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Pathway or no way: Proposed greenway has its supporters and detractors

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Various groups have been pushing for an out-of-service rail line which runs from Montclair to Jersey City to become a greenway, but rail agencies have other ideas.



(Photo: Ricardo Kaulessar/NorthJersey.com)

Looking down from an overpass on Bay Street in Montclair, one can see through the protective fence to abandoned railroad tracks.

The scene is desolate and uninviting. However, there are some people who have a different vision for that unused rail line running from Montclair to Jersey City: They see the "Essex-Hudson Greenway."

Formerly the old Boonton Line, which was discontinued in 2002, this 11-mile railroad segment has supporters who want it turned into a traffic-free trail for walking and biking. It would pass through Montclair, Glen Ridge, Bloomfield, Belleville, Newark and Kearny on the way to Jersey City.

But for this to become a reality, the line would have to be purchased from its owner, the Norfolk Southern Corp.

This pursuit of converting rail to trail follows the path of Bergen County towns of Northvale, Norwood, Demarest, Closter, Cresskill and Tenafly, which have formed a planning committee in recent months in hopes of eventually turning an 8-mile stretch of the old Northern Line, owned by CSX, into a greenway.

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On different tracks

A meeting of the Montclair Township Council on Feb. 6 showed both sides of the Essex-Hudson Greenway conversation. The council that evening had approved a resolution that called for Montclair to work with Belleville, Bloomfield, Glen Ridge and Newark on the planning and development of a shared-use path going through those towns.

Supporters of the greenway, also known as the "Ice and Iron Greenway," packed the meeting and encouraged the council to approve the resolution and work with the other Essex towns on the acquiring the tracks. They pointed to a variety of benefits, from promoting exercise and outdoor recreation to reducing car traffic.

However, Michael Fesen, Norfolk Southern's manager of government relations, put a damper on things when he said the company was not notified about the council taking action, nor about any proposals regarding the greenway.

Fesen said Norfolk Southern has had to deal with people in other states using its abandoned rail lines for ad hoc trails.

"Why don't we allow rail trails on our property? It's not a good idea to have pedestrians right next to any railroad tracks," Fesen said at the meeting. "Those people are trespassers, we keep them off of our property at all time just for the pure safety."

He said the company had plans for the old Boonton Line, but would think differently if it was abandoned officially by the federal government and people would go through the process of acquiring the tracks.

"This property is not abandoned, it's not been used for many years," Fesen said. "At any given time, if someone wanted to relocate a business or an operation on this track, we would open it up again instantly."

That led to a back-and-forth between Fesen and Montclair councilperson Sean Spiller, who took issue with Fesen telling the council to not vote on the resolution as he felt that it prevent the towns from meeting with Norfolk Southern and speaking further on this matter.

Spiller then noted that he had a memo that showed that Fesen was made aware of the greenway concept a few years back.

Cyndi Steiner, executive director of the New Jersey Bike & Walk Coalition, refuted Fesen's claim during the meeting that Norfolk Southern was not aware of the greenway concept, saying she and Fesen spoke in 2015 about the rail line and the greenway.

Taking a positive path

Steiner said in a recent interview that the coalition plans a session to inform the public about the greenway and has posted a petition on the NJBWC website that will be sent to Norfolk Southern.

Steiner is optimistic that the greenway will be a reality one day through "public support and political will from our elected officials." She cited U.S. Senator and former Newark Mayor Cory Booker, and Essex County Freeholder Brendan Gill as some of the officials who support the project.

"Over 16% of the state's population live in either Essex or Hudson Counties, and there is no such greenway like this anywhere in these two counties," Steiner stated in an email. "The counties are densely populated, with traffic congestion getting worse and no transit projects on the horizon to help ease that.

"To say that this will be a dramatic benefit to the region compared with the eyesore that the out-of-service railroad is today would be an understatement."

Gill said in a phone interview that a boost from the state could go a long way in getting the greenway created.

"There is some potential [state] money that already exists that could be used to further the development of this project," Gill said. "So the next step is to start to speak more in-depth with both counties and state Department of Transportation for the potential for feasibility and acquisition, and potential completion of this project."

Montclair Mayor Robert Jackson could not be reached to comment on whether officials from the towns with a stake in the greenway have met to discuss next steps.

Support

Glen Ridge Councilman Daniel Murphy said the council plans to reaffirm its support at its next meeting, on Monday. However, he said town officials have ~~not~~ **not** met with their counterparts in other towns about the greenway.

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Bloomfield Councilman Richard Rockwell, a proponent for the Morris Canal Greenway project, which would turn the 102-mile canal right-of-way into a pedestrian and bicycle path, said, "I'd love to see the abandoned Boonton line turned in to a recreational trail. It would be a great recreation and transportation resource and could connect existing parks and the Morris Canal Greenway."

Derailing of plans, maybe

Jonathan Glass, manager of public relations for Norfolk Southern, said in an email that any of the parties interested in turning the old Boonton Line into a greenway can go to the real estate page on Norfolk Southern railroad's corporate website and look for properties listed for lease or for sale.

Glass pointed out that the rail line is currently not for sale for certain reasons.

"The line, which runs for approximately 10 miles between Montclair and Jersey City, currently is inactive, but it retains significant value as a corporate asset. If future business conditions warranted, the line could be reactivated, for example, to provide shippers with an alternative rail connection to a Norfolk Southern intermodal facility in Jersey City," Glass stated in the email.

He did not rule out that Norfolk Southern would consider a fair-market offer for the line.

He said Norfolk Southern has not been contacted directly by local officials or representatives of the various advocacy groups about creating a greenway along the old Boonton Line.

NJ Transit ran service on the old Boonton line until the current Montclair-Boonton Line was activated in September 2002. The transportation agency is thinking about doing it again.

In its 2017 Annual Report, there is a paragraph that states, "Initial work was also performed on the Boonton Line—Orange Branch Transit Utilization Study to assess the potential for transit opportunities on existing rights-of-way that currently are not being utilized. This work is being done at a very early concept stage."

NJ Transit spokeswoman Lisa Torbic, in an email, wrote, that the goal of the study was "to examine the feasibility of utilizing the unused portions of the Boonton Line and Orange Branch rail corridors between Montclair, Belleville and Secaucus to build capacity and resilience into the NJ TRANSIT network by exploring multiple modes of transportation.

"This is in the early phases of study and providing a timeline would be premature," Torbic stated. She did not address any implications for a greenway.

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