

## Northern Valley Greenway Movement Was Sparked By Letter

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Will

**this unused railroad line (left) go from tracks to trails? A final feasibility study on the proposed Northern Valley Greenway is anticipated in less than one month.**

BY MICHAEL OLOHAN

OF NORTHERN VALLEY PRESS

NORTHERN VALLEY AREA, N.J.—In less than a month, a consultant for the state Department of Transportation will present a final feasibility study on three concepts for converting a nearly 8-mile-long unused railroad line traversing six Northern Valley towns into a greenway.

But the idea that got it all rolling, at least greenway-wise, started initially as a concept in a letter to the editor of Bergen County's only daily newspaper on Dec. 2, 2015.

### 'Trails, not trains'

Headlined 'Develop trails instead of trains,' the letter argued "to convert the unused train lines into biking trails and walking paths" instead of adding more trains.

The teenaged letter writer from Haworth argued such trails "will provide a multitude of benefits, including a safe and uncongested passage for cyclists as well as preserving the rural characteristics and charms of county towns."

The letter came from Alexander Philliou, then a 16-year-old junior at Dwight-Englewood School, who was moved by the death of a young teenage boy from Cresskill who was hit and killed by a truck while bicycling to school. That tragedy inspired his activism.

“Trails have the potential to improve the lives of all residents in so many ways in addition to stimulating economic development and protecting our environment,” wrote Philliou.

It was the letter that kicked off the current efforts to develop and construct a greenway over nearly 8 miles of unused rail line.

Once the letter was published, Philliou said he started hearing from people who supported the idea of a greenway. He admitted that he did not know those people existed.



**Alexander Philliou, of Haworth, will be honored April 7 by Tenaflly Nature Center for his efforts in initiating the momentum for the Northern Valley Greenway. In addition, six other individuals and organizations will be honored for their efforts in developing a greenway. | Photo courtesy Alex Philliou.**

## **'A lot of feedback'**

"I got a lot of feedback from people who commented positively on the letter. I walked into this not knowing that other people felt similar and then I published the letter about converting the unused railroad line and people started contacting me," he said.

Following up on the positive reinforcement, Philliou researched rail conversion projects the following summer in a course at Columbia University, and with support from others, Philliou then created an online Change.org petition, which "served as a catalyst for the Northern Valley Greenway initiative," said Andrew Mikesch, the Northern Valley Greenway project's team leader. The petition now has over 2,060 names on it.

Philliou said one of the first people to contact him and praise his letter to the editor was Mikesch, his former assistant Scoutmaster, a retired software designer and a chief advocate for the interlocal project.

Philliou said he grew up in Haworth and had been on the abandoned CSX rail lines before. He said his whole family enjoyed bicycle riding "and as a kid I would bike and ride everywhere. It was a big part of growing up."

He said during his course at Columbia, he had researched the best ways to get the word out about a massive project such as converting rails to trails.

He said since launching the Change.org petition, he was contacted by the Tenaflly Rotary Club. "They told me that they had been thinking along those same lines and that converting this unused line was a great idea that they would want to get behind," he said.

## **'A huge benefit'**

He said when he "really looked into this, and the full potential of the project was revealed. It's true that the benefits to this are understandably great. It will be a huge benefit to the area," said Philliou.

In addition to wanting to provide a safe area for biking and walking, Philliou said that his motivation for undertaking a rails-to-trails project were inspired by his school.

"Going to Dwight-Englewood School inspired a sense of community service and activism. We have a duty to improve our communities," said Philliou.

He said his time serving as an intern with District 37 state Assemblywoman Valerie Vainieri Huttel the summer before senior year also served as an inspiration for his efforts.

Philliou graduated from Dwight-Englewood in 2018 and attends the University of Miami Business School, where he is a freshman. Philliou is studying economics and plans to attend law school.

On April 7, he will join six other individuals, in addition to the Rotary Clubs of Cresskill/Demarest, Northern Valley and Tenaflly as honorees of Tenaflly Nature Center for their instrumental roles in building and sustaining efforts to promote a Northern Valley Greenway. Also being honored are Christine Evron, Tenaflly Chamber of Commerce; Cyndi Steiner, New Jersey Walk & Bike Foundation; Shepard Grinker, owner of Tenaflly Bicycle Workshop; Raymond Cywinski, former Demarest mayor; Ed Piehler, former Northvale mayor; and Fred Silber, Tenaflly resident and avid bicyclist.

All are named as "visionaries" for their unparalleled efforts to develop and promote the greenway.

By April's end, the state Department of Transportation will release three concepts and the next phase of greenway effort begins—the phase to develop a final design and plan and funding to make the greenway concept a reality.