

# Montclair Council: 'Ice and Iron' Bike Trail On Old Boonton Line East of Pine Street Draws Residents, Budget Talks Begin

By **Steven Maginnis** - February 7, 2018

The Montclair Council had an unusually long conference meeting on February 6. Part of the reason was due to the beginning of department presentations for the 2018 budget; although Acting Township Manager Tim Stafford had streamlined the budget process after succeeding Marc Dashield in 2014, Fourth Ward Councilor Renée Baskerville recently made clear her preference for more detailed testimony from the department heads. But the budget presentation was overshadowed by two major environmental issues that brought a multitude of residents to the meeting – turning the old Boonton rail line east of Pine Street into a bicycle trail, and buying power from an environmentally friendly supplier.

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*The Montclair Township Council*

Gray Russell, the township's environmental coordinator, presented an opportunity for Montclair to join the Sustainable Essex Alliance Energy Aggregation Program, a group of communities that would form a compact to buy residential electrical power from a green-energy supplier at a lower cost, saving residents money on their bills. The aggregate group would get the energy through an open, transparent process that would ensure that the energy purchased is cheap and renewable. Residents can opt out and stay with PSE&G, but in either case PSE&G would own the infrastructure that the energy is transmitted through. PSE&G allows people to choose their own supplier because the utility does not make its money in supply, and it makes its profits elsewhere.

Russell said that Montclair and five other Essex County communities, Maplewood, South Orange, Glen Ridge, Verona and Millburn, would hire a consultant to get a request for proposal for a supplier, with Maplewood taking the lead. To the delight of the residents in attendance, many of whom urged the council to seize the day and begin the process of exploring the aggregation opportunity, Mayor Robert Jackson and the councilors voted unanimously to pursue Russell's initiative. Several residents said that this would help do something about climate change when the federal government is shifting more toward fossil fuels. "If we do not deal with this issue," resident Melinda Morton said, "there are no other issues."



Several other residents were at the meeting to also push for the council to pass a resolution to work with the Essex County communities of Belleville, Bloomfield, Glen Ridge and Newark to explore the possibility of turning the old Boonton rail line east of Pine Street in Montclair into a bicycle trail, called the Ice and Iron project. Numerous residents said that a bicycle path potentially reaching Jersey City could bring visitors and economic vitality to Montclair and promote bicycle commuting. The resolution does not commit Montclair to helping to build the Ice and Iron trail but merely encourages a dialogue with the other towns and see what steps are necessary to move forward on the project and whether to do so.

But Michael Fesen, government relations manager for the Norfolk Southern Railroad, objected to the resolution, saying that Norfolk Southern did not want a bicycle trail developed on its property, especially when there are still railroad tracks in the right-of-way and cables and elements of concrete making the path unsafe. Third Ward Councilor Sean Spiller tried to

assuage Fesen that the resolution only started the process of talking about it and reaching out to the railroad to explore any of Norfolk Southern's concerns, but Fesen was unmoved, saying that this was the first time he had even heard of such an idea. Cindy Steiner of the New Jersey Bike & Walk Coalition disputed this, claiming to have discussed the project with Fesen back in the fall of 2015. She also noted that part of the track has been torn out and is accumulating garbage, challenging Fesen's claim that Norfolk Southern could re-activate the rail line easily if it chose to do so; she added that Norfolk Southern had paid no taxes to Montclair for the township's part of the line.

Despite Fesen's protests, the council voted to look at the possibility of a rail trail. Even though leaders of numerous towns along the line and even U.S. Senator Cory Booker have endorsed the rail-trial plan, the rail-trail is not a guarantee, as Fesen made clear.

The budget was the first order of business, with financial consultant Bob Benecke explaining the process at the start. Benecke said that the 2 percent spending cap imposed by the state, with inflationary issues putting pressure on necessary increases for long-term liabilities.

Therefore, expenditures have to be prioritized carefully, and some expenses would have to be gradually brought into the budget, or 'folded in," over the course of a couple of years. But Benecke said Montclair had an advantage in dealing with increased spending within the 2 percent cap because of its success in bringing debt down to \$172 million, a \$50 million decrease over the previous six years. He said this made it easier for the town to keep public safety well-financed and address quality-of-life issues such as snow removal and health services.



*Financial expert Bob Benecke addresses the Montclair Township Council on the municipal budget.*

Five department heads gave presentations about the budget (Pat Brechka of the Department of Recreation and Cultural Affairs was absent due to a case of the flu), offering no numbers but reviewing their accomplishments for 2017 and their objectives for 2018. Fire Chief John Hermann, citing the Fire Department's handling of fires in 2017 that included a couple of two-alarm blazes, took pride in the department's ability to respond quickly to fires and to gas leaks. Chief Hermann said he expected to need money for more gas detection systems to further improve his department's effectiveness. At the Police Department, Chief Todd Conforti reported the police force had 109 members, though he hoped to add a few more, specifically saying that staffing was the big ticket item for his department for 2018. Chief Conforti said he would like to put more community officers in the area around Glenfield Park who could be readily available when needed, and he anticipated a greater amount of ongoing training for officers in how to use force or de-escalate a situation.

Utilities Director Gary Obszarny cited a successful carbon treatment at the Glenfield well under a temporary permit, and he hopes to bring that process to the Lorraine and Rand wells. He is

under a mandate to inspect water valves more frequently and increase cybersecurity for the water system's online components. The Utilities Department recently refurbished a ring wall in one of the tanks and expects to lay a water main along the Church Street from Trinity Place to Plymouth Street and down Orange Road to the intersection at Hillside Avenue and connecting to the MC Hotel along Bloomfield Avenue. Obszarny said he hoped to install new grouting on the top floors of parking decks and improve the security and sanitary conditions in the decks while working with the police and Montclair Emergency Services for the Homeless to trying to get the homeless to better shelter. Steve Wood of the Department of Community Services he expected his budget request to be flat overall with some increase for contractually obligated salaries and a more aggressive effort at replacing the insect-infested ash borers in town with new shade trees. When Dr. Baskerville asked why he planted such small saplings in their place, Wood said the trees planted were not actually saplings but mature trees that were deliberately meant to be as small (or as big) as they are because he needed the right size for a tree that could be hardy and grow in the narrow plating strips between the sidewalks and the streets.

Sue Portuese of the Health Department testified last, saying the animal shelter remained a concern and that reconstruction of the facility following the April 2016 fire was still in progress. She hopes to form a partnership with Friends of the Montclair Animal Shelter to further promote pet adoption, and she said she hoped to hire a full-time nurse to handle the load of lead paint cases in town. She said the Health Department got a six-month grant to do the inspections with apart-time nurse, and she hopes to hire one full-time with continued funding of the program after the grant expires.

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