

MINUTES: Albany County Helderberg Hudson Rail Trail Public meeting – Tuesday January 11, 2016

More than 100 enthusiastic people braved a cold snowy evening to learn about progress on the Albany County Helderberg Hudson Rail Trail. There was standing room only at the Cooperative Extension in Voorheesville Tuesday evening, as representatives of Albany County discussed the progress and status of the project. County Public Works Commissioner Darrell Duncan, William Anslow, County Engineer, George Penn, Acting Director of Operations and Scott Siegel, Policy Analyst with the County Executive's office spent nearly two hours providing details on the many aspects of the Albany County Helderberg Hudson Rail Trail project.

Phases

The project is divided into three phases – phase 1 from Voorheesville to Slingerlands, phase 2 between Slingerlands and Delaware Ave and Phase 3 from Delaware Avenue in Bethlehem to South Pearl Street in Albany.

Phase 3, the section from Veterans Park in Bethlehem, to South Pearl Street in Albany is completely paved. A bit more work is need on fencing, including on the Delaware Ave Bridge and some additional drainage work is planned. The County has invested almost 3.3 million dollars in this section of the trail, with 80% from federal funds and 20% County funding. The ribbon cutting event for this section is anticipated in the spring of 2016. The County took on this stretch of the trail first as it expected to be the most expensive phase due to engineering and bridge challenges.

Phase 2 between Delaware Ave and Slingerlands will be tackled following the completion of phase 3. Through an agreement between the Town of Bethlehem and Albany County, paving of at least 6,000 additional feet of the trail should take place during 2016. The Town of Bethlehem buried sewer lines along the route and in exchange for use of the corridor will work cooperatively with the County to pave this section. If resources permit, paving might reach as far as Slingerlands.

Phase 1 is the section between Font Grove Road and Voorheesville. The County has approximately one million dollars for work on this part of the corridor. They hope to use in house design and engineering to reduce costs, as well as working cooperatively will local communities. The optimistic assessment is that work on this area will be completed and the entire trail paved and operational in 2017.

Slingerlands issues

One of the areas that will be last to be addressed is the center of the trail in Slingerlands. This area is currently blocked by a neighboring landowner and the county is working to resolve that issue. Access to the landowner's home is limited by the trail corridor. There are also parking issues for the businesses at this location and improvements are needed for the bridge over New Scotland Avenue. The County has some funding available which they are utilizing for an engineering study of the bridge, trail routing and parking. We remain hopeful that this area will become a beautiful centerpiece for the project. There are significant costs associated with this section and additional funding will be necessary.

City of Albany Linkage

Linking the trail from its current terminus at South Pearl Street to the Corning preserve is the focus of a project being led by the City of Albany. A consulting firm is currently looking at possible routes through this highly developed area. There is also an upcoming meeting to kick off the discussion of a possible connection. We see this a major priority to make the trail part of the regions transportation network and to encourage attention and investment in Albany's South end.

Signage

Several participants raised the need for signage. MHLC has a grant from the Hudson River Greenway to install interpretive signage and mile markers along the route. The Village of Voorheesville also has Greenway funding for signage and MHLC will be working with the Village to coordinate this effort.

Hilton Barn

The future of the Hilton barn along route 85A in New Scotland was raised by participants. The County is working with the Town of New Scotland to determine the feasibility of moving the structure across 85A to the corner of Hilton Road and the Rail Trail. The vision for the structure is that it could become an major highlight of the trail with the potential for retail shops catering to trail users, restrooms and maintenance facilities for the trail. MHLC holds a purchase option to acquire the land for a relocation of the barn should funding be secured for the project. The New Scotland Town board and County Legislator Mike Mackey are racing against the clock to secure funding before the barn is torn down. Assembly woman Patricia Fahy is seeking NY State funding for the effort.

Voorheesville Plans

The Village of Voorheesville sees great potential for the trail. Mayor Robert Conway and the Village board are enthusiastically pursuing funds for the construction of a trail welcoming center and other amenities to draw visitors to the trail. Chuck Dollard mentioned a Village bicycling event for next summer that will include portions of the trail.

Parking and Access

Parking and access was a subject raised by numerous participants. Some of this will be addressed by eventual improvements in Slingerlands and possible new access near Hilton Road, but clearly more will need to be done in this area. The County remains focused on completing the major task of creating a safe and enjoyable route and intends to address access in the future. We see this as an issue that will require ongoing work and there are numerous opportunities to improve this situation.

Other Comments

Several people asked about plans for porta-potties or information regarding public restroom availability. The need for signs about trail etiquette was also discussed.

Trail Use

Everyone agreed the trail is receiving very active use already and that this will certainly grow. There are currently no plans by the County to promote the trail, although they will continue to update their website. They feel that word of mouth seems to be effective.

Sections of the trail between Delaware Ave and Voorheesville are operated by MHLC under a lease arrangement with Albany County. As paving progresses MHLC leases will expire and the County will assume responsibility for the trail.

There was extensive praise for the cooperative work of the Mohawk Hudson Land Conservancy and its Friends of the Rail Trail Committee in assisting Albany County with the project. The wonderful efforts of volunteer Stewart Dutfield and the trail ambassadors were also highlighted.

The question of winter use and plowing was raised. There are no plans for winter plowing of the corridor.

Public Safety

The County was clear that public safety is a major priority. As the trail receives increased use this will become an increasingly important consideration. This is an area we see a need for additional cooperation between the County and municipalities as well as the public. The Town of Bethlehem has some police presence on the trail and Elsmere, Delmar and Slingerland fire and rescue staff have recently conducted rescue drills on the trail. Signage will be especially important for public safety.

The Mohawk Hudson Land Conservancy thanks Albany County Executive Dan McCoy and the County Legislature for their leadership on this project. We also thank County staff for taking the time to update the public on their progress. MHLC looks forward to working with the County, municipalities and volunteers to capitalize on the great opportunity the Albany County Helderberg Hudson Rail Trail offers for the Capital District. We envision the trail will become a major part of the transportation system in the Capital District, linking communities and amenities through a fun, safe and environmentally beneficial recreation and transportation corridor.