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Northampton sheriff serves up safe Halloween fun

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EASTERN SHORE NEWS

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Debate rages on whether railroad tracks on Virginia Shore are an economic boon or harm

FULL STEAM AHEAD?

Maddie Aiken

Salisbury Daily Times

USA TODAY NETWORK – DELMARVA

Railroad tracks on Virginia’s Eastern Shore that span from Hallwood to Cape Charles are currently being removed — but advocates are still pushing for railroad revival.

The railroad, which hasn’t been in operation since 2018, has been the subject of community debate for years.

Railroad revivalists claim the railroad could have future economic and ecological benefits, while those who think the railroad’s operating days are over believe the railroad has proven it is no longer an asset for the Eastern Shore.

On Oct. 5, the Accomack-Northampton Transportation District Commission voted to begin removing the railroad’s tracks. The same month, the Rail Enterprise Group, a corporate entity that operates four short lines, released a proposal to revitalize the rail corridor.

New York, Philadelphia and Norfolk Railroad, a charitable organization that supports the railroad’s revitalization, called on the transportation commission to delay removal of tracks upon the release of the proposal. The group was named after a former rail line by the same name.

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Snow falls along the railroad tracks in Exmore, Va., in 2016.

SALISBURY DAILY TIMES FILE IMAGE

Virginia maps out plan for COVID-19 shots for kids

Monique Calello

Staunton News Leader

USA TODAY NETWORK – DELMARVA

RICHMOND – Dr. Rochelle Walensky, the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, gave the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 pediatric vaccine the final clearance on Tuesday night, Nov. 2.

Virginia will receive its first weekly allotment of 377,000 doses of the pediatric vaccine through Nov. 9. This is more than half of the 723,000 children between the ages of 5- to 11-years-old in the state.

“When you ask parents, where they are most comfortable bringing their children, they will tell you, pediatricians and pharmacists,” said Dr. Danny Avula, Virginia state vaccine coordinator.

With this in mind, pediatricians have been prioritized to receive the vaccine. Of the 377,000 doses, 252,000 doses are going to pediatricians’ offices as part of the first wave and 105,000 doses are going to pharmacies via the federal pharmacy retail program as part of the second wave of vaccine distribution.

Availability will open up over the next few days, said Avula. The Virginia Department of Health added a module specific to registering children 5- to 11-year-old at vaccinate.virginia.gov, and Avula recommends that parents keep checking back periodically.

“The supply is going to more than meet the current demand,” said Avula. “The appointments should come very shortly.”

Nine sites around the state designated as community vaccination centers will also begin to administer pediatric vaccines this week, receiving 7% of the first week’s allotment. Health departments have also received a small percentage of the doses.

The Virginia Department of Health is asking people to make appointments but all of the vaccination clinics will accept walk-ins. If you walk up and they can’t accommodate you, they will schedule an appointment with you for the following week, said Avula.

A third of the adult dose at 10 micrograms, the Pfizer pediatric vaccine is spaced at the same timeline, recommending a second dose at 21 days. Common side effects were consistent with the 12 and up vaccination group, except less severe, said Avula. There were no cases of myocarditis, a rare side effect, in younger children in the clinic trials.

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A pharmacist administers a vaccine shot to a child at CVS on Oct. 31 in Sugarland, Texas. BRANDON THIBODEUX, CVS HEALTH

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Railroad

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However, the railroad's owner, Canonie Atlantic Co., says it contractually cannot cease the removal.

As tracks continue to be removed, some believe the future of this railroad is still up in the air — and hope for federal involvement.

On the right track? Pros and cons of the railroad

Over a century old, these railroad tracks were used by several different operators until the most recent operator, Bay Coast Railroad, ended operations in 2018.

The Virginia Eastern Shore's economy once thrived due to the roughly 50-mile rail corridor. By the 21st century, however, the railroad's promise of success seemed to be in the rearview.

However, advocates say the railroad could still be revitalized if it was in the right hands.

Jim Ritch, a volunteer with NYP&N, said the railroad could potentially bring manufacturing jobs to the area. He said the Eastern Shore shouldn't let the railroad slip out of its fingers until "absolutely necessary."

"It may be necessary to abandon the railroad, but it is an economic artery you don't want to sever unless you have to, unless there's no life in it at all," Ritch said.

John Paffrath, another volunteer with NYP&N, pointed to the environmental and historical benefits of the railroad. Railroads are better for the environment than trucks, and Paffrath described these tracks as a "historical landmark."

"There's a lot of potential here," Paffrath said. "It's a shame the commissioners can't see the potential, or maybe don't want to see the potential."

In response, the commissioners say they have evaluated the situation for what it is, and point to the "economic reality" of the rail corridor.

Donald Hart, Accomack-Northampton Transportation District Commission chairman, and Spencer Murray, Canonie Atlantic Co. director, outlined their position.

In the statement, Hart and Murray say NYP&N "does not comprehend the financial realities associated with profitable rail operations on the Shore."

Other operating railroads have assessed the rail corridor from Hallwood to Cape Charles, according to the statement. These assessments found the rail corridor would need a minimum of \$5 million to \$6 million in investments to bring the track to "minimum standards."

Even with investments, the railroads said sufficient carloads are not available to "recover this investment and fund ongoing operations."

"The ANTDC and CAC are fully aware of the history of rail on the Shore and no one desires to see even a portion cease operations," Hart and Murray's statement reads. "Unfortunately, economic reality demands this temporary measure by the ANTDC and CAC."

The hope for revitalization

In October, Rail Enterprise Group President Eyal Shapira penned a proposal that offers his services to Accomack and Northampton counties to "help preserve the rail corridor and develop a new rail entity."

The proposal outlines the group's history of reviving railroads and its hopes for this rail corridor.

In the proposal, Shapira envisions that the rail corridor could be used for freight and passenger services, recreational paths, and new or improved util-



A killdeer stands atop the railroad tracks in Melfa, Va. on Friday, March 21, 2014. SALISBURY DAILY TIMES FILE IMAGE

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Jim Ritch
Volunteer with NYP&N

ity lines.

Additionally, the proposal says the group would aim to:

- Develop warehouse, distribution and cross dock services in the area.
- Identify structures along the railroad to "help jump-start rail-centric interest" and use these structures to draw in more industries.
- Develop and market loading areas for products currently moving into the area by truck.
- Offer connectivity to the group's rail logistics centers in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania; Edison, New Jersey; Milan, Tennessee; and Middletown, Iowa.

"This type of valuable infrastructure is becoming increasingly rare and its preservation as a rail transportation connection to the nation is vital to economic growth, workforce retention and commercial expansion in the region," Shapira wrote in the proposal.

In response, Hart and Murray said Rail Enterprise Group has not made a financial commitment to help the rail corridor. Canonie Atlantic reached out to Shapira regarding financial commitments, but Shapira had not yet responded, according to the Oct. 29 statement.

"Should a financially viable proposal be presented that develops the rail corridor for safe, efficient rail traffic, the ANTDC and CAC will evaluate the merits with the best interest of Shore residents and businesses in mind," Hart and Murray said in the statement.

Shapira did not respond to several requests for comment for this article.

The rail corridor's future

Though NYP&N has asked the commission and Canonie Atlantic to delay removal of the tracks, both say they cannot.

Murray said the company has signed a contract to remove the rails, ties and signals, as well as smooth the ballast and pave the crossings. The removal of tracks started in the north.

"The sale of the tracks to be repurposed more than covers the cost of the

operations and gives additional funding for next steps on the trail such as final design," Murray wrote in an email. "Because the tracks have been committed in the sale, a 'pause' is neither needed or possible."

Looking to the future, the corridor could gain handlebars and hiking boots.

In December 2020, the Virginia Department of Transportation conducted a study on converting the corridor into a hiking and bicycling trail. The study says Canonie Atlantic has recognized the proposal as an "attractive idea."

NYP&N is not opposed to the potential trail. In fact, Ritch advocates for both railroad revitalization and the trail.

"We're not asking people to choose ...

we're hoping to have both the railroad — and its economic stimulus — and the bike path — and its quality of life and economic contributions," Ritch said.

Though some may believe the railroad's future is bleak, NYP&N isn't backing down.

Paffrath hinted there could be future federal involvement. Delmarva Now obtained an Oct. 27 letter sent by the NYP&N group's secretary, Roger Malik, to U.S. Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg.

The letter requests the Department of Transportation order a 90-day halt to rail scrapping.

"Local citizens, the commonwealth of Virginia and the United States will suffer several great losses should this questionable and reckless conduct be permitted to destroy this historic and essential railway," Malik's letter reads.

In response to the letter, Murray said there were "numerous errors."

Maddie Aiken is the community reporter for Delmarva Now/The Daily Times. Have a story tip or idea? Send it her way at maiken@delmarvanow.com or on Twitter @madsaiken.



A killdeer stands atop the railroad tracks in Melfa, Va. in 2014, while cars pass by on nearby Route 13.

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