

JERSEY LINE



A FRAMEWORK PLAN BY MNLA LAYS A PATH FOR A NINE-MILE GREENWAY ALONG A DEFUNCT RAIL LINE.

BY JARED BREY

The Essex-Hudson Greenway in northern New Jersey exists now in a state of latency. The former railway line runs through some of the densest suburban space in America. It crosses the Garden State Parkway, the Passaic and Hackensack Rivers, and the New Jersey Meadowlands, and it terminates in Jersey City, a short train ride from Lower Manhattan. Its potential as recreational infrastructure is so blatant that the Open Space Institute (OSI) had to tread a fine line of expectation building, even as it has worked to help acquire the property on behalf of the state.

The trick, says Dene Lee, the land projects director at OSI, was to “create materials that would capture the imagination of people that were seeing this for the first time, but not be so detailed or fleshed out that it looks like a completed vision, and they haven’t had any input in it.”

In the spring of 2020, OSI turned to MNLA to create a framework plan for the nine-mile line. The firm made an inventory of existing condi-

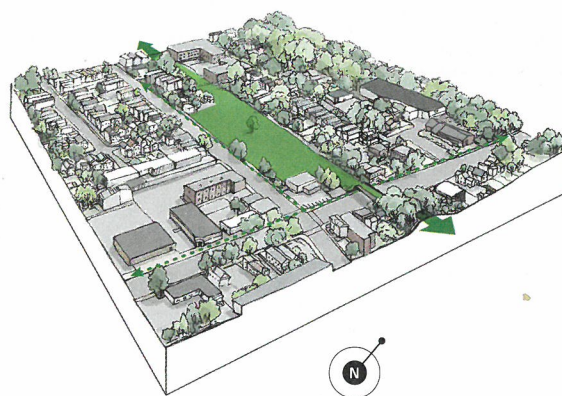
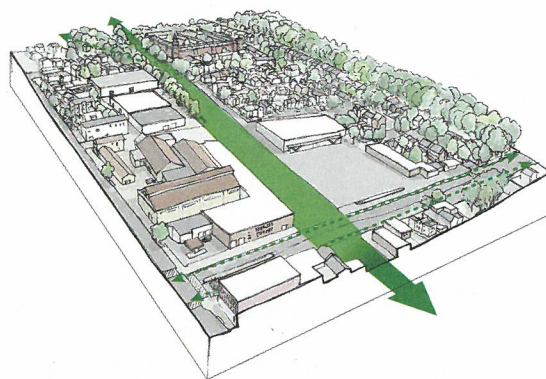
tions, identified nodes for neighborhood access and connections to other trails, analyzed stormwater flows, and made maps and renderings to illustrate the space that was already there. Even people who live close to the line often had seen those spaces only by train, if they’d seen them at all. MNLA also hired the engineering firm Arup to help assess the 30 bridges that the line crosses.



ABOVE
The Open Space Institute hired MNLA to make a framework plan for converting an abandoned railway in northern New Jersey into a public greenway.

RIGHT
Most of the area had only been seen from a train window, if at all. MNLA’s job was to illustrate what was already there.

MNLA



ABOVE AND BELOW

The greenway will cross two counties, eight municipalities, and a variety of ecosystems, from woodlands to wetlands.

"We walked the site and we were just blown away," says Molly Bourne, ASLA, a principal at MNLA. "Some of it is grown over. Some of it is coming back and succession is taking over. Other parts of it, you're just on an abandoned bridge.... You're basically going from upland woodlands to a very industrial section and then you're in this river maritime landscape. It's a fascinating gradient."

campaign that's been in the works for years to make the trail into usable public space. It was a unique approach for MNLA, which is used to taking projects from concept through to construction. Bourne says they approached the project like students, and it became "a happy place for us to put our energy" during the early months of the pandemic.

The line is narrow in some spots and as wide as 150 feet in others, with all the potential of a park and not just a trail, Bourne says. MNLA had just a few months to put together the framework plan, which was used as part of a

In November, New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy announced a commitment of \$65 million to help acquire the land for the greenway, which is named for the two counties it passes through. Eventually it will connect to both the East Coast Greenway, a planned pedestrian and bike path from Maine to Florida, and the 9/11 National Memorial Trail, a 1,300-mile path connecting the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and the Flight 93 Memorial in southwestern Pennsylvania.

Landscape architects brought a perspective to the framework plan that engineers and other consultants couldn't capture, says Peter Karis, OSI's vice president for parks and stewardship.

It's helped to inspire the public to see the project through. People are used to seeing the line a piece at a time, often as a barrier to be crossed. In a few years' time, he hopes, they'll be running and biking out on the bridges, 80 feet above the Passaic River. "It's quite amazing and gives people a whole new perspective of where they live," Karis says. ●

