Ringing in the Greenway:

Closing Transit Gaps, Protecting Road Users, and Growing the Economy on Staten Island by Revitalizing the North Shore Greenway and Investing in the Harbor Ring

PUBLISHED APRIL 2019
Introduction

New York City’s network of protected bike lanes and greenways suffers from a lack of connectivity, not to mention a near-absence in huge swaths outside the city core. In a city where the majority of residents do not own or have access to a car, this means there are few safe, extended, and uninterrupted routes for the majority of New Yorkers looking to commute, exercise, or enjoy all that their city has to offer.

For years, transportation and safe streets advocates seeking to reclaim public access to the region’s waterfront with linear parks, combined with pedestrian and bicycle pathways, have called for New York to comprehensively alleviate gaps in this emerging waterfront network by investing in the Harbor Ring plan. Encircling New York Harbor by way of Manhattan, Brooklyn, Staten Island, and the cities of Bayonne, Jersey City, and Hoboken, New Jersey, the Harbor Ring is an ambitious transportation and recreation project for the greater New York metropolitan area that integrates more than 28 miles of existing shared use paths and bikeways, including significant portions of the Brooklyn Greenway, a regional section of the East Coast Greenway, the pathway over the Bayonne Bridge, the Hudson River Walkway, Hudson River Greenway, and the East River Esplanade.
While much of the route already exists, many sections are missing dedicated bicycle/pedestrian infrastructure. This is most apparent on Staten Island, a borough that lags far behind the rest of the city in access to safe, reliable, and equitable transit, and where over 25 percent of residents do not own a car, and where residents and community leaders have long called for better, safer infrastructure.

New York City now has a unique opportunity to signal a long-term commitment to the Harbor Ring, livability, resilience, and sustainability, by investing in a dedicated people-first harbor area park, with a protected pedestrian and bicycle path to and from the St. George Ferry Terminal via the North Shore Greenway.

This Harbor Ring infrastructure – a multi-use path along Staten Island’s North Shore stretching from the Verrazzano Bridge to the Goethals and Bayonne Bridges (both of which are expected to have completed, dedicated bicycle pathways in 2019) via the waterfront – would help fill gaps in the network with safe, affordable, and enjoyable transit and recreational space for all Staten Islanders. It would generate tourism and foster economic activity by enabling easy access to tourist destinations like the Snug Harbor Cultural Center, the National Lighthouse Museum, and the Empire Outlets; offer unprecedented recreational and active-living opportunities; increase commuting options for thousands of Staten Island residents, especially once connected to the planned Fast Ferry routes; prominently showcase Staten Island’s unique views and natural beauty; and continue to establish the region as one of the nation’s most people-friendly.

Though Borough and City officials have long proposed various remedies for the under-utilized waterfront, visioning results from North Shore Greenway Summit and new public opinion research shows that there is now strong support among Staten Islanders for the North Shore Greenway.
Additionally, the Regional Plan Association’s Trails Plan shows that a regional trail network that included a North Shore Greenway would boost the economies of the “trail towns” along the route by making it easier for residents of “urban cores” in New York and New Jersey to access these spots without a car. This will be made especially relevant once bicycle and pedestrian accessibility between Staten Island and New Jersey resumes with the opening of the new Bayonne Bridge bicycle and pedestrian pathway, as is expected as early as spring 2019, along with a pathway on the new Goethals Bridge. The expected increases in tourism, safer streets for everyday commuters, and increased quality of life for Staten Islanders have all been highlighted as sound economic reasons to support a revitalized North Shore Greenway among local business leaders. For a history of previous calls for a North Shore Greenway, see Appendix.
In May 2018, over 70 Staten Islanders attended the first North Shore Greenway Summit, where they were asked to envision potential routes for the North Shore Greenway. New York City Department of Transportation officials were in attendance and helped facilitate breakout sessions. The most popular routes envisioned included routing along Richmond Terrace, Front Street and the North Shore Railway right-of-way. Summit attendees were especially interested in a route that provided connections between the North Shore’s many cultural institutions, alleviated food deserts, and offered access to commercial corridors by connecting to bike lanes that stretched inland. **First and foremost, summit attendees called for a Greenway that doesn’t just offer access to the waterfront, but one that acts as a vital piece of a larger network, uniting both the Harbor Ring and Staten Island.**
Elizabeth Bennett is the Executive Director of Staten Island Arts, the non-profit organization that works as Richmond County’s arts council to make culture accessible to all Staten Islanders through grant funding, programming, and professional development. Staten Island Arts is also a resource for policymakers, city agencies, elected officials, and community boards. In recent years, it has undertaken research and advocacy to address changes in the borough. Since 2016, Staten Island Arts has collaborated with Design Trust for Public Space on Future Culture: Connecting Staten Island’s Waterfront, an initiative advocating for the inclusion of culture amidst rapid development on the North Shore.

Staten Island Arts moved in March 2017 to its new home on Stapleton’s Front Street, which until recently, has seemed scary, forbidding, or abandoned. But today, the organization is bringing community members to a waterfront they otherwise wouldn’t visit for exhibits, concerts, and to enjoy the beautiful waterfront park behind Staten Island Arts’ office!

**What would you envision the greatest tangible or intangible impacts of greater waterfront access for Staten Island’s North Shore?**

That waterfront captivates and amazes me. The FDNY station is docked down the block and over the last two years I’ve arrived at work to find oil tankers, freighters, carriers, and the Macy’s Fireworks boats parked there. These sightings make me deeply appreciative of the role that Staten Island plays as an industrial waterway. It gives me a strong sense of déjà vu for an island I’ve lived most of my life on or off in Massachusetts. On my way to work, I’m reminded of the big open vistas of my hometown with open space unencumbered by buildings at the shoreline, birds flying high, a sense that I’m at the edge of the horizon, and the gleam of light on the water.

Front Street has all this. What it doesn’t have is what a greenway could provide: uninterrupted waterfront access for pedestrians, bikers, runners, fisherman, and daydreamers who want to amble our beautiful North Shore waterfront. Were the greenway a reality, the first thing I’d do is stand at the water’s edge, breathe the clear air and marvel at the...
ripples in the water that are created by passing ships or watch the ships themselves as they pass through NY Harbor and the Kill Van Kull. Where else in NYC can we still find those places to connect with a vibrant history of maritime traditions and occupations?

For the larger Staten Island community, a unified greenway could connect segregated neighborhoods that don’t otherwise bond. It would draw people to a shared space where they can engage in open air activities and converse with strangers over the shared love of a beautiful vista. A greenway would even combat public health epidemics by encouraging healthier lifestyles on the North Shore. Local health epidemics could be alleviated by encouraging active recreation along a greenway that inspires people to live their best lives.

For the larger Staten Island community, a unified Greenway could connect segregated neighborhoods that don’t otherwise bond.

How could the North Shore Greenway help transform the North Shore’s cultural landscape?

Staten Island Arts is always looking to entice visitors and residents to explore the North Shore and beyond and to share our cultural gems with people who have limited familiarity with all that the borough has to offer—not just world-class museums and a myriad of music festivals but legendary street murals, ethnic cuisine from all corners of the globe, and open spaces you can’t find elsewhere in New York City.

Via the greenway, adventurous and curious visitors from NYC and beyond could experience the borough’s treasures on foot or bike. They could explore culinary wonders from Africa to Sri Lanka or venture up Victory Boulevard for an unparalleled view of Manhattan and Brooklyn’s skylines and bridges. The side of Staten Island that a greenway would introduce to visitors would break through our established stereotypes and allow a new image of Staten Island as a place of fascinating storefronts, active harbors and glorious sunsets to shine through.

A greenway would get visitors to the surprising spaces they’ll soon learn to identify with Staten Island while giving our youth the opportunity to learn about this borough’s maritime history, instilling a sense of belonging and encouraging them to stay in our beautiful North Shore.
Research Shows Overwhelming Support

A recent survey of 224 residents by Transportation Alternatives found that **71 percent were likely to use a dedicated, protected bicycle lane** built as part of a North Shore Greenway. Fully 90 percent of residents were at least open to the idea, highlighting recreation, transportation, and waterfront access as desirable benefits.

Support for a Greenway is both widespread and entrenched – positive responses held firm across age, gender, neighborhood, and current level of physical activity, emphasizing the likely high rate of return on the City’s relatively modest immediate investment.

Coupled with thousands of signers to a petition supporting a Harbor Ring, this support shows that New York has a unique opportunity to finally make the critical investments needed in the North Shore Greenway.

Residents – who for years have suffered the indignity of isolation from the other four boroughs and who have regularly run and biked on cracked sidewalks, through weeds and alongside flimsy metal fencing – are tired of seeing the needs of Staten Island’s waterfront communities ignored.
Aileen Fuchs  
**PRESIDENT & CEO, SNUG HARBOR CULTURAL CENTER**

“Waterfront access to Snug Harbor for cyclists and pedestrians would be a game-changer,” says Aileen Fuchs, President & CEO of Snug Harbor Cultural Center & Botanical Garden. “We could make even greater strides in connecting and engaging with tourists coming from the ferry, as well as with people in low-income communities and families who live right in our neighborhood. Staten Islanders deserve more safe, healthy, affordable transportation options, and a waterfront route—a nod both to our site’s heritage and our future—is the perfect place to begin.”

Kelly Vilar  
**CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, STATEN ISLAND URBAN CENTER  
FOUNDER, THE LET’S REBUILD CROMWELL COMMUNITY COALITION**

“The potential of our waterfront is enormous and can be a great contribution to Staten Island and New York City if the right public investments are made to make our community walkable, bikeable and filled with spaces worth experiencing.”
Laura Barlament
DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS AND MARKETING,
WAGNER COLLEGE
RESIDENT, NEW BRIGHTON

“I have a friend who lives near me in New Brighton, in easy walking distance of the Kill Van Kull, a beautiful place to watch the sunset – if only it were an attractive place to go. Instead, we wind our way along an overgrown sidewalk, with traffic speeding past within inches of us, to get to the broken-down dock of Snug Harbor. A North Shore Greenway would draw people to the waterfront while providing a safe and attractive corridor of transportation by foot or by bicycle between all points on the North Shore and the ferry terminal. It would be a greater catalyst for positive urban development and quality of life than any other piece of infrastructure that has been started on the North Shore.”

Tariq Zaid
OWNER, RICHMOND HOOD COMPANY

“I am a cyclist as well as a small business owner on the North Shore for over 10 years. During the summer months, I love riding through other boroughs to experience all the diverse restaurants, small businesses and flea markets that New York City has to offer. Staten Island’s North Shore has plenty of first class cycling destinations as well, but they need to be supported by first class cycling infrastructure. With the North Shore Greenway to link our North Shore, our unique retail offerings and cultural establishments will gain the backbone they need to thrive.”
Veronica Gambon  
COMMUNITY ACTIVIST

“The pathway, or lack thereof, around Staten Island’s waterfront is an underutilized opportunity for Staten Islanders and visitors alike. A two-way bike lane fully separated from automobile and pedestrian traffic along the waterfront would be a quality of life game changer for all. This type of revitalization could be an example of sustainability.

As a resident of West Brighton, I would anxiously blow the dust off of our bicycles and take advantage of this type of community resource.”

Conclusion

When completed, a greenway on Staten Island’s North Shore will offer unprecedented recreational opportunities, and continue to establish the region as one of the nation’s most bike- and pedestrian-friendly. The greenway and the Harbor Ring will spur tourism in underserved neighborhoods around the region and will make the metropolitan area an even more attractive destination.

Local leaders have a window of opportunity to bring these critical infrastructure advancements to Staten Island. The time has come for Mayor Bill de Blasio and Staten Island Borough President James Oddo to show that economic development, an accessible and vibrant waterfront, and sustainability are a top priority for 2019.
Appendix: A Brief History of Calls for a North Shore Greenway

While Transportation Alternatives and the Harbor Ring Committee are proud to be champions in calling for a green, open, walkable, and bikeable North Shore waterfront on Staten Island, community-driven calls to take back the waterfront predate this report by over a decade.

- In 2000, the North Shore Waterfront Conservancy of Staten Island, Inc. was formed by a group of citizens living on the North Shore of Staten Island who called for waterfront revitalization with a focus on sustainability, public access, and environmental justice. Their outreach and stewardship eventually led Staten Island’s Community Board 1 to form a North Shore Greenway sub-committee in 2009, which focused solely on the creation of a 7.7-mile-long waterfront greenway from St. George to Arlington. Inspired by the revitalization of Brooklyn’s waterfront, they understood the economic development opportunities and health benefits of opening up Staten Island’s coastline.

- Just two years after the formation of Community Board 1’s Greenway sub-committee, the New York City Economic Development Corporation, in conjunction with the New York City Department of City Planning, released Working West Shore 2030, a framework for incorporating job creation and infrastructure upgrades into future land-use decisions, specifically highlighting the connection of West Shore parks to surrounding neighborhoods through “a network of potential bicycle and pedestrian links” as a recommended tactic.

- In 2011, the two agencies teamed up again to release North Shore 2030, which recommended “increased public access, new views of the working waterfront and a continuous multi-purpose pathway along Richmond Terrace” as a way to reconnect residents with the waterfront.

- Two years later, the Northfield Community LDC, together with NYC DCP and the New York State Department of State, released the Port Richmond Brownfield Opportunity Area Draft Recommendations, calling for the creation of “public waterfront access regulations and Greenway connections.”

2. www1.nyc.gov/assets/planning/download/pdf/plans-studies/west-shore/wsfinalreport.pdf
Today, both the St. George Waterfront⁵ and Lighthouse Point Development⁶ are rooted in pedestrianization upgrades and waterfront access, while the New Stapleton Waterfront⁷ project is establishing a bicycle and pedestrian esplanade along formerly abandoned waterfront property. The Bay Street Rezoning is focused on walkability, resilience and public, open space.⁸ And on the West Shore, two new waterfront parks – Heritage Park and the Van Name Van Pelt Plaza – came directly from calls for North Shore Waterfront access.

Nearly two decades after the North Shore community began calling for the waterfront it deserves, the momentum has never been stronger.