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FROM THE FIELD

# PATH OF RESISTANCE

**There are those who believe that public greenways are a wave of the future.  
But don't tell that to the voters of Manchester.**

To outdoors enthusiasts and environmentally minded planners in Manchester, it looked like a windfall—a generous federal grant to turn an abandoned rail line that runs through town into a public greenway with a path for jogging and bicycling. Sure, the project would cost local taxpayers something, but the feds would pay 80 percent of the land purchase and development. Manchester was the envy of its neighbors.

But the announcement of more layoffs at United Technologies last December had a chilling effect on any new public expenditures, especially the greenway proposal. And a furor began about that time when certain homeowners whose back yards abut the rail line raised

fears of vandalism and loss of privacy. Other residents were incensed at the profits being sought by Rail Line Associates, the present owners of the property. In an editorial last December, Manchester's *Journal Inquirer* called the price being demanded by Rail Line Associates (about \$400,000 for 10 acres) "outrageous" and urged voters to "run a stake through the heart of this fiscal vampire."

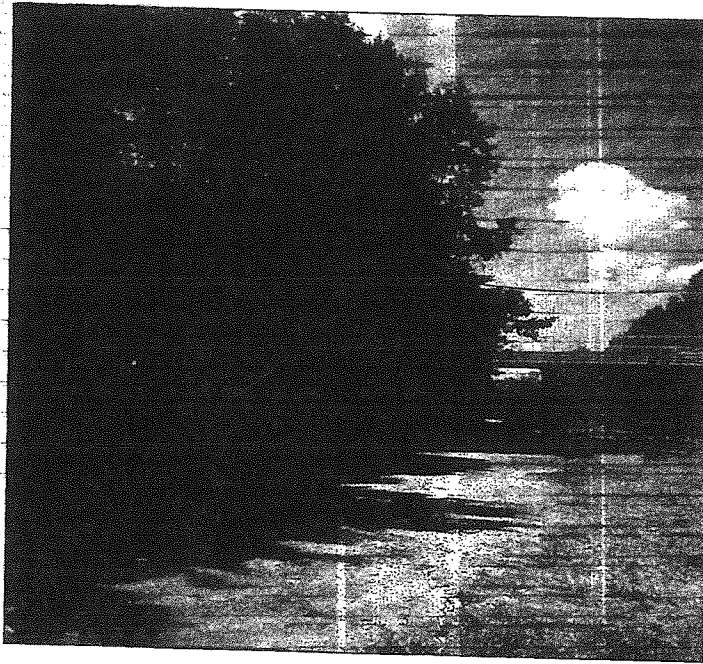
Since then, partisan politics, name-calling and innuendo have muddied the debate—until what began as a forward-look-

ing, if belated, effort to preserve a historic corridor through the center of town erupted into a maelstrom of anger, fear and greed.

At the center of the controversy has been the rail line itself—built 124 years ago by the Cheney Brothers Manufacturing Co., the nation's largest producer of silk products until its demise following World War II. The 2.4-mile-long rail line begins at the neatly laid-out complex of red brick mill buildings that still stands today on the south side of Manchester. From there, the rail line cuts north through the heart of town. In the old days, the tracks hooked up with the main railroad and carried the precious silk cargos that were the

lifeblood of Manchester—known in those days as Silk Town. Now the tracks are gone, sold for scrap.

Few townspeople use the abandoned right of way these days. On a snowy day last March, for instance, the only footprints to be seen belonged to a few homeless men encamped under a trestle. Summer brought a verdant tangle of bushes and weeds. The grade continues, level and straight, behind apartment buildings, shops, a hospital and private homes. Its route across the middle of a town that has sprawled rather haphazardly in the past half-century gives it a strategic position on the town map—as well as in the town's heritage.



Among those most dismayed by the outcry against the greenway plan has been its chief proponent, Bill O'Neill, a partner in the engineering firm Fuss and O'Neill. Pointing to a map that his firm has prepared, O'Neill has insisted from the beginning that the abandoned railway should be viewed in its larger context, rather than as an isolated strip of land. Its route through downtown Manchester could provide a safe corridor between municipal parks to the north—Union Pond Park and the Hockanum River Linear Park—and the newly approved regional bikeway to the south, being built by the DOT. Known as the Charter Oak Greenway, the new trail will follow Interstate 384 into Hartford and tie

into the Connecticut River park system.

Not only would the proposed greenway path connect these local and regional trail systems, says O'Neill, but its route past apartment complexes and across bus lines would allow it to meet real transportation needs. O'Neill avoids the term "bikeway," preferring to view it as a "multiuse, multimodal transportation/recreation corridor" that would encourage commuters and shoppers to leave their cars at home—exactly what the federal grant is designed to accomplish.

The path would consist of a 10-foot-wide strip of asphalt and

ROBERT BENSON

▲ A curve in the ill-fated Manchester greenway.

BY DAVID MORSE

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4 feet of stone dust—the asphalt for bicyclists, rollerbladers and wheelchair users; the stone dust for walkers and runners. Shrubbery and intervals of basketweave fencing would help screen the back yards of abutting properties. No motor vehicles would be allowed except for emergency use.

The 54-year-old O'Neill's careful manner—his neatly cropped white hair and gold-rimmed glasses, his flat engineer's lexicon dotted with catch phrases like "access points" and "wheelchair-friendly geometry"—betrays his passion on the subject. He has donated hundreds of hours to the project, preparing preliminary engineering studies and maps, and appearing at public forums.

He keeps half a dozen copies of Charles E. Little's *Greenways for America* circulating among friends and acquaintances, and speaks admiringly of the pioneering work of Frederick Law Olmsted. It was Olmsted, a Hartford native, who first developed the concept of greenways—green corridors through urban areas, narrow in many places but bulging outward to include fully developed parks so as to resemble, as someone has said, a python that has swallowed a litter of pigs. Olmsted left his visionary mark in the form of green swaths for urban dwellers to enjoy from Berkeley to New York and Boston. Taking their cues from Olmsted, O'Neill and others are working to create in eastern Connecticut a network of bike trails and greenways for future generations to enjoy.

But it is not easy to sell a vision in Manchester. The present recessionary climate notwithstanding, one senses that this town has never recovered from the loss of its Cheney mills. The company was a lulling presence. It epitomized the benevolent paternalism for which the New England textile industry was famous, dominating the town's economic and political life, and providing many of the services we associate today with the public sector: schools, libraries, roads, sewers and affordable housing. And although the stately red brick buildings with green trim have been recycled—the spinning mill with its ornate clock tower, the velvet mills, weaving mills and ribbon mills, all turned into apartments—and are humming again, this time with the sound of vacuum cleaners and air conditioners, the town has a decided lack of vision when it comes to public space.

Among the most vocal of O'Neill's critics has been Joe Rafala, who spearheaded opposition to the greenway plan. Rafala, whose back yard abuts the abandoned railway, has raised fears among his fellow abutters that the path would attract motorcyclists, vandals, Peeping Toms, muggers and other criminals, and that it would

undercut property values as well as compromise privacy.

"When you buy a house," says Rafala, who is 66 and retired, "you want to buy it because you got the school, you got the church, you got the shopping center, and you got your privacy—or you wouldn't have bought. A lot of people here are very fearful of this bike trail."

Rafala was quick to dismiss as "public relations" a report issued last March by a study committee on which he himself served. After studying greenways elsewhere in the region, the committee concluded that greenways did not cause a decline in the value of abutting or nearby properties—that, if anything, values were enhanced. Addressing the issue of crime, the committee found "no conclusive evidence of a direct correlation between bikeways and types or amounts of criminal activity."

The blunt-spoken Rafala was not convinced by these findings. He cast suspicion on Bill O'Neill's motives, suggesting that O'Neill's engineering firm would get a piece of the action if the plan were to go forward. "He doesn't look like a bicycle enthusiast to me," says Rafala, who gets his exercise on a stationary bike in his basement.

O'Neill has stated publicly that his firm would not accept remuneration for any future work on the project. "It's not a tax write-off," O'Neill says jokingly of his volunteer effort, "it's an affliction." His family includes avid bicyclists and greenway advocates.

But apart from Rafala's avowed worries over privacy and safety and his suspicions in general, there is another, perhaps more pressing, concern: the economic toll. And it is purse-strings issues that have carried the most weight with Manchester taxpayers since the decline of the Cheney mills.

Rafala and others are also still smarting over the way that fellow abutter Al Reale acquired the property in the first place. Back in 1987, when word got out that Conrail was going to offer the surplus rail line to the town for \$200,000, Reale raised the alarm among his neighbors up and down the right of way. With their support and the argument that the price was too high, he persuaded the town's governing body, the Board of Directors, to pass up the purchase. Then, with a partner, he bought the property himself from Conrail for the same price—\$200,000.

"I bought it as an investment," he says. A small round man with a soft voice and velvety touch who came here from Italy as a child, Reale does not show his 84 years. Of the original 12-acre strip, he took a small piece for himself and sold off a 2-acre parcel for \$110,000. Then last March his

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partnership was awarded \$220,000 in easements from Northeast Utilities for existing poles on the right of way. (Reale has called this his "ace in the hole.") Even so, he hoped to sell the remaining 10 acres to the town for a price tag that might come to \$400,000.

Rafala burns at this. "Greed got the better of him," he said of Reale in an April interview. "He wants to double his money, on less land than he started with."

The cost of acquiring the 12-acre strip of land needed for the greenway has been estimated at \$500,000, for which the town has been awarded a \$400,000 grant from ISTEA (Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act) to cover 80 percent. Cost of construction is expected to run another \$843,000, of which 80 percent would also be paid by ISTEA. The town's share of the total cost for acquisition and construction would come to about \$270,000.

O'Neill and other proponents have claimed that the town's share could be raised without dipping into tax revenues—on the basis of the sale of easements, in-kind services and private contributions. Manchester's director of planning, Mark Pellegrini, maintained this was still true even after Reale sold the easements to Northeast Utilities, although he admitted the task would be more difficult.

Joe Rafala argued that the money was more likely to come out of taxpayers' pockets. He thought that the cost of purchasing the land would exceed planners' estimates, or that maintenance and capital costs would show up in the town budget. Rafala's own motives might be suspect in some eyes. In what one imagines was an unguarded moment, he mentioned to this reporter that if the greenway project were killed and if the bank then foreclosed on Reale—who reportedly hasn't made a payment since 1991—the abutters would then be able to buy pieces of the land at well below the asking price.

Last winter, Rafala mounted a petition drive to impose a moratorium on the project for five years, and collected more than 1,600 signatures—enough to force a referendum.

O'Neill called this a "thinly veiled kiss of death," since the federal monies would disappear if Manchester voted against the project. He collected enough signatures to get a cautiously worded counter-referendum on the ballot—directing town officials to build the greenway, but stipulating that no local tax revenues be used.

Voters in this fiscally conservative blue-collar town remained wary. And in April they were further shaken by the news that UTC's Pratt & Whitney division was contemplating the shutdown of two-and-a-half plants—which would throw an additional

2,300 people out of work.

In May, the two competing referenda went to the voters. The greenway proposal lost by a three-to-two margin.

Joe Rafala was triumphant following the vote. "This is not the proper time to be talking about bike trails or anything else," he said. He noted that Al Reale had put up "for sale" signs on the property.

Bill O'Neill said after the vote that the idea of a greenway might have been "too soon" for Manchester residents. His new strategy, he said, would be to focus on expanding the Charter Oak greenway system being built by the DOT, "so that two years from now we'll have an operating success story." He was optimistic that some civic-minded individual would acquire the Cheney rail line and keep it intact for future development. "Municipal recreation programs have to be in place for hard times," he said. "When money for travel runs out, people return to the parks."

Greenways proponents elsewhere in the state take consolation from the fact that Manchester's loss will be some other town's gain. "There are lots of municipalities that want that money," observes environmental lawyer Russ Brenneman.

Brenneman co-chairs a special Governor's Greenways Committee, appointed by Gov. Lowell Weicker last year in response to a recommendation from the Council on Environmental Quality. The committee is expected to issue its draft report this month, and in it to recommend ways the state can encourage the development of greenways statewide.

"When you look at the total mosaic," says Brenneman, "we've got a lot of open space"—not only state, federal and municipal parks, but land held by land conservancies and water companies, as well as river frontage and abandoned railroad rights of way. One of the ways the state can support local projects, he says, is to "identify and enable linkages."

For example, he cites a canal-to-greenway project in North Haven and Hamden being developed under the auspices of the Trust for Public Land, which is now being linked with New Haven to the south, and with the Farmington Canal greenway to the north—which in turn could connect with railroad rights of way clear to the Massachusetts border. "Wouldn't it be great if we could ride a bike from New Haven to Massachusetts?" he asks, predicting that such a greenway will be a reality in another 10 years.

Like O'Neill, Brenneman says he was "very disappointed" at the Manchester vote, but he observes that the federal dollars will be used elsewhere in the state. "It's a setback for Manchester," he says, "but not for greenways."

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