

Turning Rails To Trails Project Gets Boost From State Group

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A 3.5-mile biker- and hiker-friendly greenway extending from Rego Park to Ozone Park inched closer to reality this month, with an endorsement from Parks & Trails NY. But the path to a Central Queens greenway is still as obstacle-ridden as the stretch of overgrown railroad it would replace.



A group of residents, business owners and students is working to transform the abandoned Rockaway Beach Branch LIRR line into a pedestrian and bike trail. (photo by Cesar Mieses)

“We’re trying to rally support among people in the community on the one hand, and on the other hand to talk to city government to see what we can do to persuade them to clean it up and turn it into a public space,” said Jordan Sandke, who heads the Rockaway Beach Branch Greenway Committee.

The proposed greenway would follow an abandoned spur of the Long Island Rail Road, which at one time served the Rockaways. Train service from Rego Park to Ozone Park was terminated in 1962 and the tracks have since fallen into disrepair, collecting trash and attracting vagrants.

Sandke envisions replacing the dilapidated tracks with a strip of asphalt to accommodate bikers, hikers and joggers while retaining most of the trees and other vegetation to create a swath of green space through the communities.

The idea took hold over two years ago, when Sandke was out riding his bike. He was in search of a hospitable route from his Richmond Hill home south to Jamaica

Bay and kept dead-ending on the abandoned tracks. A greenway there would have served him well that day and he has been volunteering on the project ever since.

The city maintains an extensive network of greenways and recommended bike paths, although picturesque north-south stretches in Central Queens are few and far between, said Community Board 9 member and avid biker Tom Chiofolo. “Even the streets that are designated as bike paths, they’re dangerous,” he said.

David Snetman, bicycle campaign coordinator of Transportation Alternatives, reports that Queens has the least number of greenways of any borough. His group is backing Sandke’s plan. “We think it’s a great project,” he said, adding that turning rails to trails is a nationwide movement that has been gathering steam. Reclaiming this kind of public space is particularly advantageous for bikers, he said, as it is already car-free.

It’s unused space and it would be really easy to turn it into a greenway,” he said.

Advocates of the plan also cite increased property values for neighboring residents, a boost for local merchants, an alternative means of commuting and health benefits for the whole community among the advantages.

There is already local support—Community Board 9 endorsed the plan back in 2004—and now the project has gotten the attention of the statewide organization Parks & Trails NY. Parks & Trails NY has worked on revitalizing trails from the Erie Canal to Nassau County. The group chose to support the Rockaway Beach Branch greenway based in part on the strong community backing it already had and the work Sandke has done, including recruiting youth volunteers from the Newcomers High School in Long Island City, where he teaches.

“We have found a great and important thing to have in a project is a spark plug” said Fran Gotcsik, director of programs at Parks & Trails NY. Her group intends to meet with advocates to devise a plan of action, then offer support to shepherd the project to fruition.

The statewide support is a welcome help. “I think it’s a big morale boost,” said Sandke, adding that it also adds legitimacy to the project.

Obstacles that remain, physically, include two parking lots, which were built over the city-owned right-of-way in the years since the trains stopped running.

Additionally, some residents along the northern portion of the path are concerned about the possibility of public access in their backyards, Sandke said.

Community Board 10 hasn't given any input or offered an official opinion on the plan, which would affect a few blocks within its jurisdiction. In the past, however, the board has supported the renewal of the Rockaway LIRR line, said board Chairwoman Betty Braton.

Sandke hopes the greenway will become a "real community project," garnering manpower and financial support from more residents and businesses.

First, the group has to get the city on board. The abandoned track was included in the greenway master plan in 1993, and the portion that runs through Forest Park has been transferred to the Parks Department. The Rockaway Branch Greenway Committee has been in touch with the City Planning Department and has been waiting since January for a feasibility study to begin.

A spokeswoman for the Department of City Planning indicated that a feasibility study is not presently under way.