

MONTCLAIR COUNCIL PASSES GREENWAY, ENERGY AGGREGATION RESOLUTIONS

February 7, 2018



Debra Kagan, president of Bike and Walk Montclair, speaks during the Tuesday, Feb. 6 council meeting. ERIN ROLL/STAFF

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It was a packed house at the Feb. 6 council meeting, as members of the community turned out in support of two environmental-related projects.

The council voted yes, unanimously, on a resolution that would have Montclair enter into a discussion with its neighboring towns about how to plan a greenway along the former Boonton Line. Another resolution related to a proposed energy aggregation project with several other Essex County towns also passed.

Several people in the audience wore paper badges with blue bikes on them in support of the greenway and green plugs in support of the energy aggregation project.

Ben Rich, the sustainability coordinator at Montclair Kimberley Academy, spoke in support of both projects. "I would be excited to ride a bike from here to Jersey City, how exciting would that be rather than sitting in traffic?"

The greenway would run alongside the former Boonton Line tracks between Montclair and Jersey City.

But during the public comment period, Norfolk Southern government relations manager Michael Fesen claimed that this was the first he had heard of the greenway project. "There's not a for sale sign on it. We don't allow trails on it," he said of the rail bed. "There's all kinds of groups out there trespassing on land that we own."

He said that Norfolk Southern is opposed to trails running alongside its tracks, due to safety and liability issues, and he urged the council to vote no on the resolution.

"Why would you be saying no to this? This would be stopping the ability to have the conversation that you're talking about?" asked Third Ward Councilor Sean Spiller.

Spiller emphasized that the resolution was only the first step in a larger discussion process. "Maybe instead of this piecemeal approach, we should all get together," Spiller said. To Fesen, he added, "To come here and say don't even talk about it is not the right approach."

However, Cyndi Steiner, the executive director of the New Jersey Bike and Walk Coalition, said that she had documentation of discussions with Norfolk Southern, and she said that she herself had spoken to Fesen about the project in the past. She presented the council with a packet of documents containing, among other items, the resolutions that the other towns along the route had passed in support of the greenway, and a letter that the Montclair Senior Citizens Advisory Council had sent to Norfolk Southern's CEO in 2017.

Steiner indicated that tax records showed that Norfolk Southern was not paying taxes on the railroad property. She also said that the railroad bed had deteriorated to the point that it would require a massive investment to put it back into operating order.

With the energy aggregation project, Montclair is looking at joining with five other towns in Essex County to form the Sustainable Essex Alliance, a partnership for purchasing electricity and energy.

The energy aggregation project was not officially included on the agenda, but the council voted to add it to the agenda for a discussion and vote.

“Well, I think Montclair should be a leader, like it’s always been,” said Councilor-At-Large Bob Russo.

Upper Mountain Avenue resident Frank Rubacky criticized the council for going ahead with a vote, saying that it didn’t allow the public enough time to comment.

During the first part of the meeting, each of the town departments took turns giving a presentation to the council on what they expected the coming year would hold for their budgets.

There was some discussion of how to aid the homeless population in Montclair.

Dejon Morris, the new president of Montclair Emergency Services for the Homeless, introduced himself later in the meeting. He noted that homeless people are not required by law to take advantage of MESH’s services, so he said that MESH will try to bring blankets and other supplies out into the community.

During the utilities report, utilities director Gary Obszarny said that his office was working with the police and other agencies to address the issue of homeless people sleeping in Bay Street Station. He said that his office would be stepping up police actions, but he said it was important to make sure that homeless people were getting the assistance they needed.