

BACKGROUND: THE 2015 MASTER PLAN

The vision for a trail was born out of citizen concern over unsafe pedestrian conditions along Route 9D and a sense of duty to find a solution before people were hurt. Conversations over coffee eventually grew into a coalition with a range of project partners including local municipalities, local and regional non-profits, Metro-North Railroad, and various state agencies. This group became the steering committee that pooled funds and hired a consultant to complete a master planning process for the Hudson Highlands Fjord Trail (Fjord Trail).

The purpose of the initial Master Plan study, as it was conceived at the time, was to evaluate the feasibility of creating a trail linking the Cold Spring and Beacon train stations. The study identified and evaluated various route alternatives based on project goals and public input, along with technical and cost feasibility. This analysis and public input culminated in a preferred alignment for the proposed Hudson Highlands Fjord Trail (Fjord Trail or Trail) as an accessible shared-use trail connecting the Village of Cold Spring, in Putnam County, to the City of Beacon, in Dutchess County. **The Preliminary Draft Master Plan for the Hudson Highlands Fjord Trail** (Preliminary Draft Master Plan) was completed and endorsed by all four communities in 2015. The Master Plan established that:

“The goal of the project is to transform a portion of the State Route 9D/Metro-North Hudson Line corridor in the heart of Hudson Highlands State Park between the Village of Cold Spring and City of Beacon from a high speed thoroughfare into a multi-use, user-friendly recreational, tourism-oriented connection that provides people with a stronger visual and physical connection with the Hudson River.”

The 2015 Master Plan also identified key goals that served as parameters to assess the feasibility and desirability of various proposed route alternatives:

Safety: Lack of pedestrian, hiker and cyclist safety was the initial issue that led to the grassroots support for the trail. It is necessary to address traffic safety concerns along this portion of State Route 9D, where visitors currently park to access the trailheads, by calming traffic and implementing pedestrian safety measures.

Recreation: Creation of this trail is an opportunity to provide a new recreational amenity for the region accessible to a broader population than just hikers. This project could transform the character of this stretch of Route 9D from that of a dangerous high-speed thoroughfare into a multi-modal recreational corridor that acknowledges the diverse needs of the motorists, pedestrians and cyclists using it. ADA access was sought where possible to open this unique area to people with disabilities, families with young children and the aging population. A trail located here would ultimately connect into a regional greenway and trail network, as well as the broader Hudson River Greenway, to create a multi-modal link between adjacent recreational opportunities and natural assets that people of all physical abilities could use.

Highlight & retain natural beauty, ecology and environment: Creating a continuous off-road, multi-use trail that provides visual and physical connection to the Hudson River and surrounding streams and woodlands is a major focus, given the strong public support for a such a trail. The design concepts developed are based on analysis of critical areas of environmental, cultural and archaeological significance, and have been developed to minimize environmental impacts during construction, to the extent possible, while maximizing exposure to natural surroundings and views.

Economic development: Encouraging non-motorized travel between Cold Spring and Beacon and their tourism-based destinations is a major goal that would be realized as a by-product of this trail. Once built, a continuous trail will highlight assets of these two communities as well as Hudson Highlands State Park Preserve. Therefore, unless there are specific economic development benefits for a given route segment, this goal is not analyzed in detail for each segment. Rather, it is regarded as a strong reason in support of implementing the entire trail route.

Construction feasibility: Evaluating the desirability of various route alternatives revealed a series of practical issues at the forefront of the analysis. These include political jurisdiction, property ownership, environmental constraints, engineering feasibility, construction issues, project cost, and political and public support.

SINCE THE MASTER PLAN

Generic Environmental Impact Statement (GEIS):

As part of the master planning process, a Generic Environmental Impact Statement will be prepared under the New York State Environmental Quality Review Act (SEQR), first as a Draft GEIS (DGEIS) and ultimately a Final GEIS (FGEIS). The New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (hereinafter “OPRHP”) is the Lead Agency for the State Environmental Quality Review Act (SEQR) review of the proposed Hudson Highlands Fjord Trail (Fjord Trail or Trail) and Scenic Hudson is serving as Project Manager for this assignment.

The DGEIS process was initiated in 2016 with the publication of the Draft Scoping Document on July 6, 2016. This scoping document provides a table of contents for items to be analyzed in a DGEIS, which will identify and evaluate benefits and potentially significant adverse impacts that are pertinent to the Proposed Action (in this instance, The Fjord Trail), and to identify appropriate mitigation measures, as well as, viable alternatives. It also eliminates consideration of any impacts that are irrelevant or non-significant. With its

publication, the Draft Scoping Document was made available for review and for public comment on the OPRHP project website, the Scenic Hudson website (www.hudsonfjordtrail.org), and circulated to all involved and interested agencies. A public scoping session was held on November 14, 2016, and public comments were received on the Draft Scoping Document until November 18, 2016.

Concurrently with these agency and public reviews and comment, analysis was begun on the preferred route identified in the 2015 Master Plan. However, this process was paused in 2017 as public input and field work indicated that additional planning, design and route alternatives were merited for the project (see next section). Ultimately, A Draft Generic Environmental Impact Statement (DGEIS) will be developed addressing all items identified in this Final Scoping Document.



SITE WALKS

The design and environmental review team conducted several site walks throughout the planning process.

Breakneck Connector: The segment of the potential Fjord Trail alignment between the Breakneck Ridge Trailhead and Breakneck Ridge Metro-North Station is one of the most heavily-used areas of the potential trail route, particularly in the Spring to Fall, with thousands of hikers arriving by car, train and bicycle on peak weekends. There is limited parking, no pedestrian walkways (hikers must walk along an informal path just outside the guardrail on 9D or on 9D itself), and no designated bicycle accommodation.

Based on these conditions, project stakeholders and the steering committee prioritized this segment as one of the most critical “sub-projects” within the Fjord Trail corridor and identified it as the first segment that should be constructed. Immediately after the master plan was completed, a full design for this segment was developed through construction documents for an off-road shared-use facility located between the Metro-North tracks and State Route 9D that would:

- Create a separated 12' trail for bikes and pedestrians between the Metro-North pedestrian bridge and the Breakneck Ridge Trailhead.
- Create designated parallel parking on Route 9D, create no parking zones to eliminate dangerous conditions, and expand and pave the Breakneck parking lot with permeable pavement and designate reserved parking spaces for emergency responders to ensure their safety and convenience when performing rescues.
- Add a new welcome center and signage for the Fjord Trail and trailheads of major trails in Hudson Highlands State Park Preserve like Breakneck Ridge!
- Remove invasive vegetation and plant native landscaping along the trail, including adding two to three rain gardens in and around the parking lot.

Receiving only one bid response several times higher than available funding, the project was halted. It is currently being reconsidered in parallel with the updated master planning process.



BREAKNECK CONNECTOR

Currently, hikers and visitors walk single file along an extremely narrow path adjacent to State Route 9-D.



STEERING COMMITTEE PROJECT KICK-OFF MEETING

FJORD TRAIL 2.0: RE-THINKING THE 2015 MASTER PLAN

In the intervening years since the completion of the 2015 Master Plan, the vision and aspiration for the Project has evolved into the understanding that the full execution of the Hudson Highlands Fjord Trail should be the creation of a linear park of exemplary design at the intersection of the highlands and the river, providing enhanced access to opportunities for appreciation of both and celebrating the deep history, striking and dramatic scenery, rich biodiversity and ecological resources for which the Hudson Highlands region is known. The aspiration of this new phase of the Fjord Trail project is to create a master plan and design guidelines not just for a trail, but for a linear park that creates opportunities for appreciation and awe of this rich natural landscape.

The design should achieve a sense of being the landscape versus something placed upon the landscape. The Fjord Trail, at its core, will connect people with this natural cathedral, including restoring public access to the river that has been impeded over time, creating an amenity for residents and visitors through waterfront access. In addition, Fjord Trail will incorporate and improve existing parks located in the project area, including improvements to trail systems, creation of family-friendly zones and education spaces, and landscape ecology restoration. The project is also as much about caring for the landscape - being restorative where needed to address past degradation as well as forward thinking for resilience and what future risks climate change and sea level rise will pose.

The Fjord Trail will be an amenity for the local communities and region, while also providing a landscape that supports the increased visitation to this area. It will provide alternative day trips for unprepared hikers unable to trek Breakneck Ridge. It will expand restroom facilities and create safe walkways for both area residents and visitors from the Metro-North stations and the local communities, connecting them to other trails in the region. It will include new parking areas, reducing the demand for parking in the local communities and the foot traffic through residential neighborhoods. Finally, it will improve access for emergency responders and encourage safer behavior, with the goal of easing the burden on local emergency responders. Altogether, the Fjord Trail will promote safer, more organized

access to popular destinations and help safeguard local quality of life for residents and integrity of the landscape in the face of high visitation.

Practically, for the Master Plan, this will entail looking beyond the narrow bounds of the trail alignment to the planning of the larger landscape corridor through which it will move. It also entails re-thinking the preferred alignment of the trail in some places to ensure achievement of the updated project goals.