

Old rail line could spur a Yonkers resurgence

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A ghost of Yonkers past could be a pathway to revitalize neighborhoods and bolster the city's tax base with new businesses and new housing in coming years.

That is the vision and goal of Yonkers Mayor Mike Spano and the city's project partners at Groundwork Hudson Valley, the nonprofit environmental and community development organization spearheading plans to map and build what the mayor calls the South Yonkers Public Greenway.



The paved, lighted trail for pedestrians and bicyclists would pass through residential and commercial areas on the eastern side of the South Broadway business district from Caryl Avenue at the northern border of New York City's Van Cortlandt Park to Getty Square. From downtown Getty Square, Groundwork planners hope to extend the trail west to link with the city's new and expanding Saw Mill River walkway and end near City Pier on the downtown waterfront, where Groundwork's popular Science Barge is moored.

City officials and partners want to revitalize a Yonkers neighborhood around a pedestrian trail built along a former railroad right of way.

Passing small city parks and playgrounds already built in south Yonkers, the greenway would follow or in places closely parallel the long-abandoned right of way of a three-mile branch line of the Putnam Division of the New York Central Railroad that carried passengers between Van Cortlandt Park in the Bronx and Getty Square. Opened in 1888, the line was abandoned by New York Central in 1944 after a series of legal challenges by the city, one of which was heard by the U.S. Supreme Court.

Though the Putnam rail tracks were soon recycled for use in World War II, ghostly remnants of the line and stonework at some of its four Yonkers stations can still be seen on the edge of Park Hill and along residential side streets in south Yonkers. On Getty Square, engravings of locomotives on a bank's stone façade point to the building's original service as the entry to the Putnam branch's downtown terminus.

As the city's project partner, Groundwork Hudson Valley recently was awarded a \$186,529 grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency as part of the EPA's brownfields program to clean up and reuse contaminated former industrial sites. Groundwork has formed a steering committee in Yonkers that represents nonprofits, neighborhood churches, the Municipal Housing Authority and other government agencies and project stakeholders to solicit community input and explore whether vacant brownfield properties might be used for the proposed trail. Committee members are being trained in brownfield redevelopment issues by staff at the New Jersey Institute of Technology, the EPA's brownfields technical assistance contractor in this region.

Robert Baron, president and board chairman of Groundwork Hudson Valley, said preparing the brownfields area-wide plan will take about 1½ years.

“Even though Groundwork is facilitating the process, it becomes a true community vision of what they want to see,” Baron said.

Groundwork Hudson Valley also has applied for an approximately \$160,000 state grant in the state’s 2014 funding round for the trail project. Groundwork Hudson Valley Executive Director Rick Magder said the grant would be used for an approximately \$250,000 feasibility study “to get the project ready for capital construction.” If funded, that study would take 14 to 16 months to complete, he said.

At a recent press conference held near the old rail branch right of way to announce the EPA-funded planning for the South Yonkers Greenway, Spano evoked that concealed and in some places built-over city history.

“This was once a place where Yonkers residents would get on the Putnam Railroad’s commuter line and head to Manhattan or Getty Square to work, shop or dine,” he said. As part of its Yonkers Green City revitalization effort, the city is “unveiling the untapped opportunity and potential of Yonkers historic neighborhoods.”

Leading the Business Journal on a tour of the Putnam line’s ghostly route in south Yonkers, Baron said the paved trail will be routed and designed as “a useful walk. People are going through here to go to school, get to work, to get to (bus and subway) transit.” Parents on shopping errands could stop with their children at the playgrounds along the route.

“This should feel like a street, like part of the grid, but a street for pedestrians and bicycles,” he said. “This is a transit-friendly city, a walkable city. We should be building on this.”

“These neighborhoods grew up around Getty Square and the railroad stations,” Baron said. “That’s what gave them vitality.” The paved walk could attract value to those neighborhoods in the form of new businesses and higher-density housing.

“It’s fantastic for businesses,” said Baron, standing at the corner of Lawrence Street and Western Avenue, where drug dealers now conduct their open-air business outside shuttered commercial buildings. With the trail, “There are business opportunities. There are more people coming through here so it’s a safer neighborhood.”

“This is what we’re trying to sell people – revitalizing their neighborhood. This is where we’re trying to bring value and bring customers and bring economic activity.”

With changes in zoning, “There’s a possibility for more density here, to bring more housing into this neighborhood,” Baron added.

“The mayor is committed to this. He really wants to revitalize this neighborhood.”

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