall for the town. Where we saw ourselves jogging or cycling through bucolic scenery on the rail trail, watch out: Train's a-coming.

The idea is counter-intuitive. We don't manufacture things in MetroWest anymore, except for new pharmaceuticals, new ideas and some computer chips. We work on our laptops and ship our products with a click of the mouse. That's the future, right?

But here comes the train, chugging along on a rail bed 137 years old, hauling wood pellets and other products to warehouses and small manufacturing operations in the backyards of leafy subdivisions. And we don't have any choice but to get onboard.

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