



The state signed off an environmental review of a proposed 7.5-mile accessible trail connecting existing paths in the Hudson Highlands Monday, including Breakneck Ridge, pictured above.

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COLD SPRING — On Tuesday, the state Office of Parks, Recreation and Historical Preservation signed off on a massive document examining the potential impacts of a controversial trail along the eastern shore of the Hudson River in the lower Hudson Valley, despite pushback from some environmental groups and a citizens' nonprofit.

The Hudson Highlands Fjord Trail includes a 7.5-mile main path along the river; 2.8 miles of meanders, banks and water trail connections; 2.2 miles of regional trail connections; two new parking areas; the expansion of a third parking area outside Cold Spring; restroom buildings at five locations; and a maintenance facility in Beacon.

The document, an Environmental Impact Statement, assesses a project's potential adverse effects on people and the environment. In the 1,000-plus-page report, the state addressed some of the impacts but said there were some it could not mitigate, many of which opponents have also noted.

Nevertheless, supporters of the project say they now have the green light to "fully implement the vision of the Fjord Trail expressed in the project's master plan."

Hudson Highlands Fjord Trail Inc., the nonprofit subsidiary of Scenic Hudson that is in charge of the project's construction and its maintenance, has billed the project as a solution to safety concerns surrounding visitation. They claim that the Fjord Trail provides "welcoming access to people of all abilities" and "restores and protects natural resources and enhances quality of life for local communities."

In a statement, the nonprofit said the state had "considered the relevant environmental impacts, facts, and conclusions disclosed in the (environmental review) ... and certifies that adverse environmental impacts will be avoided or minimized to the maximum extent practicable."

The Fjord Trail has attracted controversy for many reasons. Its construction would involve disturbing about 56 acres of woodlands and other natural environments, including chopping down trees. Two half-mile sections of the trail would run over the Hudson River on an elevated boardwalk, which would be constructed with barges and cranes. Residents of Cold Spring also fear their village being mobbed by visitors. The trail would attract an additional 269,000 visitors annually, according to state parks.

In an interview, Amy Kacala, executive director of Hudson Highlands Fjord Trail, said the nonprofit designed the trail as “visitation management” and said the system would disperse how hikers enter trails, with many able to bypass Cold Spring.

A draft version of the Environmental Impact Statement was released on Dec. 4, 2024, and the public could comment on it until March 4, 2025. More than 650 comments were received.

The unavoidable potential adverse impacts include impacts on federally regulated wetlands; the temporary loss of aquatic habitat, including for the endangered Atlantic sturgeon; and sediment disturbance in the Hudson River and Fishkill Creek during construction. Long-term potential impacts include the construction of up to 23 acres of impervious surfaces; the potential permanent disturbance of 54 acres of natural habitats; additional traffic in intersections in Cold Spring and Philipstown; potential impacts to wildlife; and the disturbance of wetlands.

Many of these issues were brought up by groups and individuals in their comments, which were included in the document.

The environmental group Riverkeeper wrote that it agreed with the notion of expanding public access to nature, but disagreed with many elements of the plan, including building a bridge over Fishkill Creek. The group wrote that the elevated boardwalk along the Hudson would “restrict natural tidal flow, disrupt sediment transport and contribute to localized erosion and habitat degradation.” They also feared disturbances to protected or endangered species from the trail’s construction and increased visitation.

Riverkeeper instead argues that the trail should be constructed further inland to make use of an existing bridge and built with no impervious surfaces.

Rebecca Schultz of the National Audubon Society wrote in her comments that, “Overall, we support the purpose of the Hudson Highlands Fjord Trail and the need to address the very high visitation to Hudson Highlands State Park Preserve and the surrounding area,” adding that during the pandemic, the Constitution Marsh Audubon Center & Sanctuary, which is located just south of the proposed trail “experienced overcrowding, creating untenable conditions with illegal parking, trespassing, public safety concerns, and trail erosion.”

Stating the area included the habitats of multiple endangered and protected birds, including bald eagles, cerulean warblers and pied-billed grebes, the Audubon Society suggested that “wetlands disturbance should be avoided entirely or minimized to the furthest extent possible.” The nonprofit also expressed concern about the “scale” of the boardwalk over the Hudson, writing that “the persistent presence of people will cause regular and recurring disturbance to waterfowl and other shoreline wildlife.”

Not all environmental groups took issue with aspects of the trail. Matt Decker, the Northeast senior land project manager for the Open Space Institute, said his organization was an “enthusiastic supporter of the Fjord Trail” as it “will offer greater access to the riverfront and connecting trails to all users,” including “families, people with disabilities, seniors,” and people not comfortable tackling challenging terrain.

A group of residents from the area formed the nonprofit Protect the Highlands to express opposition to the trail and how it might affect Philipstown, which includes the village of Cold Spring. They were not pleased about how their misgivings were addressed in the environmental impact statement.

Dave Merandy, president of the nonprofit and the former mayor of Cold Spring, said in the beginning, the project “was actually community-driven” and was “about solving an issue instead of making it an attraction.” The group was not against the project in theory but was opposed to how it had been designed, stating in their comments that the project should be “abandoned.”

Grace Kennedy, the nonprofit’s vice president, said one of the main issues the project was trying to solve — hikers walking to trailheads along the 55-mph Route 9D — was a non-issue after the town eliminated parking along the state route. On Jan. 10, a Sunday when temperatures neared 50 degrees, no pedestrians were visible along Route 9D.

The group was also concerned about increased visitation to the town. Cold Spring is the southern terminus of the trail and would be the first point that downstate visitors would come upon when seeking to use it.

“We already have a traffic problem,” Kennedy said.

Suggested improvements

The impact statement suggested making improvements to and around three intersections in Cold Spring to mitigate the additional traffic. One of these involves constructing a turning lane at the intersection of Route 9D and Main Street, but this would involve eliminating on-street parking that residents use, Merandy said.

“It flies in the face of existing conditions and reality,” he said.

The Washburn lot just north of Cold Spring would be expanded during the project’s construction, but would become a paid lot, further hampering resident parking, Merandy said.

There were no plans to expand the lot during the first phase of the project, though it could be in subsequent phases, according to the Hudson Highlands Fjord Trail group.

Cold Spring Mayor Kathleen Foley wrote state parks and requested an additional public hearing when the environmental impact statement was released, but before the state issued its written findings. No such hearing was held.

State parks referred the Times Union back to its findings statement when sent a list of questions about the proposed trail.

Kacala said they did not know the total cost of the project, but the Breakneck Connector — which is related to the Fjord Trail, but underwent a separate environmental review and is already under construction — will cost \$100 million.

In its findings, state parks wrote that “the project will achieve a balance between the protection of the environment and the need to accommodate social and economic considerations.” The project is anticipated to be completed in 2031.