

MONTCLAIR-AREA GREENWAY GETS SUPPORT FROM ESSEX COUNTY

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A rendering shows what the proposed Ice and Iron Greenway, also known as the Essex-Hudson Greenway, could look like. PHOTO COURTESY BIKE AND WALK MONTCLAIR

By ERIN ROLL

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The owner of the abandoned Boonton train line, where advocates hope to create a biking and walking trail, told Montclair Local they would be willing to consider a fair-market offer for the property. This comes on the heels of the county giving its blessing for the 11-mile biking and walking path along the defunct Boonton rail, which could one day run from Montclair to Jersey City.

Essex County Executive Joseph DiVincenzo sent a letter to the New Jersey Bike and Walk Coalition on Thursday, March 1, voicing his support for the proposed The Ice and Iron

Greenway concept. "I am pleased to support the efforts to develop a trail/greenway from Montclair to Jersey City, and ultimately Hoboken, known both as the 'Ice & Iron Greenway' and the 'Essex-Hudson Greenway,' using the Old Boonton Line right of way," DiVincenzo wrote. "This greenway will be economically beneficial for the townships of Essex County that lie along the greenway and those within walking and pedaling distance of the greenway, and will provide recreation and commuting opportunities for the residents of Essex County and visitors alike. Furthermore, this project will support national initiatives."

NJ Transit ended passenger service on the Boonton Line in 2002 with the opening of the Montclair Connection, a track junction located near Bay Street Station. The line is currently owned by Virginia-based freight railroad Norfolk Southern.

The railroad has repeatedly voiced its opposition to a trail being built alongside the tracks, citing safety and liability concerns, as well as the possibility that the line could once again serve as a freight line over the next few decades.

However, local officials contend the tracks have fallen into disrepair in recent years.

"The former Boonton line currently is not used by Norfolk Southern for freight rail service. Train service could be restored, however, if future business conditions warrant. As such, the line retains significant value as a corporate asset. Because the line could be re-activated, Norfolk Southern, for safety reasons, would not permit a recreational trail to be built within the line's right-of-way," Norfolk Southern spokesperson Jonathan Glass said via email on Tuesday. "That said, if a group in New Jersey has interest in purchasing the line for use as a trail, Norfolk Southern would be willing to consider a fair-market offer for the property."

But at the Feb. 6 council meeting, a representative from Norfolk Southern came before the council and urged them not to pass a resolution supporting the greenway.

"There's not a for-sale sign on it. We don't allow trails on it. There's all kinds of groups out there trespassing on land that we own," Norfolk Southern government relations manager

Michael Fesen said to the council.

The council unanimously passed the resolution supporting Montclair entering into discussions with neighboring towns about how to plan a greenway. The trail would run through Montclair, Glen Ridge, Bloomfield, Belleville, Newark and Kearny and Jersey City.

The next step is to start reaching out to Assembly members and senators representing each of the towns and cities along the proposed greenway route, said Cyndi Steiner, the executive director of New Jersey Bike and Walk Coalition. The New Jersey Coalition will be partnering with Bike and Walk Montclair, as well as with advocates in Glen Ridge and Bloomfield.

“We’re excited. We’ve been looking for this for a long time, so this is tremendous,” Steiner said.

Steiner said that Bike and Walk Montclair will be holding a public education event about the greenway on April 8. There will also be a petition, directed at Norfolk Southern, for members of the public to sign.

“We are very hopeful that [the Assembly members and senators] will join in this project,” she said. “With Amazon coming to Newark – this should resonate with them, and it probably will.”

Newark is one of the cities vying to host Amazon’s second headquarters. Philadelphia and New York were also named as finalist cities.

The Ice and Iron Greenway began as a local project spearheaded by residents in Montclair, Glen Ridge and other local communities. Last year, the New Jersey Bike Walk Coalition assumed a leadership role in the project.

If the trail is built, there is the possibility that it could be connected to larger trail networks in the area. These include the East Coast Greenway – a trail running from Florida to the

Canadian border in Maine – and the Sept. 11 National Memorial Trail: a series of trails connecting the three 9/11 memorial sites.