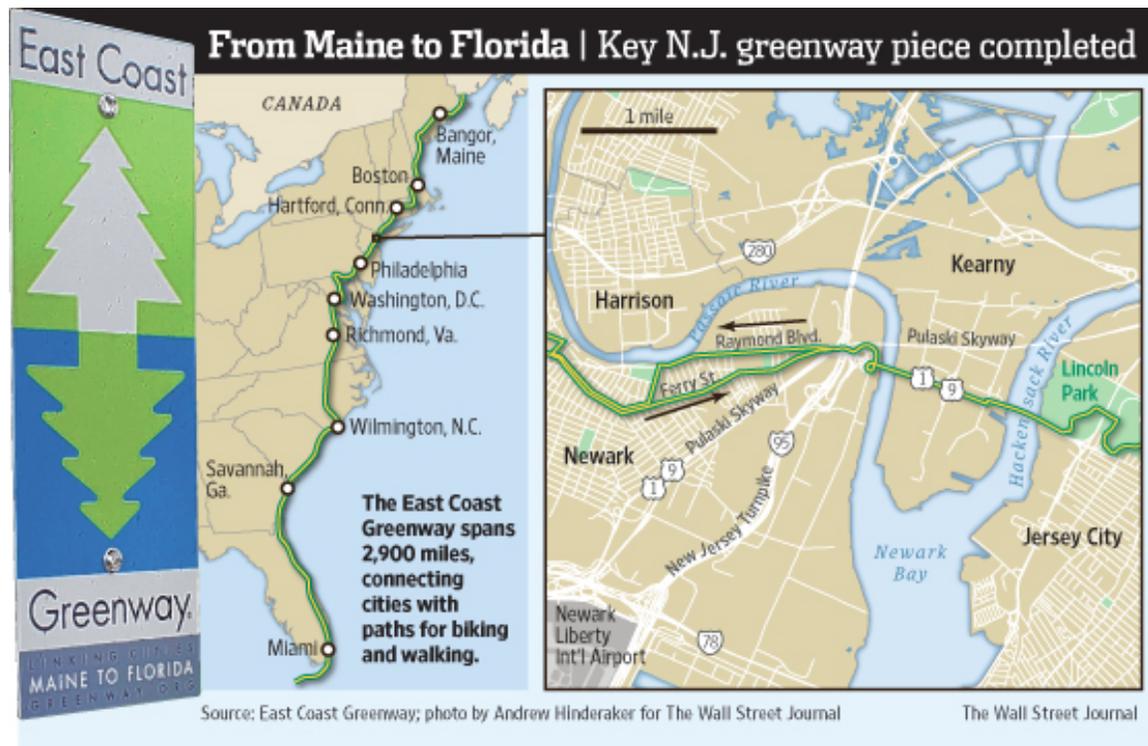


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Greenway Clears Gritty Hurdle

By [HEATHER HADDON](#)

NEWARK—A 2,900-mile biking and walking path taking shape along the East Coast winds through some of the most bucolic sections of the Garden State, passing 19th-century mills and historic river towns. But for years planners struggled to find a route across an industrial section running through a spaghetti bowl of highways between Newark to Jersey City. After years of study and \$1.3 million in state funding, the two-mile path is set to finally open later this month.



It remains one of the grittiest stretches of the East Coast Greenway, a two-decade-old series of roads and paths stretching from Key West, Fla., to Maine's Canadian border. But project backers believe the new New Jersey City leg is an improvement over the previous option: having riders pack up their bikes and board a train in Newark to continue into New York.

"It was a matter of pride," said Dennis Markatos-Soriano, executive director of the East Coast Greenway Alliance, a nonprofit launched in 1991 to foster its development. "A lot of cyclists don't want to be told they have to get on a train."

The New Jersey trail is the latest step forward for the greenway—which at more than 7,000 acres is one of the largest public spaces being developed in the country, according to the alliance.

The concept was born in New York City 20 years ago and has gained momentum in recent years as Americans turn to bicycling and walking for recreation.

"I wouldn't have predicted this," said Karen Votava, one of the greenway's founders and a former director of the New York City Planning Department. "A number of things came together that lent a lot of power to building the trail."

The East Coast Greenway, sometimes called the urban Appalachian Trail, isn't a natural escape. It travels through dozens of cities and towns and was planned for bicycle commuters, leisure travelers and walkers alike. The path runs on sidewalks, old rail lines, roads and even greenways, such as the one running along Manhattan's West Side waterfront.

More than a million people a year pass along some section of the route, according to the alliance. The organization's goal is to develop more paths that are separate from roads built for cars. Currently, 750 miles of the trail is off-road, or 26% of the entire passage.

"It works now for adventure cyclists, but I can't recommend it for my son," said Mr. Markatos-Soriano. Moving the entire path off-road would cost \$2.5 billion, with each mile needing between \$100,000 and more than \$1 million to build, Mr. Markatos-Soriano said.

More than \$515 million has been spent so far through local, state and federal government funding—more than a third of it to build sections in New York, New Jersey and Connecticut, according to alliance figures. The organization aims to build 50 miles of new paths a year.

The New Jersey greenway section runs 97 miles from Trenton to Jersey City and is the second-most-complete in the U.S., with 54% of it off-road, according to the alliance. New York's 45-mile section traversing the city and Westchester County is 63% off-road, while Connecticut's 198-mile portion is 28% complete.

Connecticut officials are currently studying how to build a 37-mile stretch along the Merritt Parkway, but some homeowners along the highway have spoken out against the plan during public hearings. "There's a lot of negative feedback from wealthy property owners who are not happy to have a trail running along their backyards," Ms. Votava said.

New Jersey embraced the greenway a decade ago. Routes on state land were put in a pipeline for funding, said Sheree Davis, a state Department of Transportation manager in the Bureau of Commuter & Mobility Strategies. But the dense network of highways between Newark and Jersey City—including the New Jersey Turnpike—presented a hurdle for planners trying to build a safe route for bicyclists and pedestrians. "This was a challenge for us," Ms. Davis said. "When you are building paths and sidewalks in a dense urban area, it's difficult."

The state Transportation Department in 2011 began building sidewalks, a retaining wall, guardrails and pedestrian crosswalk signals, following roads in eastern Newark's industrial area. The route uses drawbridges along U.S. 1 and 9 to cross the Passaic and Hackensack rivers into Jersey City and goes to Liberty State Park.

The greenway ideally crosses paths that are at least 10 feet wide, but parts of the Newark section measure only five feet across. The route crosses heavily trafficked roads where users have to be aware of turning trucks. Ms. Davis said the route is safe, and an initial alliance ride included a 13-year-old and a grandfather in his 60s.

"It's nothing fancy or pretty," said Mike Krimmer, 58 years old, of Edison, who rode the new stretch. "But it gets you safely from Newark to Jersey City."

The new paths will be maintained by the local and county governments, Ms. Davis said. Several years from now, the alliance hopes to shift the entire route north in Essex County to run through a less-trafficked area over the reconstructed Wittpen Bridge to Jersey City. But for now, advocates are pleased to open the latest section of what they call the "linear park," Mr. Markatos-Soriano said.

"That segment is not like going through Central Park. It's an industrial section," he said. "But this is really a big deal for the East Coast Greenway and locally."

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