

## Long-planned super highway may yield to greenway

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He may not have fully expected it, but Victor DeMasi may live to see a green phoenix rising along a failed highway corridor.

In the 1980s and 1990s, DeMasi, a Redding resident, was one of the people who helped stop plans for Super 7 -- a limited access multi-lane highway between Danbury and Norwalk.

If the state Department of Transportation had been allowed to build it, the road would have run right next to his house.

It would have also skirted the Weir Farm property in Ridgefield -- now the state's only national historic site -- and ruined some beautiful woods, limestone glens, and places like the pastel green meadow near the Norwalk River across the street from near DeMasi's house.

"It's the last piece of land like this," he said of the river's floodplain that's been, over the years, largely covered with either asphalt or buildings.

For a variety of reasons -- political, environmental, financial and cultural -- Super 7 was never built. And unless there's a grand reversal of public policy and sentiment, it never will be.

But now, representatives from the five towns along the Super 7 corridor -- Danbury, Norwalk, Redding, Ridgefield and Wilton -- are planning a different future for the 890-acre corridor.

They want to build the Norwalk River Valley Trail, a greenway with a walking/biking trail that would run the 15 miles between Danbury and Norwalk.

We've been waiting for a highway for 50 years," said Patrica Sesto, a Ridgefield resident who is Wilton's environmental director and the head of the trail committee. "Let's free it up for other uses."

There are firm expectations the project will get a \$180,000 state grant to pay for actually plotting a route along the corridor -- an 18-month study that will only be a prelude to the years of work needed to actually build the trail.

But area leaders say the greenway, once completed, will offer residents a huge enhancement in what the area offers.

"It's a very exciting proposal," said Ridgefield First Selectman Rudy Marconi, a member of a group of people who began to reconsider the use of the Super 7 corridor in the 1990s.

"I think, in the next 50 years, this will be such an asset to the towns they won't be able to imagine being without it," Marconi said this month

"We see this time and time again," said John Monroe, a National Parks Service planner who spoke to the trail committee this month about the popularity of greenways. "From the day they are opened, they're full."

And there are grander ideas afoot.

At its northern end, the Norwalk River Valley Trail could easily intersect with the Ives Trail -- the almost-complete 15-mile trail that will run from Redding to Danbury to Ridgefield.

To its south, it could cross the greenway trail planned to run along the Merritt Parkway.

The Merritt Parkway Trail, in turn, is included in plans for the 3,000-mile East Coast Greenway, which is envisioned to run from eastern Maine to the tip of Florida. A well-provisioned citizen of northern Fairfield County could leave home and, by pedaling and walking, end up in Bangor or Key West.

"Connections are always nice," said Mike Cunningham, of Danbury, who is one of the main architects of the Ives Trail and is now on the Norwalk River Valley trail committee.

Even state Sen. Robert Duff, D-Norwalk -- the most vocal proponent of building Super 7 -- supports the idea of building a greenway trail along the corridor. He just thinks there should be a road there, too.

"To use the entire corridor for a trail, that's a little over the top," he said.

The idea of creating a greenway along the corridor was born out of the opposition to the Super 7 project.

DeMasi said to understand what Super 7 would be, people have to disabuse themselves of the thought it would simply be the existing Route 7, only bigger.



Instead, he said, it would be a big, zigzagging highway that goes from ridge to ridge along the Norwalk River Valley. The existing Route 7 would be flooded by the flood control dam on the Norwalk River.

The first opposition group -- Citizens for a Sensible 7 -- was formed in the 1980s to stop the highway's development.

"All the towns had different reasons," said former Redding First Selectman Mary Ann Guitar. "For Redding, it would have meant a connector at Old Redding Road -- wrecking the library, the Town Hall, the churches -- going over to Route 58. It was nothing anyone could ever support."

The Super 7 plans would take the highway through many of the wetlands in the valley. In return, the DOT promised to do mitigation work and create new wetlands.

DeMasi said everyone assumed there was little wildlife of note in those wetlands.

He decided to find out. Recruiting naturalists from many fields, he compiled a Route 7 Expressway Natural Inventory, cataloguing all the species people could find, which included 19 species of note. "I'm one of the few people who have walked the entire route," he said.

In 1999, when Gov. John G. Rowland announced the state was no longer willing to build the highway, that idea moved from the visionary to the possible.

And now, with a greenway committee -- the first group to include members from all five towns in the route -- it may take concrete steps toward becoming a reality.

However, the planning process itself will take 18 months. And Pat Sesto said people have to realize that the DOT does not own the entire corridor. There is a lot of privately owned land along the way.

Monroe, of the National Parks Service, advised the planning committee to learn "to be more patient than you ever thought you could be."

"But at some point, you're going to have to be impatient," he added, "and pound your fist on the table when you're dealing with bureaucracies."

"It will take longer than you expected," Monroe said. "But it will be better than you expected."

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