

COMMENTARY

Needed: a plan to link Castleton to its park

By Susan Megna

Since the establishment of Earth Day in 1970, April has been a time to celebrate the environment. Pandemic life has further focused community interest in natural resources and outdoor recreation. Yet the tiny village of Castleton-on-Hudson is embroiled in a decades-long struggle to safely open its Riverfront Park for activities such as nature study, fishing, birdwatching, kayaking, and peaceful enjoyment of river views.

Castleton is a small, walkable community perched on the east bank of the Hudson River just seven miles south of Albany, part of the town of Schodack in Rensselaer County. It has an old-time intimate flavor, quality schools, solid public services, a charming library.

Unfortunately for Castleton, the active Amtrak Rensselaer/New York City corridor bifurcates its Main Street from the riverfront. Commuter trains barrel 18 times a day at speeds exceeding 100 MPH, sounding multiple high-decibel horn blasts to ward off possible accidents at the two local commercial crossings.

Castleton acquired the three-quarter-acre plot meant to become Riverfront Park through a 1994 Municipal Agreement with the state Department of Transportation. It also acquired the promise from DOT to provide safe pedestrian access across the tracks. Since then, various options for safe crossing have been floated. A pedestrian tunnel under the track is not considered structurally viable. In 2009, DOT proposed a 30-foot pedestrian bridge over the tracks. The village declined, concerned about the budgetary impact of maintenance costs.

The DOT bridge offer was reintro-

duced, with the same design, in 2021. A coalition of village residents, concerned about the utility and aesthetics of an overbearing bridge structure for the small park, are pressing for consideration of newer technologies for safe grade-level pedestrian crossing. In Illinois and San Clemente, California, Amtrak and state transportation agencies have installed at-grade crossings with automatic magnetic gates. These newer technologies are considered safe, inexpensive, and harmonious with local landscape. However, DOT has steadfastly refused to discuss such options with village officials.

As Earth Day 2022 approaches, the old DOT promise has yet to be fulfilled. The large and pricey bridge is the only option on the table, DOT insists. Village residents are divided — some say take the bridge, just to get it done so we can build the park and enjoy the river. Others want to continue to advocate for the more pleasing, newer designs for safe at-grade crossings. Frustrated village officials continue to seek consensus within the community and with the state.

But to this longtime resident, it's beginning to feel like a familiar stalemate, rooted in a lack of vision and open dialogue. Riverfront Park continues to sit, overgrown and inaccessible. The challenge of safe access across the railroad tracks exists in small communities up and down the Hudson River. Why not look into solutions that are affordable and working well in other parts of the country? New York state should be doing better.

► *Susan Megna lives in Castleton-on-Hudson.*