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Catskill Mountain Railroad gets \$4.5 million state grant for new station, reduced emissions, new engine house.

<https://www.dailyfreeman.com/2024/03/28/catskill-mountain-railroad-gets-4-5-million-state-grant-for-new-station-reduced-emissions-new-engine-house/>

KINGSTON, N.Y. — The Catskill Mountain Railroad has received a nearly \$4.5 million state grant the group said will go towards constructing a new station at Basin Road that could serve both train passengers on an expanded ride and Ashokan Rail Trail users, along with upgrading to a low emissions diesel locomotive and building a new engine house.

A press release said the largest portion of the state Department of Transportation's Passenger and Freight Rail Assistance Program grant, \$2.3 million, will go towards upgrading the railroad's locomotive to use a low-emissions engine; \$1,518,000 will go towards the engine house; and \$667,000 towards the proposed Basin Road Terminal at the Ashokan Rail Trail trailhead in the town of Woodstock

Catskill Mountain Railroad President Ernie Hunt said the railroad has already spoken to several county legislators about the grant and is ready to get to work on these upgrades as soon as all approvals are in place.

Hunt said the railroad members only learned that they had received the grant a few days ago.

Hunt said the proposed 1.6-mile extension over currently out-of-service tracks to Basin Road would need the approval of the Ulster County Legislature. The extension would bring trains to a new terminal at the eastern trailhead of the Ashokan Rail Trail, near the intersection of state Route 28 and Basin Road.

Hunt said the \$667,000 will go towards the development of the terminal on land leased from local business owner Pasquale Iovieno and the restoration of 0.2 miles of track at the terminal. The railroad would foot the bill for rehabilitating the balance of the tracks to state Route 28A, including replacing 4,000 railroad ties.

He said the proposed station, open to both train passengers and trail users, would have indoor restrooms and parking creating a new entrance for the trail with vehicles entering from the signalized intersection at state Route 28, Basin Road and Zena Road. Plans also call for bike rentals for trail users, he said.

He said the station could also be served by Ulster County Area Transit buses and host events. It could function as a tourist gateway, not only for Ulster County, but the whole Catskills.

Hunt said visitors could leave their car at Kingston Plaza and take the train up to walk or bike the trail. Tickets would allow passengers to pick which train they want to take back, he said.

An expanded schedule could see trains depart Kingston at 9 a.m., 11 a.m. 1 p.m. 3 p.m. and 5 p.m., he said. Shorter shuttle trains targeted at bikers and trail users would offer lower fares than

the scenic rides aimed at tourists, he added. The expanded schedule would allow people to spend hours at the trail before coming back on the 5 p.m. train, he said.

Hunt said he believes uniting the Ashokan Rail Trail and Catskill Mountain Railroad will attract more tourists than the two attractions alone, while taking cars off state Route 28. I call it 1+1=3 he said. This will make tourists extend their stays to all-day or overnight stays spending more money at businesses in Midtown and Uptown Kingston, he added.

He said the railroad is open to partnering with the city of Kingston or Ulster County on a program of reduced or free fares for lower-income individuals to use the train to access the trail.

Hunt said the railroad is also talks with Ulster County about creating a platform at Washington Avenue where bikers and hikers coming up the extended O+W Trail could board trains without having to ride to Kingston Plaza. A dedicated bike car with bike racks would serve bicyclists, he said.

Hunt said he strongly supports having rail and trail between Kingston and Basin Road.

He noted that the railroad sent this grant application to the state DOT with the idea of rail-with-trail and the awarding of the grant signals the state support for the plan and this could open the doors to future grants.

The railroad presently operates on just under 5 miles of the former Ulster and Delaware Railroad between Westbrook Lane Station at Kingston Plaza and state Route 28a. In 2023, the Ulster County Legislature voted unanimously and without discussion to extend the railroad's operating permit on the county-owned tracks for five years.

This marks a far cry from the years of legal battles between the railroad and the county leading up to 2016 when the railroad was granted a five-year permit to operate on the eastern portion of the line after a brief hiatus in train operations.

The railroad said it carried a record 51,610 people last year when the Ulster County Regional Chamber of Commerce named it the 2023 Tourism Business of the Year.

Hunt said the clean diesel grant would see a currently out-of-service 1950s-era diesel-electric locomotive stored near Col. Chandler Drive upgraded with a modern diesel engine that reduces emissions by 95%. The 1,000-horsepower engine generates electricity to turn large electric motors that drive the wheels, he added.

The railroad's present locomotive would become a backup locomotive.

Hunt noted the engine replacement can only happen after the railroad builds an engine house as the work would need to be performed indoors with an overhead crane.

He said the railroad has made a deal to lease a portion of land just to the southeast of Kingston Plaza along existing tracks to build an engine house and storage tracks that would move train equipment not currently in use away from Westbrook Lane to a secure location.

Hunt said the secure engine facility would allow the railroad to truck two fully restored old-fashioned steel railroad coaches from 1917 with openable windows from the railroad's former operation in Phoenicia to Kingston for use during the summer. They stripped those down and rebuilt them from the ground up he said.

He said the railroad plans to bring a site plan for the engine house facility in front of the city's Planning Board soon and they are already working with the county on the plan.

Currently we are storing equipment near Dutch Village and we won't need to do that anymore, Hunt said.

In the meantime, the railroad is working to implement biodiesel fuel in its current locomotive to reduce emissions as soon as possible.

The railroad's plans also call for run-around sidings in Kingston and Basin Road allowing the locomotive to run around to the front of the train at both terminals improving safety, Hunt said.

The office of Ulster County Executive Jen Metzger said the executive was unable to provide a statement at this time.