

## **\$36M federal grant to replace bridge on Veterans Memorial Highway, expand Long Island Greenway trail**



The Veterans Memorial Highway bridge over the LIRR tracks in Ronkonkoma was awarded more than \$30 million in federal grants to replace the structure that was originally built in 1950. Credit: Google

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Suffolk County and state transportation officials are receiving more than \$36 million in federal grants to replace a 73-year-old bridge and to build 12 miles of the Long Island Greenway trail from Bethpage to Brentwood.

Sen. Chuck Schumer (D-NY) announced the federal transportation RAISE grants, which stands for Rebuilding American Infrastructure with Sustainability and Equity, to fund the local projects.

The grants awarded this week include \$20 million to replace a bridge on Veterans Memorial Highway between Islandia and Central Islip that travels over the LIRR tracks on the Ronkonkoma line, just south of East Suffolk Avenue.

A second \$16.4 million will cover construction for the Long Island Greenway, between Suffolk County Community College in Brentwood and Bethpage State Park. The trail is an

extension of the 175-mile trail planned between Manhattan and Montauk. About 60% of the greenway is planned off road.

"These two awards will repair a critical bridge, built in the name of our hero veterans, and will also spur economic development, walking, biking and tourism through the creation of a safe and popular pedestrian-friendly trail," Schumer told Newsday.

State transportation officials on Long Island said they were in the early stages of designing a new bridge on Veterans Memorial Highway to replace the Route 454 bridge that was originally built in 1950.

The new bridge will be wider than the existing route and will improve safety with new access for bicyclists and pedestrians, state transportation spokesman Stephen Canzoneri said. Construction is slated to begin in 2028, officials said.

The Long Island Greenway is planned as an extension of the 750-mile Empire State Trail that runs from Manhattan to the Canadian border, said Mike Lieberman, program director for New York Community Trails and the New York Trust for Public Land.

He noted that the Empire State Trail did not extend to Long Island because designers faced access challenges due to urban development spanning from Brooklyn to Long Island.

"I think people have been trying to do this for longer than a decade," Lieberman said. "Communities were designed around cars rather than people. It affects physical and mental health and people need to walk more and bike more."

Planners said they would eventually try to route the trail through the Nassau Hub to Eisenhower Park in East Meadow.

The grant awarded this week is expected to pay for construction of the trail in the next two years between Bethpage and Brentwood along a LIPA easement right of way of power lines that may include bike paths and off-road trails.

Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand also worked to secure funding as part of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law.

"Green and open spaces are a critical asset to any community, and this funding will help ensure that the necessary resources are available for the Long Island Greenway so New Yorkers and visitors alike can enjoy the area's beauty," Gillibrand said.

Federal, state and local Long Island leaders, including Rep Andrew Garbarino (R-Bayport) and State Sen. Monica Martinez (D-Brentwood), praised the funding to further enhance walkability and outdoor trails. Suffolk County Executive Ed Romaine said the trail would spur economic growth and preserve the environment.

Huntington Town Supervisor Ed Smyth called it "a steppingstone" to begin the Long Island Greenway's chain of trails.

"As we embark on this initiative that will promote outdoor recreation, improve public health, and connect communities, we will also be providing safe passage for pedestrians, bicyclists, and hikers, reducing the need to share the road with motor vehicles," Smyth said.