

Plans for freight lines suspended

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AREA -- Plans to revitalize two railroad freight lines in the heart of Union County are suspended, according to county officials.

The downturn in the nation's economy, combined with state funding cutbacks for vital sections of the 14-mile project, left the county with little choice but to recommend to the state Department of Transportation that the project be temporarily suspended, said Al Faella, Union County's director of economic development.

Plans developed by the DOT called for restoring the old Staten Island Railroad from Linden to Cranford and the Rahway Valley Line from Cranford to Summit. The county, acting as an agent for the state Department of Transportation, contracted with the Morristown & Erie Railway for the rehabilitation work.

While the SIRR is nearly finished, with installation of railroad crossing signals the last major component left to be done, little of the Rahway Valley Line was rehabilitated. In addition to extensive track work, the RVL's rail crossing on Route 22 in Union had to be redone and three missing bridges in Springfield and Summit had to be replaced.

However, recent state budget cutbacks eliminated funding for the Route 22 crossing, Mr. Faella said. Without that crossing, it would be impossible for the M&E to service the Union industrial area, which economic development officials believed had the greatest potential for utilizing a revitalized freight line, Mr. Faella said.

Under the plan, the M&E, which runs short haul freight lines in Morris County, as well as in Pennsylvania and Maine, would have been able to transport small freight loads from central Union County towns out to Bound Brook, where the rail cars would be transferred to the long-distance haulers such as Norfolk-Southern.

The M&E also planned to transport pelletized plastic from plants in Linden to Morris County, where several plastic manufacturing facilities are located. In Summit, the old Rahway Valley right-of-way joined the active rail line of NJ Transit's Morristown Line a short distance east of the Summit Train Station.

Residents of Summit and other communities -- including many whose properties were adjacent to the dormant right-of-way -- had fought the reactivation project.

Mr. Faella said county officials met with state transportation officials some weeks ago to discuss the situation.

"This really isn't the climate right now. We told them, 'Why don't we put things on hold for awhile,' and they agreed," Mr. Faella said. "So everything is on hold. It just doesn't make sense at this point to throw more money at the project after considering the economic climate."

Union County Manager George Devanney said it will be up to the state to determine when work on the project resumes.

"This has been a state project from day one, with Union County acting only as a conduit and overseer. When the state decided it wanted to revitalize the two freight lines, the county's interest was simply to protect local residents as much as possible," Mr. Devanney said.

The rail revitalization project was expected to be operational along the SIRR portion by June, according to Gordon Fuller, chief operating officer with the Morristown & Erie Railway.

The M&E's plans called for utilizing the SIRR to haul materials from Linden and Roselle out to Cranford, and then use NJ Transit's Raritan Valley Line to move the freight cars to Bound Brook, where they would be handed off to a major carrier, such as Norfolk Southern.

The other major component to the M&E's proposal was to repair the Rahway Valley Line, from Cranford to Summit.

While the M&E initially began repair work on both the SIRR and the Rahway Valley Line, the state ultimately restricted all recent funding for the project to be used only for the SIRR portion.

The state has given no indication when work would resume on the Rahway Valley Line.