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Freeholder Gill: 'Essex-Hudson Greenway' Would Provide Off-Road Recreation

Op-Ed: An "Essex-Hudson Greenway" would benefit Montclair, Glen Ridge, Bloomfield, Belleville, Newark, Kearny and Jersey City.

By Eric Kiefer (Patch Staff) - (https://patch.com/users/eric.kiefer) May 10, 2017 8:00 am ET (http://my.patch.com/article/27072813/edit)

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The following letter to the editor comes courtesy of Essex County Freeholder Vice President and NJ Bike & Walk Coalition Board Member Brendan Gill. Send local news tips, photos and press releases to eric.kiefer@patch.com.

“The Old Boonton Line, a segment of railroad running from Montclair to Jersey City that was taken out of service when Montclair received the Midtown Direct Train in 2002, presents a tremendous and unique opportunity to create a greenway for residents from Essex and Hudson Counties. This potential greenway, known as both the “Essex-Hudson Greenway” and the “Ice and Iron Trail,” would provide off-road recreation – walking, bike riding – for residents of the many towns that the greenway would pass through: Montclair, Glen Ridge, Bloomfield, Belleville, Newark, Kearny, and Jersey City. Also, as the entire distance to Jersey City is only 11 miles, the greenway would provide a way to ultimately reach Manhattan (via PATH train or ferries) and points in northern New Jersey (via Hudson - Bergen Light Rail) for those who would like to commute by bicycle.

“Greenways connect neighborhoods with business districts, parks, places of employment and other communities, and they provide residents with a unique and safe off-road option for recreation and mobility. Instead of driving through congested areas, residents and visitors use greenways to walk or ride a bike.

“Organizations like the New Jersey Bike & Walk Coalition and the Friends of the Ice and Iron Rail Trail have raised awareness of this greenway to the point that it has caught the attention of both the East Coast Greenway Alliance and the September 11th National Memorial Trail Alliance. The East Coast Greenway is a long-distance, urban, shared-use trail system linking 25 major cities along the Eastern Seaboard between Calais, Maine, and Key West, Florida. This green travel corridor will provide cyclists, runners, walkers, and other active-transportation users with a low-impact way to explore the Eastern Seaboard and will follow the Essex-Hudson Greenway through northern New Jersey. The announcement this past March by NJDOT of the shared use path/multi-modal connection from Jersey City to Newark across the WittPenn Bridge, dubbed the “East Coast Greenway Meadowlands Connector,” brings the entire Essex-Hudson Greenway closer to a reality.

“The September 11th National Memorial Trail - the “911 NMT” is a trail that will honor the victims of that horrible day back in 2001 by connecting the three crash sites and memorials along the way. The 911 NMT would follow the Essex-Hudson Greenway as it travels east from Shanksville, Pennsylvania to Ground Zero and then south to the Pentagon.

“The Old Boonton Line, owned by Norfolk Southern, has not been used since 2003, and was placed in “out of service” status with the Surface Transportation Board in 2005. The right-of-way is currently showing signs of neglect, garbage accumulation, and evidence of crime and drug use. These negative qualities serve to detract from the property values of the adjacent landowners and tenants, both commercial and residential.

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ike. Families with children
o provide recreational

opportunities by connecting the communities to each other, Branch Brook Park in Newark, trails in the Hackensack Meadowlands and various “destination” communities like Montclair, Newark, and Jersey City.

“The Greenway would improve safety for our neighbors by providing an off-road place to walk and ride. The state has one of the nation’s highest numbers of pedestrian and bicycle fatalities as a percentage of all road deaths, going back to 2008. In 2015 and 2016, over 30% of road fatalities in New Jersey occurred to people who were either walking or riding a bicycle, while the national average was 14-16%.

“Underserved communities adjacent to the line, such as Newark, Belleville and Bloomfield, would benefit from the presence of the Greenway. These communities have non-white populations ranging from 25% to 40%, with Newark having 25% of its residents living below the poverty line. These populations typically have higher obesity rates and less access to healthy activities due to dangerous neighborhoods, unsafe streets, and lack of affordable transportation options. The Greenway would provide these communities with safe, off-road access by foot or bike.

“The Essex-Hudson Greenway would have a profound impact on the seven towns from Montclair to Jersey City and on other nearby communities, making them more attractive places to live and visit. There is nothing else like this greenway in highly developed northeastern New Jersey. Greenways are an amenity that contribute to the overall livability of a community, and forward-thinking communities in New Jersey should consider them as part of their overall strategy for attracting visitors and keeping residents.”

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