Paths for the Bridge District

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How to Build a Healthier, More Sustainable Future for the Bridge District Community

How Bridge District residents will safely access the Bronx River Greenway, accommodate new modes of transportation, ensure an active and safe pedestrian culture, and transform community access into sustained community benefits.

Existing Conditions

Mass Transit

Transit links to and from the area are limited. The 8 train is a local train and only provides for East-West service through the area before turning South at Whitehall Avenue. Though several express buses pass by the area, no express buses service the area. An Amtrak line also runs along the Bronx River, but does not provide any service.

Concrete Plant Park Access

The intersection of Westchester Avenue and Whitlock Avenue is dangerous for pedestrians and is currently the only way to access Concrete Plant Park.

One thing to do to make this intersection more safe is to integrate a pedestrian-activated crosswalk into the normal light-cycle. Trying to cross this intersection requires one to “look sharp” at almost all times. Providing pedestrians with their own dedicated time to cross will go a long way toward making them feel safer. Sidewalk width on the North side of Westchester Avenue can also be taken from the road, as added from the condemned area on the North side of the bridge.

Future development of the Greenway may also incorporate an underpass that can be reached from the North side of Westchester Avenue. This would allow pedestrians and cyclists to go under Westchester Avenue via a tunnel connecting to Concrete Plant Park from the current impound lot on the North side of the avenue.

Car Dominance

Car-dominated streets decrease pedestrian access to all other transit options. The current street design heavily favors vehicular traffic, while alternative forms of transportation, such as walking, bicycling, or skateboarding, are forced to compete with cars, often putting people in harms-way. Such simple things as clearly visible crosswalks and adequate street signs are missing at many intersections.

Empowered Community

Despite a legacy of social and environmental injustices, the Bridge District community has remained empowered and organized. Groups like Youth Ministries for Peace & Justice and the Bronx River Alliance have been featured in existing plans for the area. An additional transit option in a streetcar (light rail) track that would run next to or through any new development.

Before the days of buses and vans, streetcars rolled along city streets in many neighborhoods throughout New York. Both quiet and efficient, streetcars run on tracks tucked into the pavement and are powered by gripping a cable that is embedded in the street.

Providing a dedicated access for walking is rapid transit. The advantage of using a streetcar over other transportation types is that the motor for a streetcar track is stationary and can be tucked away anywhere along the track, usually in the most unobstructed location possible. Buses or vans run on fuel, which discharge emissions, and other types of light rail would depend on either a third rail or unsightly overhead wires.

A street car track running up the Sheridan right-of-way would serve to connect points of interest, beginning with Concrete Plant Park, the 6 train at Westchester Avenue, and Starlight Park (the existing space vacated by the Sheridan). Future Northward expansion could connect the Bronx Zoo and the New York Botanical Garden and future Southward expansion would add the proposed Hunts Point Metro North station and the Hunts Point Market. Additionally, a pedestrian bridge could connect the line to Soundview Park.

Connecting employment areas, transit hubs, cultural institutions, places of recreation, housing, and commercial areas would encourage use of the streetcar system. This, in turn, would encourage growth along the Bronx River corridor. It would also decrease car dependence by linking the various activities along the track to transportation options.

More varied uses would also serve another purpose in the Bronx River corridor: Commuters, zoo-goers, and park users would all use the streetcar at different times, keeping the entire area populated through most hours of the day. The streetcar would also aid residents in transporting groceries, laundry, or other goods from one part of the area to another, opening up a new corridor of commercial options.

Increasing the amount of eyes in a certain place decreases the opportunity for crime to occur; decreasing crime has the positive effect of encouraging use. An additional advantage of a streetcar is dedicated access. Unlike a bus or a van, light rail systems are not subject to the same traffic delays as street-based transportation.

Also, the quiet, pedestrian-centric nature of a streetcar allows the rider to enjoy the beautiful natural features of the river and the surrounding parkland. It will also connect neighborhoods and commercial areas along the riverfront.

Sheridan Right-of-Way

Many points of interest lie along the shore of the Bronx River. From the New York Botanical Garden to the North to the Hunts Point Market to the South, the Bronx River corridor has a variety of offerings for area residents.

The existing 1.25 mile long Sheridan Expressway right of way has the potential for new mixed-use buildings or green space. Both avenues of development have been featured in existing plans for the area. An additional transit option in a streetcar (light rail) track that would run next to or through any new development.

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Subway

Expand the express service on the 6 train, utilizing the existing express line. Regular service will foster usage and could lead to increased demand.

Bus

Several Express Buses travel around the Bridge District, but none stop inside the neighborhood to pick up riders. An express bus line gives workers competitive advantage for jobs and could be routed either to Westchester or to Manhattan depending on demand.

Regional Rail Service

The Amtrak line that runs along the river is part of an existing plan which would expand Metro-North service on the New Haven Line to to Hunts Point and Parkchester. Future local bus service could be rerouted to take advantage of regional rail service. Additionally, the proposed streetcar, detailed on page one could stop at the Hunts Point station. Addition of Metro-North service to the area would provide a cheap alternative to car commuting into Westchester. An alternative plan places the Metro-North station next to Concrete Plant Park, linking it both to the Greenway and to the Whitlock Avenue 6 train subway station.

Bicycle Lanes

Develop existing bicycle lanes to encourage neighborhood bicycling and link neighborhood bicycle lanes to the city-wide network. This would add as an option for more distant trips or commuting. This both decreases car dependence and helps people to become more active.

Regional Recommendations

Three Path Proposals

Concentrating on pedestrian safety should go hand in hand with any plan to increase access to the Greenway from the streets. Creating a safe environment increases opportunities for use. Increasing usage will make the Greenway safer.

174th Street Bridge

The Greenway will be completed in phases, and Phase 1 includes the completion of Starlight Park. Therefore, the existing entrances to Starlight Park are the best place to start. The entrances to Starlight Park are located on the North and South sides of the 174th Street bridge.

- Replace the wide median down the center of the bridge roadway with a narrower, higher, visually reflective barrier.
- Use roadway space gained by the alteration to install protected bicycle lanes, visually dividing auto traffic from bike and pedestrian traffic.
- Accentuate security of the pedestrian paths with a string of pedestrian level lamp posts along each side of the bridge. Similar redesigns in other areas of the Bronx have been funded and implemented by the New York City Department of Transportation.
- Add security provisions to ramp from the 174th Street Bridge into Starlight Park.
- Police call boxes on the bridge.
- A future Underpass redesign.

Westchester Avenue

Two streets that can be used by people to access the Greenway are Westchester Avenue and Bronx River Avenue. These streets could be made more pedestrian-friendly, which would encourage pedestrian use. For Westchester Avenue:

- The exterior lanes should include traffic-calming measures, such as curb build-outs at business entrances and sidewalks that are wider than the exterior car lanes.
- The traffic-calmed outer lanes could also be used as public space for Green Markets and Street Fairs on certain days.
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Bryant River

- Bronx River Avenue provides for more lanes than the existing traffic needs. Reducing the roadway from four lanes to two free space that can be used for a promenade to draw people into the Greenway.
- Features of a promenade include a broader sidewalk, a planting strip, a dedicated two-way bike lane and pedestrian-friendly, human-scale street lighting.
- The redesigned sidewalk should make use of permeable pavement, which will aid in stormwater management.

Safe Lanes for Bicycles

The lone existing bicycle lane in the Bridge District runs along 174th Street from Bronx Avenue on the Western side to the Bronx River Parkway on the Eastern side. Expanding the network of bicycle lanes transforms cycling from a form of recreation to a useful activity. Giving someone a place to cycle is the best way to encourage bicycling in general.

- Secured bike routes will provide safety and encourage bike use, which will in turn encourage future Greenway access.
- One goal is the creation of a continuous and safe North–South bicycle lane along the Bronx River Avenue corridor from 174th Street to connect with the Greenway pathways where they end at Soundview Park. And since riders may want to return to their homes by a different route, a similar North–South bicycle lane along the streets bordering the Bronx River Parkway creates a varied and continuous ‘loop’ around the area.

- Additional lanes on Elder or Boynton add the possibility of subway access, and connect riders to the commercial area on Westchester Avenue.

Priority for Pedestrians

Pedestrian Plaza

All paths will lead to a plaza at the intersection of Evergreen St., 172nd Street and Bronx River Avenue. The New York City Department of Transportation has recently introduced an initiative to create new pedestrian plazas throughout the city to reinvigorate existing public spaces, and create new spaces in areas with potential.

The 172nd Street location is an ideal plaza space. Development of a pedestrian-friendly bridge at 172nd Street that will provide access to the greenway is already in the works and an adjacent plaza at 172nd Street would capitalize on the broad public area where numerous streets already intersect.

- Including traffic-calming measures to balance the needs of vehicles and pedestrians will create a long-term point of access to the Greenway.

Simple Strategies

- Simple things, like adding street lights at places where there is just a stop sign (like some intersections of Westchester Avenue) or repainting faded pedestrian signs, could be used to distinguish the neighborhood from other areas.

- Another method that could be used to distinguish the neighborhood from other areas would be to create a banner or logo designed by neighborhood children. The banners could hang from lamp posts or in other places along the Greenway.

- Having a neighborhood ‘brand’ for the Bridge District would help to motivate residents for future goals.

Design Alternatives

These district-specific lamp posts could be created via a design competition voted upon by the community, or perhaps as a project for local highschools. New York City recently undertook such a design competition for new city street lights.

Sources and References

Bronx River Alliance
New York City Department of Transportation
Transportation Alternatives
South Bronx Greenway Plan: City of New York, NYCEDC, Sustainable South Bronx, The Point CDC

Regional Planning Association
New York City DOT
NYCDEP
NYMT
Youth Ministries for Peace & Justice