

Hyde Park launches initiative to transform economy, downtown

Jack Howland, Poughkeepsie Journal Published 6:00 a.m. ET Aug. 11, 2017 | Updated 4:14 p.m. ET Aug. 11, 2017



(Photo: Alex H. Wagner/Poughkeepsie Journal)

CORRECTION: Commercial property owners within the eventual Route 9 sewer district will be responsible for approving a plan and then paying taxes toward the construction of the district. This was misstated in an earlier version of the story.

HYDE PARK - The sound of hammering metal on concrete is often loud enough to make it into Linda Haag's art consignment shop along Route 9, Harvest Moon Gifts.

But, the 59-year-old said she welcomes the occasional rattles.

Each one signals progress on the Town of Hyde Park's plans to renovate its downtown pedestrian foot paths, as crews excavate the area where new, wider sidewalks and a "buffer space" lined with trees are going. The alterations are part of the Hyde Park Downtown Initiative, a multi-million-dollar undertaking to transform a historic district on a busy roadway that has long struggled to attract businesses.

Town Supervisor Aileen Rohr said the initiative seeks to do this through a multi-phase plan that she said could last a decade. The complete proposal encompasses sidewalk renovations for the two-mile stretch along Route 9 from the Hyde Park Drive-In Theater to the Vanderbilt Mansion National Historic Site, and the construction of a commercial sewer district along a one-mile stretch of Route 9.

VIDEO: Hyde Park moves forward with 'walkable center' concept (</videos/news/local/2017/07/25/video-rogers-pyatt-shellac-company/103986096/>)

APPETITE: Public's appetite for a strong Hyde Park center is clear: Editorial (</story/opinion/editorials/2017/07/18/hyde-park-center-editorial/484653001/>)

INPUT: Hyde Park seeks public input on plans for town center (</story/news/local/2017/06/11/hyde-park-seeks-public-input-plans-town-center/387108001/>)

"Phase A" of that plan, a half-mile of sidewalk improvements from the drive-in to the Hyde Park Plaza, is underway and expected to be completed in early September, with a second length of sidewalk planned to be renovated next year.

The hope is to attract visitors to downtown businesses, and attract more businesses to come to Hyde Park.

Long known for its numerous historic sites, Hyde Park drew more than 193,000 visitors last year to the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum alone, according to the National Park Service. But, Rohr said the town's businesses have often been bypassed by visitors for places with established downtown areas, such as Rhinebeck and Wappingers Falls. She envisions creating a "walkable town center" with a "main street feel" in the future.

"We have about 500,000 tourists who come to Hyde Park annually and a lot of them drive through and go, 'Wait, where's the town?'" Rohr said. "So we're trying to create those visual cues that people use to say, 'Oh, wow, I'm in this really nice historic town.'"

While the total cost of the project is to be determined, the first two phases of sidewalk construction and the commercial sewer district are estimated to cost roughly \$16.5 million, funded by a various grants, town funds and, if approved by district property owners, tax dollars. At an estimated \$14 million, the planned sewer system could be installed within the next three to five years.

As part of "Phase A," a consistent five-foot sidewalk will be created along the east side of Route 9, with the road and pedestrian path separated by a five-foot bike lane and five-foot buffer space. The phase also includes replacing drainage systems and installing a stone wall at the point where the path goes over a pond in front of the Hyde Park Antiques Center. Construction on the wall was scheduled to begin this week.

As crews work on the east side of Route 9, northbound lanes will be closed on certain weekdays — never on consecutive days — between 9 a.m. and 4 p.m. until the phase is finished.

Haag, whose store is located in that stretch, said she's hopeful the sidewalk improvements will lead to more foot traffic that will translate into business.

"People drive by here and never see it," Haag said of the six-year-old consignment shop she runs with her husband, daughter and son-in-law. "There are months when we struggle to pay the rent ... I think (the sidewalk improvements) are going to bring us business. I think it will keep our business going."

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A view of the construction happening along Route 9 in Hyde Park. (Photo: Alex H. Wagner/Poughkeepsie Journal)

However, not all residents are convinced the sidewalks will have the desired impact.

Barbara Shelton, a Hyde Park resident of more than 60 years, said what she wants to see more businesses moving into Route 9. A graduate of Franklin D. Roosevelt High School, she said it's been frustrating to watch the lack of progress on Route 9 over the years, noting she has turned to shopping in nearby municipalities like Kingston.

"So many of us (Roosevelt graduates) have not left the area, and we don't do our shopping here because there's only one Stop & Shop, no big department store of any kind or any little restaurants," Shelton said. "You really think sidewalks are going to help the Town of Hyde Park? I don't."

Rohr hopes the sewer district and increased pedestrian traffic will help make the area attractive to new businesses.

Emily Svenson, a six-year councilwoman on the Hyde Park Town Board, said the project will not just benefit tourism and the local economy, but help move the town out of its "highway business pattern," which grew around Route 9.

"What I think we're trying to achieve is something new that hasn't been in Hyde Park before," she said. "Something that respects our history but also incorporates modern elements."

Building in phases

The bulk of payment for the initiative has so far come from grants, Rohr said. The sidewalk project has been funded in part by three New York State Department of Transportation grants totaling more than \$960,000 and a New York State and Municipal Facilities Program grant of \$500,000. Town funds will make up 15 percent of funding for the entire downtown initiative, Rohr said.

For the second phase of the sidewalk project next year, which will cover the stretch between the Hyde Park Plaza and Hyde Park Firehouse, the town secured a Transportation Assistance Program grant of \$1.1 million.

And, separate from the main project, the town will use a community development block grant from the state of \$125,000 to extend the sidewalks up Pine Wood Road from its intersection with Route 9 to Pine Woods Park. Construction is expected to begin in summer 2018.

For the sewer district, the town has hired Delaware Engineering and Elan Planning using a New York State Energy, Research and Development Authority grant of \$159,000 to begin researching where a district could lie and what type of discharge system it could use, as well as conduct market analysis to see what types of commercial or residential spaces could help grow the district.

Property owners within the eventual sewer district would have to approve of a plan and then contribute funding over time through a 30-year bond included in their tax bill, Rohr said, noting commercial property owners reliant on septic systems have been asking for a sewer district for “at least 50 years.”

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A view of the construction happening along Route 9 in Hyde Park. (Photo: Alex H. Wagner/Poughkeepsie Journal)

Svenson said funding has been the biggest hurdle to accomplishing that.

"It might take five years to have a sewer system online, but you've got to start somewhere, right?" she said. "People have been talking about it for 50 years. I like to say I think we're closer than Hyde Park has ever been."

Rohr said the town submitted an application for a \$4 million grant through the Regional Economic Development Council to help fund construction of the eventual district. That's in addition to a previously awarded gift of \$1.25 million from Bellefield Development Partners and a grant of \$500,00 from the Dutchess Open Space, Farmland Preservation and Infrastructure Projects program.

Selling residents on a plan

In early June, more than 100 residents attended an open house at Hyde Park Town Hall to share their thoughts on the downtown initiative, including their housing and streetscape preferences as well as suggestions for tourist attractions. And though there were only a few comments on the sewer district, Rohr said, she expects questions to amplify as the town moves forward.

And eventually, when the plans for the sewer district are ready, which are expected to come in February 2018, property owners within the district will have to be sold on a project they'll be helping to fund.

“Only those people who benefit actually get to vote on it and have to pay for it,” Rohr said. “That’s why it has to be a very realistic plan, a very specific plan, that clearly details what the infrastructure will be and what it will cost.”

Clement Tau, the owner of Earthgoods Market, a health food store in the Hyde Park Plaza, said he believes the town’s reliance on individual septic systems has driven away businesses, contributing to the feeling of a sparse, disconnected downtown district.

“Many potential business interested in coming to Hyde Park, once they find out there’s no sewer system, they back out,” said the Hyde Park resident, whose store was in New Paltz for five years before he moved into the plaza two years ago. “We have the home of FDR here, the library here — there should be a lot more tourism in Hyde Park.”

Jack Howland: jhowland@poughkeepsiejournal.com, 845-437-4870, Twitter: @jhowl04

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