

Park-rich boro needs trains more than green space

Reactivate a rail line in a Queens transit desert **BY GENE FALIK AND RICK HORAN**

Good transportation is the lifeblood of any city, and New York is certainly no exception. If people cannot get to employment and recreation opportunities safely and efficiently, we will work less and play less—harming our quality of life and society itself.

Yet some people are suggesting that a 3.5-mile former Long Island Rail Road line between Ozone Park and Rego Park not be rebuilt and incorporated into the subway system but instead be used as a park.

We could not disagree more.

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority is studying the benefit and cost of rebuilding the unused Rockaway Beach Line, which we call QueensRail, on the right-of-way, which amazingly is still intact after more than 50 years. Replacing this vital rail connection between southern Queens and the rest of the city is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that will utilize an existing asset to improve public

transportation for generations to come.

Queens is already park-rich. It is also commonly described as a transit desert. Ironically a section of this irreplaceable right-of-way goes through Forest Park. To put this in perspective, QueensRail is only 47 acres, while Forest Park itself is 538 acres—in a city that boasts nearly 30,000 acres of parkland. Other major Queens parks include Crocheron, Alley Pond, Cunningham and Flushing Meadows.

The right-of-way is only 47 acres and passes through a 538-acre park—in a city boasting nearly 30,000 acres of parkland

Forgive our skepticism, but we can't help but think that advocacy for a bike and pedestrian project called QueensWay is not so much about a park as about blocking a needed rail connection.

If New York is going to remain a world-class city, we must look long term and invest in our transportation infrastructure. If we don't, we will lose both residents and visitors to cities where getting around is easier. Using modern technology such as continuously



HIDDEN TREASURE: A subway line here would be relatively easy and inexpensive to build, the authors say.

welded track, vibration-absorbing ties and acoustic barriers, trains also can be a good neighbor—while raising property values along their routes.

Projects like QueensRail can be built relatively easily and inexpensively because the right-of-way already exists. Besides saving millions of hours each year in commuting time for residents and visitors, it will help achieve many of the city's stated transportation goals, such as getting people out of cars and into trains as well as reducing pollution and energy consumption. Pedestrian and bicycle safety will be enhanced as more drivers choose mass transit and leave their cars at home.

Queens residents have the longest average commute times in the nation. It can take up to two hours to get from

the southern half of the borough to Midtown, or even to central or northern Queens. QueensRail can reduce travel time on many routes by more than 30 minutes.

We are optimistic that the MTA study will confirm the positive impact this connection will have on Queens and on the city as a whole. Although we love parks, residents and elected officials have to choose between rebuilding this crucial rail link or copping out and losing the chance forever. Let's not blow it. ■

Gene Falik and Rick Horan are members of the Queens Public Transit Committee and the Coalition for QueensRail, both nonprofit advocacy groups.