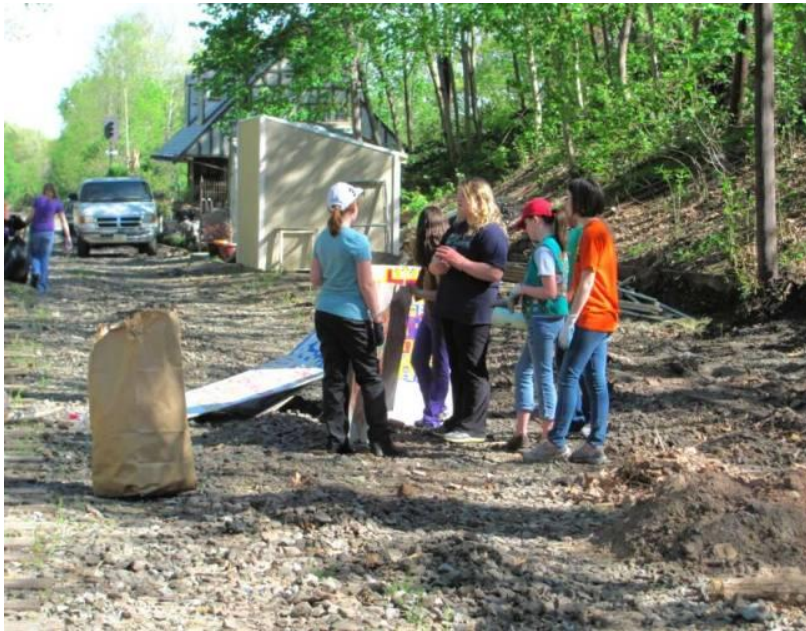


Essex County rail trail proposal gets new attention

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Scouts from Glen Ridge's Junior Girl Scout Troop 673 pick up trash along the former Boonton rail line near the Benson Street station in 2012. The Scouts also collected signatures for a petition to have a walking and biking trail built alongside the tracks, which are owned by Norfolk Southern.

A long-running plan to build a walking and biking trail next to the former Boonton Line in Glen Ridge and Bloomfield may be gaining new momentum – including some attention at the state and federal levels.

For the last six years, a group of area residents have been campaigning to build a trail called the Ice and Iron Rail Trail, now called the Ice and Iron Greenway.

Earlier this year, the Ice and Iron campaigners became involved with the New Jersey Bike Walk Coalition, which took the project under its wing. Additionally, Montclair resident David Wright said last Thursday that the project has caught the attention of U.S. Sen. Cory Booker, and that the New Jersey Bike Walk Coalition was working to arrange a meeting with Booker's chief of staff.

The next goal during the next six months will be to arrange a meeting with Norfolk Southern.

NJ Transit closed the line to passenger traffic in 2002, following the opening of the Montclair Connection near Bay Street Station. The section of the line in Glen Ridge, Bloomfield and Kearny was sold to Virginia-based freight railroad Norfolk Southern.

In Glen Ridge, the tracks run past the now privately owned Benson Street Station.

The goal is, if the Greenway is built, to link it to the New Jersey section of the East Coast Greenway: a multi-state recreation trail that runs from Florida to the Canadian border in Maine.

"Along its route, the Ice & Iron Greenway will connect parks, including Branch Brook Park, schools, hospitals and retail, in addition to providing an integral active transportation link enabling commuters to bypass some of New Jersey's most congested roadways."

The vision has been to have the trail run next to the train tracks – not in place of them – in the event that a transit agency decided to resume passenger rail service on the line sometime in the future.

Norfolk Southern has resisted the idea of a rail trail, citing potential liability issues and the potential for new freight rail traffic in the area over the next two decades.

In 2010, Glen Ridge's borough council announced that it would be working with Montclair, Bloomfield and Essex County on a plan to explore building a trail next to the tracks. But the exploration project never truly materialized.

In 2012, a local Girl Scout troop also circulated a petition asking for a trail to be built. The petition gathered about 200 signatures.

Rutherford and East Rutherford have been negotiating with Norfolk Southern to buy a 1.4-mile strip of land containing a disused rail bed.

The intention is to turn the land – which many local residents have used as an informal recreational trail for several years – into the Rutherford Highline.

Wright said that the Ice and Iron campaigners are looking at the Rutherford project as a sign that a rail trail project can potentially move forward.

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