

Fjord Trail Friction Surfaces in Dispute Over Visitor Numbers

By Douglas Cunningham

April 09, 2024

It sounds like a good idea: A waterfront trail to connect the Village of Cold Spring and the City of Beacon along the Hudson River, thrilling in the splendor of one of America's greatest rivers and scenic areas, all while providing another trail to soak up hiker demand and put in place infrastructure to deal with Breakneck Ridge and nearby trails.

But the Hudson Highlands Fjord Trail encountered rare public turbulence last week when five of the members of the Trail's own Visitation Data Committee, all from Philipstown, Cold Spring or Nelsonville, called into question the assumptions underlying visitor number projections. In essence, they said, the visitor projections from HHFT cannot be relied upon as having any semblance of accuracy. The committee has been at work for eight months.

Utility poles are being relocated from the west side of Route 9D to the east side of Route 9D. In recent weeks, a tree contractor has removed a number of trees on the east side in preparation. This view is looking south, before the tunnel. Photo, Doug Cunningham

The statement said in part, "The selection and comparability of parks used to project visitation was not adequately justified and key characteristics of our area such as access by train and close proximity to large cities do not appear to have been closely considered in choosing comparable parks. Moreover, the HHFT study has chosen a composite comparable visitor growth rate of only 4.2% based on those parks."

And, "Actual data from the NYS Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP) does not appear to have been used in the visitation estimates for the project area. Currently available attendance data for the Hudson Highlands State Park from OPRHP shows a 10.7% average annual growth rate in visitation from 2016- 2023. The ORCA report shows the same park with only a 7.6% annual growth rate for the same period." In other words, the trail's consultants are choosing parks in other regions or with data that reflect low growth rates, understating the likely actual impact of the Fjord Trail by many thousands of visitors.

A public Fjord Trail session last Wednesday at Dutchess Manor, which many local municipal officials attended and which outlined the visitor numbers and ways to address them, did not

assuage their worries. Said Chris Winward, Nelsonville's mayor and a member of the Visitation Committee, "It definitely did not allay our concerns; it only increased them."

Why issue such an unusual statement? Winward said: "We really didn't want the public to think we were signing off on the visitation projections. We didn't want the public to think we were blessing anything." She questioned in particular the simulations of visitors on peak days in the area of Main Street and Dockside which were presented last Wednesday evening.

"That was kind of laughable, honestly," Winward said. "The growth rate projections are just so off."

She advocated that current growth data from the Hudson Highlands State Park, which includes the Fjord Trail area, should be used, rather than bringing in park numbers from elsewhere. "We have actual good data here," she said Thursday. She also said inadequate attention had been paid to the impact of Metro-North Railroad which, even with tiny and inadequate platforms, can dump 400 people per train near the Breakneck trailhead. The platforms are to be upgraded as part of the trail work to a more standard size and capacity.

The Fjord Trail organizers seemed taken aback by the criticism, with a statement provided Friday:

"HHFT has worked hard to share project information, methodologies, and raw data gathered by professional experts with these community volunteers. HHFT formed this committee to foster more robust communication about pedestrian congestion, projected visitation, and traffic to proactively prepare local communities for the GEIS public comment period. The committee's discussion and review of the visitation projection has yet to be completed, and review of the traffic study has not even begun, so this commentary is premature. In light of this, we will all need to reflect on the future of the VDC process," Amy Kacala, HHFT Executive Director, said in the statement.

The full HHFT presentations regarding visitor numbers, including additional details, can be found here: [https:// hhft.org/experience/visitationapril-3/#videos](https://hhft.org/experience/visitationapril-3/#videos).

At bottom, one of the central issues is this: Will the trail help Philipstown, Cold Spring and Nelsonville deal with the overtourism that already plagues the community? Or will it simply draw many tens of thousands more visitors and materially worsen the over-visitation?

Local officials hailed the attention the Visitation Committee is giving the matter, and the strength of its analysis. Said Cold Spring Mayor Kathleen E. Foley, "I am well aware and fully support them taking their concerns public. Our data committee members are doing the job the Trustees asked them to do – review critically, give honest assessments, keep the Board and the public informed. I'm grateful for their service."

And, a significant portion of the Committee's statement was read aloud during last week's Philipstown Town Board meeting. Town Board member Bob Flaherty noted later that the Committee had not obtained all the information it had requested.