

Proposed train still not welcome in city

By Kevin J. Kessler
Staff Writer

SUMMIT — For six years, there has been a struggle between the city and the forces behind the re-opening of the Lackawanna Cutoff Project, which would re-open the Staten Island and Rahway Valley freight train lines that run through the east side of Summit.

The reopened railway would be used to transport garbage from Staten Island into Pennsylvania and expand the delivery of goods. The project was made through a collaboration of the Union County Board of Chosen Freeholders, and the Morris-town and Erie railway.

After several closed meetings and resolutions of opposition, the issue was again discussed at the May 1

Common Council meeting. It was introduced by 2nd Ward Councilman and mayoral candidate Michael Ver-notico.

"This seems to be one of those big pork barrel projects with political interests," Vernotico said.

The re-opening of the line could impact commuter railroads, traffic at road crossings and even delay emergency responses, according to Ver-notico.

"There are a lot of economic and safety issues," Vernotico said, "as well as some quality of life issues."

Vernotico also said that there is no way for city officials to know or control what materials are transported on these trains. One example the councilman gave was that a train car carrying propane gas could

encounter a problem while in the city and pose a serious safety hazard.

While many of the project's political backers have stated that the usage of the railway line would be limited, Vernotico was confident that once re-opened, the project would become larger. Vernotico's comments were echoed by Bob Sheehan, a member of the Stop the Train Coalition and president of the East Summit Association.

"Limited usage of the railway is in contradiction to their motivation system," Sheehan said, noting that the contract for the site dictates that more funds would be generated based on tonnage or amount of materials transported. "You don't have a contract like that if you only want a

small number of trains running."

Currently, Gov. Jon Corzine has not committed any funding to the project, which is good news for the members of the council who oppose the project.

"My primary concern at this point is the safety and quality of life in Summit," Vernotico said. "This project frightens me. On top of everything else, the sponsors of this project have not been able to justify it from an economic standpoint."

"We're confident that if they're forced to do an environmental or economic study, the project would never make it," Sheehan said. "That's why they haven't done one."

Kevin J. Kessler can be reached at 908-686-7700, ext. 123, or TheObserver@TheLocalSource.com.