

# CAPITAL REGION



Lori Van Buren / Times Union

A community group held a public meeting to inform residents of the benefits of a ground-level rail crossing that would allow access to a waterfront park located beyond the rail line that runs parallel to Route 9J along the Hudson River in Castleton-on-Hudson.

## RAILROAD SAFETY

# Track crossing a longtime issue

*This Rensselaer County community had access cut off by the state in the 1990s*

By Roger Hannigan Gilson

Castleton-on-Hudson

For three decades, this village has been trying to find a way for its residents to safely access a waterfront park lined by a railroad crossing.

And the fight goes on. Last week, a community group held a public meeting to inform residents of the benefits

of a ground-level rail crossing to access the park.

The village purchased a small plot between the Amtrak/CSX rail line and the Hudson River in 1994 using matching funds from the state Department of Transportation.

During the purchase, the state DOT, village and Conrail, the freight company which then owned the tracks, agreed in court to close a vehicular crossing leading to the park over safety concerns — but only after a pedestrian tunnel was built so residents could access the land, which the village

wanted to turn into a waterfront park, according to a court order.

During the recent meeting, held by the Route to the River coalition and attended by over 50 people, coalition members laid out why there should be a ground-level pedestrian crossing. The original plan for the tunnel was rejected as not feasible, and the DOT has pushed for a pedestrian overpass, but members of the coalition said it was an awful fit for the village.

Coalition member Suzanne Cecala called the plans for a pedestrian over-

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## Top concern: safe access

### CROSSING

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pass “a blight on the landscape,” saying it would obscure the skyline and its footprint would “eat into the park area,” which is only three-quarters of an acre.

Coalition members prefer a ground-level pedestrian crossing with warning lights and fence-like gates that close when a train is approaching. Also supporting this plan is Village Board member Lissa D’Aquanni, who said the overpass would cost state taxpayers millions of dollars to construct and still saddle the village with maintenance and upkeep costs, which could be substantial, since the DOT overpass would include elevators on each side to make it Americans with Disabilities Act-accessible.

If the bridge was erected, people would still cross the tracks at ground level by other means, she added.

There are two railroad crossings in Castleton-on-Hudson, both which are privately owned, and D’Aquanni said residents in the meeting “said that

they cross at the other private crossings and walk along the tracks to the park — which of course is much more dangerous than if the village had safe at-grade crossing.”

There is also the question of whether there was reason to close the crossing in the first place.

The crossing was closed “as a safety measure,” according to the court order by Administrative Law Judge Bernard Heller. “The concern for safety is amplified by the plans of this Department for initiating a high-speed passenger rail between Albany and New York City,” the order continued.

A high-speed passenger rail was never constructed, and was, in fact, deemed not to be feasible, according to Peter Melewski, one of the contributors to a state study on high-speed rail.

“From a feasibility and economic standpoint, from Rensselaer south, the trains are not going to go faster by Castleton-on-Hudson than they are right now, which is a maximum speed of 110 mph,” he said.

The Federal Railroad

Administration currently allows ground-level pedestrian crossings at this speed, according to Melewski, who supports this kind of crossing in the village.

Melewski is also one of the authors of a white paper commissioned by local conservationist group Scenic Hudson on other options for pedestrian crossings.

The paper points to train lines in Illinois and California that have modern, ground-level pedestrian crossings.

A spokesperson for the DOT sent a statement in response to an inquiry of the feasibility of high-speed rail along the Hudson River.

“Safety is the top priority of the New York State Department of Transportation,” it says. “Trains traveling through the Village of Castleton-on-Hudson reach speeds in excess of 100 mph and in the interest of safety the at-grade rail crossing that provides access to the village’s waterfront park remains closed to both vehicles and pedestrians. NYS DOT remains willing to engage with our local partners to find a long-term solution that would provide safe access to the park.”