

News

Spitzer backs Hudson walkway

By Jeremiah Horrigan

Times Herald-Record

January 10, 2008 6:00 AM

POUGHKEEPSIE — It was Fred Schaeffer's night, and he was loving every minute of it.

It's not every day that a project you've labored long and hard for gets a public nod of approval from the governor. Only hours before a people-packed open house yesterday aimed at explaining the effort to convert the moribund Poughkeepsie railway bridge into a pedestrian Walkway Over the Hudson, Gov. Eliot Spitzer praised the project in his State of the State address. He called it "the first major investment in our parks leading up to the 400th anniversary of Henry Hudson's voyage up the river that bears his name."

If Spitzer stopped short of promising a specific amount of financial support, Schaeffer, chairman of the board of the nonprofit Walkway Over the Hudson, wasn't complaining.

He was beaming, making his way slowly through crowds of people that clustered around him three people deep.

Schaeffer said he tried to videotape Spitzer's announcement from the office of his Poughkeepsie law firm, but the phone wouldn't stop ringing. He said he hoped other supporters of the project had been luckier with the electronics.

"I'm just ecstatic — after all these years, it's great to get that kind of recognition," he said.

The meeting might have been billed as an open house, but everyone attending already seemed to know about and support the \$25 million project.

If the group succeeds in its designs, the once-mighty bridge (it was the longest bridge in the world at the time of its completion 120 years ago) will become an elevated walking and cycling haven that the group expects will draw more than 250,000 tourist visits and add \$21 million to local economies.

"It'll be great for people like me — I'm a bicyclist —but will also put us on the map. It'll put us on the map, like the Golden Gate Bridge or Niagara Falls."

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CREATING A WALKWAY

The effort to transform a forgotten, fire-scorched railway bridge into a tourist-magnetizing Walkway Over the Hudson has been a long time coming.

It began in the early 1990s as a grass-roots effort, the dream of Poughkeepsie resident Bill Sepe. Since then, the not-for-profit group has applied for and received millions from the state and from the private, grant-making Dyson Foundation, with which it has partnered for administrative and operating reasons.

According to Walkway Executive Director Amy Husten, the group has raised about \$3 million of the \$25 million it will need to complete the project by the 2009 quadricentennial of the Hudson River's navigation. Most of that money - \$1.5 million - came from Dyson (which also employs Husten).

The state Department of Environmental Conservation recently kicked in \$500,000, and the state Department of Transportation came up with \$800,000.

Several other state and Dutchess County agencies have made up the balance of the \$3 million raised so far. Most of that money, Husten said yesterday, has gone toward physical inspections that have confirmed the viability of the project.

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