

A rail good idea for Queens: Restore trains to the Rockaway Beach Branch

By EDITORIALS

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Halfway through his week governing from Queens, Mayor de Blasio owes the people of the borough and city his support for restoring rail service to the old Rockaway Beach Branch of the LIRR, a route that has been inactive since 1962.

Although it has been more than half a century since the last train ran the 3.5 miles from Ozone Park up to Rego Park, connecting to the LIRR Main Line and straight into Penn Station, the valuable and irreplaceable right of way remains.

Some activists want this fallow rail bed to become a park, an outer-borough High Line, called Queensway. Sorry, folks. We love the High Line as much as anyone and were the very first to champion it, before Michael Bloomberg had ever heard of the defunct elevated freight spur.

But the derelict High Line had only two possible futures: demolition or a park, modeled on the original greened viaduct, the Promenade Plantée in Paris. A return to service for either goods or passengers was never viable.

In contrast, the Rockaway Beach Branch is ideal for a fast, direct link from JFK and Southeast Queens into the heart of Manhattan. It was such a good idea that then-Gov. Nelson Rockefeller pushed it a half century ago.

De Blasio, when asked last month, said "We are closing in on our final decision. I want everything on the table. I will come back publicly with an assessment of the different options and the cost and we will move to a decision."

For a guy who is planning a trolley line along the Brooklyn/Queens waterfront and expanding ferry service, the call is an easy one: transit.

Just look at the subways. New York can't exist if New Yorkers can't move and a train on the Rockaway Beach Branch can move more people faster and more efficiently than any other mode. JFK could finally have a direct one-seat train ride into Midtown. And the most expensive part — acquiring the land — is already done, as the city owns the right of way.

Of course, reactivating the line for the subway or LIRR would require cooperation with Gov. Cuomo. De Blasio can deal with that.

The other choice, a linear park, should be just as easy to dismiss for a man like de Blasio who has never once even been to the High Line (too Bloombergian) . For now, the High Line will have to suffice for New Yorkers. Queens needs transit. Queens needs the Rockaway Beach Branch.