

Public Policy and Planning in New York: Policy Memo

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QueensWay Policy Memo

Description

The deactivated portion of the LIRR Rockaway Branch elevated rail line that runs for 3.5 miles from Rego Park south through Ozone Park provides a unique opportunity for development that can dramatically improve the lives of Queens residents. The QueensWay proposal envisions realizing this improvement by transforming the elevated rail bed and some surrounding street-level land into a 47 acre linear park. The first phase of this park redevelopment was funded by the FY2023 NYC budget with \$35 million for design and construction of a 5 acre park on the Metropolitan Hub section, a 0.7 mile stretch between Metropolitan Avenue and Union Turnpike (Office of the Mayor, 2022a). The entire project is projected to cost \$150 million (Friends of the QueensWay, 2023a).



Metropolitan Hub Section (QueensWay, 2014)



Entire QueensWay (QueensWay, 2021)

While Forest Park crosses the middle of this rail line and supplies the immediately surrounding residents with nearby park space, both Rego Park to the north and Ozone Park to the south have among the fewest functional park acres per capita among neighborhoods in the city. Rego Park only contains 18.6 acres per 100,000 residents,

while Ozone Park only contains 7.5 acres per 100,000 residents (NYC Council Data Team, 2022). The Metropolitan Hub project extends north from Forest Park, so would only increase access marginally by itself, but would set the stage for further development into the under-parked neighborhoods. An isolated bike lane would also be constructed along this section with the aspiration to connect it to a larger network over time.

The northern sections including Forest Hills and Rego Park are predominantly white (51%) and asian (30%), with 50% immigrants born outside the US. The residents are more educated than average, and have tended toward lower unemployment and poverty than the rest of Queens or NYC. (NYC Dept of Health and Mental Hygiene, 2018b) On the southern side of Forest Park, the demographics shift, with the community district containing Woodhaven predominantly latino (41%) and asian (27%) (NYC Dept of Health and Mental Hygiene, 2018a) and Ozone Park's district evening out to nearly equal representation of white, black, latino, and asian (20-25% each) (NYC Dept of Health and Mental Hygiene, 2018c). These areas have lower education rates, higher poverty, and unemployment than Rego Park and Forest Park, but are similar to Queens averages.

The current right of way is owned entirely by NYC, which greatly simplifies the process of park creation. There is a section within the existing boundary of Forest Park that is administered by the NYC Parks Department and the remainder is administered by the NYC Department of Citywide Administrative Services (NYC Parks Employee, 2023).

Some sections of the right of way are currently being leased for other purposes including sections of the parking lot of the Forest View Crescent Apartment Complex, the Ridgewood-Glendale Little League fields, and the Forest Hill Youth Athletic Association fields. Friends of the Queensway has indicated no intention to change these uses (Friends of the QueensWay, 2023a) though this decision is ultimately in the hands of the city.

Support & Opposition

The primary advocacy group for this project is the Friends of the QueensWay, a community group that formed in 2011 (Friends of the QueensWay, 2023a) with the goal of establishing an elevated park on this abandoned rail line. They established a partnership with The Trust for Public Land (TPL), a national nonprofit that works to increase outdoor access, who commissioned the design of the 'QueensWay Plan' in 2014 (Friends of the QueensWay, 2023b) using grant funding from NY State Parks and the Governor's Regional Economic Development Council (Regional Economic Development Council, 2013). During this process they solicited some community input, including sponsoring an open design contest (Schulz, 2014). The current president of the Friends of the QueensWay, Travis Terry, was involved in advocating for these grants through his political consultancy, Capalino (Capalino, 2020).

In 2016, an additional \$1 million in funding was secured to design the first Metropolitan Hub section of the QueensWay through a combination of these state government

agencies, State Assemblyman Andrew Hevesi, City Councilwoman Karen Koslowitz, and several private foundations (Cusenza, 2016). The renderings for this design were released the following year (Young, 2017). While there was no commitment from the De Blasio administration to pursue the QueensWay project, this design activity and community engagement around it seemed to have momentum.

Over the same time period, however, there was another vision for the same land: reactivating it for rail transit. In 2012, Queens Community Board 14 in Far Rockaway voted to back a non-binding resolution calling for the reactivation of the Rockaway Beach branch for LIRR service (Kabak, 2012) and Assemblyman Goldfeder funded a preliminary use study of rail reactivation by Queens college in 2013 as an explicit alternative to the QueenWay (Kern-Jedrychowska, 2013). This political advocacy was complemented by interest from the MTA, which included reactivation of this section of the Rockaway Line as a possibility in their 2013 20 year needs assessment (MTA, 2013), and a community group called the Queens Public Transit Committee (QPTC) which started organizing community members from along the rail line. QPTC held their first rally of 30 people in Rego Park to call for reactivation in November 2014 (Licata, 2014). Different ideas about how this line could be reactivated were floated by community members and local politicians, including building a separate light rail network in southern Queens, which was proposed by Congresswoman Crowley in 2015 (Giudice, 2015). These ideas and discussion culminated in funding for a feasibility study being added to the NY State budget by Assemblyman Goldfeder in 2016 (Giudice, 2016) which allocated millions of dollars for the MTA to conduct a study of options for

reactivation and their costs. The essential argument of these groups was that southern Queens needed increased transit options far more than they needed park space.

Unfortunately for rail advocates, when the MTA feasibility study was completed in 2018, it came with a shockingly high price tag: \$8.1 billion dollars for a NYC Transit extension of the subway. With an estimated ridership of 47,000 riders per day (MTA LIRR, 2019), the cost/benefit of this project compares very unfavorably against even controversially expensive projects such as the second avenue subway phase 1 (\$4.5B for 200k daily riders (Business Insider, 2016)) or the Interboro Express (\$5.5B for 115k daily riders projected (Westbrook, 2023)). An alternative LIRR reactivation was also studied but only reduced costs by ~25% while cutting ridership projections by ~75% (MTA LIRR, 2019).

Despite nominal interest by the MTA, there was concern among rail advocates that the MTA were inflating the cost estimates in the feasibility study as a means to ignore a project that would sap limited authority resources and hadn't received the kind of high level political sponsorship that other expansion projects have received (Senate Majority Leader Schumer funding the second avenue subway phase 2 (Simko-Bednarski, 2023), Governor Hochel initiating IBX environmental review (MTA, 2023)). The president of the QPTC, Phil McManus, noted on announcement of the feasibility study funding that "we are going to have to monitor this study and make sure that it is done correctly" (Giudice, 2016), and in response to the unexpectedly high cost, they commissioned an independent review by engineering firm TEMS. The resulting report released in 2021

agreed with the MTA on construction cost estimates, but indicated that the MTA used non-standard estimation techniques for financing and contingency costs that greatly inflated the overall estimate. Their revised estimate in 2021 was between \$3.4 and \$3.7 billion (TEMS, 2021) which still trails some of the other expansion projects in cost per rider efficiency but is close enough to allow for further discussion on other benefits such as economic development in the area. As of 2020, the QueensWay project was still considered stalled due to potential future interest from the MTA in reactivating this line (New York Building Congress, 2020) despite Friends of the QueensWay pointing to the MTA estimate as evidence that rail is infeasible (Friends of the QueensWay, 2023a).

Aside from cost, one of the primary points of contention the rail advocates faced was concern they were against parks, or if not anti-park directly, at least willing to deprive a community of much needed parks if there was a chance for transit reactivation. This was reinforced by direct debates between the QueensWay and QueensRail presidents, Travis Terry and Rick Horan, who both asserted that use for one purpose would preclude use for the other (A. Lynch et al., personal communication, October 19, 2023). Horan had established QueensRail Corporation as a non-profit to advocate for rail reactivation in 2015 (QueensLink, 2023b).

In 2017 Andrew Lynch, a urban policy blogger, highlighted that the right of way included a significant amount of land that could be used for parks in addition to the tracks needed for transit (Lynch, 2016). This led to a collaboration where Horan and Lynch created the QueensLink plan which combines reactivation for rail with significant park development

in 2019. The QueensLink calls for 33 new acres of park land in addition to an extension of the M line from Rego Park to the Rockaways. This is less than the 47 acres of park the QueensWay would develop but positions this new parkland primarily in the least parked neighborhoods of Rego Park and Ozone Park, and includes a similar bike lane along the entire route.



QueensLink Plan (QueensLink, 2023a)

The new QueensLink scope has successfully reframed the debate from rail vs park to whether or not allowance for rail reactivation should be included in the overall effort that everyone agrees should include significant parkland. The QueensLink volunteer organizers have used this more positive framing, and more recently renderings of the proposed stations and parks, to connect first with local politicians, then communities. They have leveraged personal and past political organizing connections to meet with NY State Senator Jessica Ramos, NY State Assemblymember Jessica Gonzalez Rohas, City Councilperson and former NYC Parks Commissioner Shekar Krishnan among others, and refined their advocacy to focus on requesting an Environmental Impact Study for the QueensLink plan. Community organizing has involved rallies and town hall meetings all along the route since 2022, talking with local business owners to put up flyers (including along parade routes where the pro-QueensWay councilperson Lynn Schulman was participating to demonstrate grass-roots support), and regular petition drives at local green markets which were magnified via social media (A. Lynch et al., personal communication, October 19, 2023). Through direct and indirect outreach to politicians and constituencies, they've engendered wide support among politicians at all levels of community, city, and state government as demonstrated by attendance at a city hall rally in September 2023 that includes the NYC Public Advocate Jumanne Williams, Queens Borough President Donovan Richards, various NY State senators and assemblymembers, NYC Councilmembers including the Transportation Committee Chair Selvena Brooks-Powers, Queens EDC representatives, and various community groups (Queens Gazette, 2023). At the first public meeting on the QueensWay Phase 1

Metropolitan Hub project, which took place at a Queens Community Board 6 session on October 17, 2023, their influence was also apparent in the preponderance of questions from both the community board members and public comment being about QueensLink and the possibilities of designing the park while leaving opportunity for rail. These questions included original members of Friends of the QueensWay such as Peter Beadle who have since come to support the QueenLink and the Queens Borough President's community outreach coordinator who advocating both in public comment and afterwards in private to the presenters from EDC and NYC Parks Department that they incorporate the allowance for rail reactivation in their plans (QCB6, 2023).

Regardless of the rail advocacy opposition, the Friends of the QueensWay found a strong supporter in Mayor Adams. This project was not a visible campaign issue in 2021, with only Andrew Yang advocating strongly for the QueensWay (Pozarycki, 2021), and the QueensLink organizers were surprised when shortly after the election Mayor Adams met multiple times with QueensWay supporters in spring 2022 and it was officially announced 10 months after Adams was elected (Office of the Mayor, 2022a). The QueensLink supporters strongly suspect that the president of the Friends of the QueensWay, Travis Terry, who could not be reached for comment, had a direct line of influence with the incoming Adams administration and cut a "backroom deal" for QueensWay backing in exchange for in-kind contributions to political organizing during the mayoral campaign (A. Lynch et al., personal communication, October 19, 2023). Regardless of the truth of that assertion, it was clear that Adams, despite having many things to do in his first months in office, moved quickly to get this stalled project off the

ground and Terry went out of his way to praise the Mayor during the public comment portion of the first public hearing (Terry, 2023).

While rail reactivation supporters are the primary opposition of the current plan, it's worth highlighting a less organized and vocal contingent that are simply opposed to any development at all, neither parks nor rail. In 2013, a short-lived "No Way QueensWay" organization and website was created by Woodhaven resident Neil Giannelli (Pozarycki, 2013) that raised concerns about crime, lack of funding, and lower home prices (Giannelli, 2014). This sentiment was echoed by two members of the public at the QCB6 meeting in October, one of whom relayed a dubious tale of finding sacrificial alters strewn with headless chickens along the trails deep in Forest Park and was concerned about this kind of activity close to their home. The other was very satisfied with their current exclusive use of the public space as a natural feature of their back yard and simply preferred no one else get any benefit from its improvement (including, tangentially, peeping Toms who are assuredly very interested in her family). Aside from inducing visible discomfort in the presenting EDC representative these perspectives don't seem to have much sway on the discussion so far.

Conflict Resolution

The QueensWay plan attempts to split the opposition from rail advocates and no-development community members with its choice of Phase 1 location. The selection of this location overlaps significantly with the tracks and construction staging areas needed for transit rather than choosing to start with a section where both projects agree

a park should go (ex: the northernmost portion in Rego Park), which would effectively block rail development along the whole corridor rather than keep the rail option open while park development progresses. By choosing to build in the only section (aside from within Forest Park boundaries) where there are no residential neighborhoods abutting the right of way, they also limit the no-development opposition. There's little concern for any potential negative effects of a park between a Home Depot and a school complex. Once this is complete, the next phases of the park plan can proceed with limited push back from the rail advocates because they're already blocked, and the no-development opposition will likely not be organized or powerful enough to push back on the continuation of a successful park building project. Miriam Bensman, a senior advisor to the QueensLink, put it eloquently that (paraphrasing) the park they build will probably be lovely and then any discussion of rail will have to argue that they should destroy a park, which will engender very understandable community opposition. This would result in a de facto block of ever redeveloping this park land as an active rail line (Bensman, 2023).

This leaves the community engagement process on the design of the Metropolitan Hub, scheduled to proceed throughout this fall and into next year, as the best and last opportunity to either block the park development or force it to accommodate rail access without future destruction of the park. Several pro-transit members of the QCB6 and the Queens Borough President are advocating for the latter option of incorporating future rail planning into the park plan. QueensWay supporting politicians, including Mayor Adams and Councilwoman Schulman are simply keeping quiet, presumably with the

intent to focus on getting the park designed and built, which is aligned with Mayor Adams's "Get Stuff Done" priorities that include more parks in underserved neighborhoods (Office of the Mayor, 2022b) and could achieve at least a groundbreaking within his first term. Advocacy groups including Friends of the QueensWay and QueenLink members will attend further community engagement events as the Metropolitan Hub design is discussed to influence the discussion further (A. Lynch et al., personal communication, October 19, 2023).

Lasting Impact

If the QueensWay is completed roughly as envisioned by the TPL and Friends of the QueensWay plan. It will improve the day-to-day life of thousands of people living nearby. They will have access to green space, fresh air, recreational bike lanes, and likely park programming that would not otherwise be available. Children will grow up happier and healthier, perhaps with more fondness for their childhood neighborhoods. Home prices will likely rise with the addition of such an amenity, enriching existing homeowners. There may be commercial economic development that caters to parkgoers, though this has not been studied by EDC (QCB6, 2023). The broad strokes of life in these areas will likely remain the same, however. Transit deserts will remain disconnected from the subway. Cars or long multi-modal commutes will continue to be required for most people, and density of development is unlikely to significantly change. One of the few remaining rights of way for mass transit will forever be lost to the city.

Alternatively, if the current development is adjusted to accommodate the vision for transit supported by the QueensLink plan, and the MTA eventually agrees to complete it, this area of Queens will be reshaped significantly over decades. Initially, the park benefits would mirror that of the QueensWay, albeit in more modest ways. Later, however, the direct connection to Manhattan via the subway would significantly enhance the value of existing housing stock and prospects for developers. This, perhaps with some aligned upzoning, would result in a large increase in density as demand and supply are balanced (similar to what's happening today in Gowanus, Greenpoint, and other areas of the city). As more people live in these areas, commercial enterprise will be attracted both to serve these new residents and to colocated offices with prospective employees, further improving the desirability of the corridor, with positive network effects into southern Queens and Brooklyn who will have readier access to these improving areas. The parts of the neighborhood closest to transit stations will likely be transformed in ways that current residents don't uniformly appreciate, but which significantly improve the quality of life of the vastly larger set of new residents, for whom the parkland developed along with transit is not just a nice amenity but a vital part of their neighborhood.

Personally, I hope that the option for that later scenario is kept open, while finding creative ways to have the most benefit in the near term for people living in these communities today.

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