

South Kingstown Access Path Initiative (ESKAPE)
Memorandum by Jay G. Wegimont, South Kingstown Town Councilmember

Experience South Kingstown Access Path for Everyone (ESKAPE):
Connecting Our Town to Its Shoreline

Executive Summary:

The South Kingstown Access Path Initiative—informally known as ESKAPE (Experience South Kingstown Access Path for Everyone)—is a long-term proposal to re-establish safe, walkable and bikeable access between the inland villages of South Kingstown and the coastline. The central goal is to create a continuous hybrid route from areas like Pond Street, Wakefield, Peace Dale, and Kingston to South Kingstown Town Beach (719 Matunuck Beach Road), reconnecting our community to the shore as it historically was.

For more than 300 years, South Kingstown’s residents had informal and formal ways to reach the ocean—through old roads, carriageways, and the Narragansett Pier Railroad. That connection has been diminished by highway infrastructure and car dependency. Today, there is no safe way to walk or bike to the beach from town without crossing Route 1. This project would restore that access while protecting property values, supporting small businesses, and reinforcing the public’s right to reach the shoreline.

Key Benefits:

- Safe, equitable access to South Kingstown Town Beach for all residents.
- Strengthens local economy by increasing foot traffic to village centers.
- Protects property values by investing in quality-of-life infrastructure.
- Supports sustainability goals by reducing car reliance and emissions.
- Highlights public shoreline access and our 302-year heritage as a coastal town.

Approach:

The route would follow a hybrid model, combining off-road trails with improvements to existing low-traffic roads like portions of Route 1A. It would be phased in over time and built with grants, partnerships, and strategic planning. Optional spurs could extend to East

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Matunuck State Beach and Green Hill, but the primary goal is a direct connection to South Kingstown Town Beach.

“This is not just a transportation project—it’s about restoring a vital piece of South Kingstown’s identity and ensuring future generations can safely access and enjoy the shore” -South Kingstown Town Councilor Jay G. Wegimont.

Connecting Inland Villages to South Kingstown Town Beach

The South Kingstown Access Path Initiative – informally dubbed ESKAPE (Experience South Kingstown Access Path for Everyone) – is a Town Council-led project to establish a safe, continuous walking and biking route from the town’s inland villages to the shore. The primary destination and focal point of this path is South Kingstown Town Beach (719 Matunuck Beach Road) the town’s official public beach. By linking population centers like Wakefield, Peace Dale, and Kingston with the coastal communities of Matunuck (Town Beach), East Matunuck, Snug Harbor, and Green Hill, the initiative seeks to re-establish the historic tradition of pedestrian and cycling access to our coastline. This will allow residents and visitors to ride their bikes or walk to the Town Beach without crossing Route 1 – reconnecting our town to its shores in a safe and accessible way.

Project Background and Rationale

South Kingstown has a rich history of connecting its villages to the sea. Prior to the advent of automobile highways, residents traveled by foot, bicycle, and even rail to enjoy the coast. Notably, the old Narragansett Pier Railroad (now the William C. O’Neill Bike Path) once carried people from Kingston Station through Peace Dale and Wakefield to the Narragansett Pier area. (Until Narragansett was set off as its own town in 1901, it was a village of South Kingstown meaning South Kingstown’s boundaries historically encompassed what is now Narragansett Town Beach.) Today, the existing 7-mile South County Bike Path follows that former rail corridor and is planned to end near Narragansett Town Beach.

However, the new Access Path initiative is focused entirely within South Kingstown, aiming at our Town Beach in Matunuck – not extending into Narragansett. The historical reference to

Narragansett is important only to underscore past access patterns; this project will terminate at South Kingstown Town Beach and will not reach into Narragansett.

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Several modern challenges highlight the need for this initiative. Route 1 bisects South Kingstown, creating a dangerous barrier for non-motorized travel to the shore. Currently, families in inland neighborhoods must drive and compete for limited beach parking. (Even a seasonal pass does not guarantee a parking space on busy days. The absence of a safe pedestrian/cyclist crossing over or under Route 1 near Matunuck means the coast feels disconnected from inland villages. In response, the Town Council is championing the Access Path both to improve safety and to expand equitable shoreline access for all residents.

Goals and Community Benefits

The South Kingstown Access Path initiative aligns with multiple community goals:

- **Safe, Direct Coastal Access:** Create a dedicated route to South Kingstown Town Beach that avoids dangerous highway crossings. This will allow children, seniors, and families to bike or walk to the beach safely, without having to cross Route 1.
- **By providing a car-free option, the path improves public safety and reduces traffic congestion on peak beach days.** It also supports those who do not drive, ensuring everyone can enjoy our coastal resources.
- **Connecting Communities:** Reconnect the inland and shoreline neighborhoods that historically were linked. The path will physically unite villages such as Wakefield, Peace Dale, and Kingston with seaside areas like Matunuck, East Matunuck, Snug Harbor, and Green Hill. This link restores a sense of shared community heritage – reviving the era when a trip to the shore from town was a regular part of local life. Families in Kingston or downtown Wakefield will once again have a straightforward route to “go down to the beach” using their own power.
- **Health, Recreation and Quality of Life:** Encourage walking and cycling for recreation and daily journeys. Residents will gain a scenic trail for exercise with fresh ocean air at the end of the journey. The path will also connect to existing bike routes and trails, expanding our bike path system in line with South Kingstown’s commitment to outdoor recreation. Beyond beach access, the route can be enjoyed year-round for jogging, biking, bird-watching, and walking, enhancing overall quality of life.
- **Environmental and Traffic Benefits:** By offering an alternative to driving, the path can reduce vehicle emissions and ease parking demand at the beach. Fewer cars headed to Matunuck means less traffic on local roads and a smaller carbon footprint. The project supports sustainable transportation and aligns with Rhode Island’s environmental goals by promoting non-motorized mobility.
- **Shoreline Access Rights:** In Rhode Island, public access to the shore is a cherished right. This initiative helps protect and expand the public’s right to access the shoreline by

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providing a practical means for the public to reach the coast on foot or bike. It reinforces South Kingstown's role in upholding the state's tradition that the shore should be accessible to all, not only those with beachfront properties or vehicles.

Route Concept and Design Approach

Hybrid Trail Model: The envisioned path will utilize a hybrid design, combining off-road trails with segments of existing low-traffic roads. This approach balances scenic, car-free trail experiences with cost-effective use of current infrastructure in areas where roadways already provide safe passage. For example, new off-road trail sections might be built along greenway corridors, utility easements, or the fringes of farms and conserved lands to create shortcuts and avoid high-speed traffic. These trails would be linked by stretches of quiet town roads (enhanced with bike lanes or sharrows where necessary) through neighborhoods. By thoughtfully blending off-road and on-road elements, the project can cover the needed distance to the shore with minimal disruption and modest construction expense.

Proposed Route Highlights: While exact routing will be determined through engineering studies and community input, the path is generally expected to begin near the terminus of the South County Bike Path in Wakefield/Peace Dale and head southward toward Matunuck. Key waypoints under consideration include:

- **Peace Dale & Wakefield:** Utilizing portions of the existing bike path and/or Railroad Street, the route would start in the heart of South Kingstown's inland population centers. These villages are natural gathering points that the trail will extend from, possibly beginning at Wakefield's Main Street (which the current bike path already reaches.)
- **Route 1 Underpass/Crossing:** A critical design feature is finding a way past Route 1 without at-grade crossing. Options include routing through an existing underpass or tunnel (if one exists or can be repurposed) or constructing a new safe crossing. One idea is leveraging the underpass at the Saugatucket River or another creek where Route 1 passes over a waterway; another is exploring the Route 1 Stewardship Plan for any planned pedestrian crossings. Ensuring a safe crossing here is paramount to the project's success, as it eliminates the current east-west divide.

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- **Matunuck Beach Road Corridor:** Once past Route 1, the path would likely converge with Matunuck Beach Road, the main road leading to the Town Beach. Portions of Matunuck Beach Road could have improved bike/pedestrian accommodations, such as widened shoulders or separated bike lanes, guiding users toward the shore. The trail may diverge from the road in spots to provide a more scenic experience or to bypass any high-traffic stretches (for instance, a side trail paralleling the road through open space if available).
- **Termination at Town Beach:** The path's primary endpoint will be South Kingstown Town Beach in Matunuck. A small trailhead or bike parking area could be created near the beach entrance (while respecting environmental constraints of the dune area). Reaching this terminus means residents can literally walk or bike right up to the sand. The Town Beach's facilities (pavilion, restrooms, boardwalk) will support trail users upon arrival, and the beach itself becomes a natural reward at journey's end.

Additionally, an offshoot or spur could be considered to East Matunuck State Beach as a secondary objective. East Matunuck State Beach (approximately 2 miles east of Town Beach) is managed by the state and offers another beautiful shoreline destination. While not the core aim, a spur trail along Succotash Road toward East Matunuck could be a future enhancement, providing connectivity to that state beach and the village of Snug Harbor. Likewise, the western end of the path in the Green Hill area might connect into Charlestown's planned bike routes in the future, reflecting a regional vision for a continuous coastal greenway. These extensions are optional benefits that improve overall connectivity, but the central mandate remains linking South Kingstown's villages to South Kingstown Town Beach first and foremost.

Emphasizing Heritage and Resident Access

A driving philosophy of this project is celebrating South Kingstown's coastal heritage and ensuring residents' access to the shore. By re-tracing routes that in some form existed generations ago (be it old country lanes or railbeds), the Access Path will weave local history into its course. Informational signage or kiosks could be placed at key points to highlight historical facts – for example, noting how Narragansett was once part of South Kingstown until 1901 and that local families would take the train or carriage to Narragansett Pier for beach outings. Other signs might share stories of Matunuck's past (such as the establishment of summer colonies and the Town Beach in 1988) or the importance of coastal ecosystems like salt ponds and dunes that travelers will see along the way.

By invoking this shared heritage, the project builds a sense of ownership and pride among residents. The path is not just a recreation facility; it is a symbolic reconnection of the town with its historic shoreline. Importantly, this initiative reinforces that the shore belongs to the people of Rhode Island as part of our public trust. In recent years, concerns about shoreline access

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have grown as coastal development increases. South Kingstown's response is proactive: rather than limiting access, we are creating a new public corridor to the coast, affirming that our residents deserve a direct line to the ocean. Long-time South Kingstown families and newcomers alike will benefit from this legacy project, which enshrines the principle that the beach is an integral part of community life.

Implementation Strategy

Delivering the Access Path will require coordination across municipal and state agencies, as well as community input. Key steps in the implementation strategy include:

1. **Feasibility Study and Public Input:** Conduct a detailed feasibility study to determine the optimal route, engineering requirements (especially for the Route 1 crossing), environmental considerations, and cost estimates. This study will involve public workshops to gather ideas and address concerns from residents in all affected neighborhoods.
2. **Partnerships and Approvals:** Work closely with the Rhode Island Department of Transportation (RIDOT) for any crossing or use of state highway rights-of-way, and with the Department of Environmental Management (RIDEM) for segments near sensitive habitats. Since the State manages East Matunuck Beach and parts of the salt ponds, their cooperation will be vital for any spurs or overlooks. Also, collaboration with South Kingstown's own Parks & Recreation (which manages Town Beach and Planning Department will ensure the project aligns with local comprehensive plans and recreation plans.
3. **Phased Development:** Implement the path in phases as funding allows. An initial phase could focus on the segment from Wakefield to Matunuck Village (up to the Town Beach), which delivers the core functionality. Subsequent phases might add spurs to East Matunuck or Green Hill, additional amenities (like benches, bike racks, lighting in key spots), and further safety improvements on connecting roads. Phasing will allow early use of portions of the trail while later sections are still in planning.
4. **Funding and Grants:** Seek a mix of funding sources – local capital budget allocations, state recreation grants, federal transportation enhancement funds (e.g., Transportation Alternatives Program), and potential private or nonprofit grants. Given the project's dual benefits for recreation and transportation, it is a strong candidate for grants focused on alternative transportation and public health. Community fundraising or sponsorships (such as "Adopt-a-Trail" programs) could also defray costs of amenities or landscaping.

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5. Maintenance Plan: Plan for long-term maintenance by assigning responsibility to an appropriate town department (likely Parks & Recreation or Public Works). This includes

surface upkeep, vegetation management, and security patrols as needed. The path will be designed for durability (with weather-resistant materials and sustainable drainage) to keep maintenance needs and costs manageable. Partnerships with volunteer groups or “friends of the bike path” organizations can help monitor conditions and organize clean-up days, fostering community stewardship of the trail.

Throughout implementation, transparency and community engagement remain priorities. Regular updates to the Town Council and public will be provided, ensuring the project continues to reflect the public’s needs and remains on track as a community asset.

Optional Path Naming Ideas

While “South Kingstown Access Path” is a working title, part of building public enthusiasm can involve giving the path an appealing name. Here are a few naming ideas for consideration, each capturing a facet of the project’s spirit:

- South Kingstown ESKAPE Trail – Emphasizes the project acronym and the idea of an “escape” to the beach. (ESKAPE: *Experience South Kingstown Access Path for Everyone*.)
- Inland-to-Ocean Greenway – Highlights the connecting of inland areas to the ocean, with “Greenway” suggesting a scenic, natural route.
- Village-to-Sea Trail – A simple descriptive name conveying how the path links village centers to the sea.
- Matunuck Shoreway – Incorporates the destination (Matunuck) and “Shoreway” as a twist on highway, implying a dedicated way to the shore.
- South Kingstown Coastal Link – Communicates that this path links the community with the coast, reinforcing town identity and purpose.

Each of these names could be accompanied by branding elements or a logo for the trail, useful for signage and promotional materials. The final name should resonate with residents, honor local heritage, and be easy for the public to remember.

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Conclusion:

The South Kingstown Access Path Initiative is a forward-looking project that honors our past and prepares for our future. By focusing on South Kingstown Town Beach as the primary terminus, the plan keeps the benefits squarely within our community's reach and jurisdiction. Residents of Wakefield, Peace Dale, Kingston and beyond will regain a direct, safe connection to the shoreline that has been missing for decades. The hybrid trail approach balances ambition with practicality, creating a route that is both enjoyable and achievable.

This initiative represents more than just a bike path – it is an investment in our town's health, safety, environment, and heritage. It speaks to the core values of South Kingstown: that we are a community which treasures its natural beauty, looks after the well-being of neighbors, and upholds the public's right to enjoy our shoreline. As a Town Council-led effort, the Access Path has broad public appeal: families can envision weekend rides to the beach, elders recall the days of easy walks to the water, and everyone can appreciate the freedom of an alternative to traffic jams on summer days.

With careful planning and strong community support, the South Kingstown Access Path will become a reality – a ribbon of connectivity from the heart of South Kingstown to the sands of Matunuck. This project will truly connect our town to our shores, ensuring that current and future generations can experience the full breadth of South Kingstown's landscape, from our historic villages to our welcoming coastline. It is a proposal rooted in common sense and community benefit, and with it, South Kingstown takes a significant step toward a more connected and vibrant future for all of its residents.

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Sources:

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2. Jay G. Wegimont, South Kingstown Town Council – *Council Priorities (2024)*: expanding bike path access to the Town Beach and protecting shoreline access jaywegimont.com.
3. South Kingstown Planning Dept. – *Parks, Trails, and Bike Paths Overview*: South County Bike Path route and terminus near Narragansett Town Beach (context for historical access) southkingstownri.gov.
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5. South Kingstown Town Beach Policy (2025) – Parking information (limitations of parking at Town Beach) southkingstownri.gov.
6. South Kingstown Town “Beaches” Info – Management of East Matunuck State Beach by RI (distinguishing it as a secondary connectivity benefit) southkingstownri.gov