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Cuomo bridge path saw 250K visitors in first 6 months

Peter D. Kramer Rockland/Westchester Journal News

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The New York State Thruway built it, and, boy, did people come. In its first six months, nearly a quarter-million cyclists, runners and pedestrians ventured out or across the path on the Gov. Mario Cuomo Bridge.

The path has quickly become a way of Lower Hudson Valley life, drawing all kinds, from the merely curious to marathon runners to serious cyclists.

Jennifer Givner, spokeswoman for the New York State Thruway Authority, said the path — opened on June 15, its namesake's birthday — has attracted an average of 1,800 visitors a day, nearly 250,000 in its first six months.

'HOME RUN': Bike-pedestrian path opens on Cuomo Bridge

ARTFUL EYEFUL: Bridge-path landings have commissioned artwork

"Offering an outdoor option during the COVID-19 pandemic has proven to be an enormous win for New Yorkers and residents of the entire region," Givner said. "We expect its popularity will only grow in 2021."

Tarrytown's Village Administrator Rich Slingerland said he considers the path a success, but one that — owing to the pandemic — hasn't delivered the crowds that downtown merchants had anticipated.

"One thing we hope to see after the pandemic social restrictions are lifted is the increase in bicycle traffic to the Tarrytown business district," he said. "There has been a significant increase in the number of trips to the shared-use path, but most of the visitors are staying near to the bridge, and going to the Bridge Plaza Shopping Center for food and such."

The administrator said he wasn't surprised that a quarter-million people flocked to the path, having seen the popularity of the Walkway Over the Hudson in Poughkeepsie, a 1.28-mile railroad bridge that has become a destination and economic engine, attracting as many as 700,000 visitors a year since it opened in 2009.

The numbers for the Cuomo Bridge, which is nearly three times longer, were dampened by the pandemic, Slingerland said. He said he hopes more Cuomo path users will venture three-quarters of a mile north from the Westchester landing to discover Main Street shops and restaurants.

A path to 'opportunities'

At the ribbon-cutting in June, on what would have been his father's 88th birthday, Gov. Andrew Cuomo predicted the bright blue ribbon over the Hudson — shared by cyclists and pedestrians, with scenic overlooks highlighting the region's history — would be "a home-run."

Daniel Convissor, of the Bike Tarrytown advocacy group, said the path has opened up opportunities.

"People can now get to jobs, shopping and parks on the other side of the river without getting into a car," he said. "The views from the path are amazing, too."

But Convissor bristles at the path's hours of operation — 6 a.m. to 10 p.m. — and that the Thruway has shut the path during inclement weather, including a recent nor'easter.

"Crossings owned by New York City are always open," Convissor said. "People cycling in rough weather know what they are doing and have places they need to get to. Thruway staff would be wise to encourage such travelers by learning best practices from NYC DOT and the Netherlands' Ministry of Infrastructure."

In case of emergency

The path is under the watch of the New York State Police, patrolling on foot, bike and utility terrain vehicle. But emergency calls on the path are dispatched by Tarrytown Police, with EMS from Greenburgh and Tarrytown Fire Department rescue vehicles lending support.

Tarrytown Police Chief John Barbelet said the first six months saw 30 calls to the path for a variety of mishaps, a quarter of which involved cyclists. There were a couple of summer calls for pedestrians experiencing heat exhaustion and some people tripping and falling on the path.

"A typical one is: '18-year-old female fell from bicycle, unknown injuries on the shared-use path,'" Barbelet said. "Once they go, we don't get much more information. EMS grabs them and they drop them off at the hospital and they're done."

Of late, EMS calls have also included fire rescue trucks.

"We just started sending the fire department out there to help with manpower and to provide a safe lane for EMS," Barbelet said, explaining that extra personnel is needed because the path, on the northern edge of the Rockland-bound span, is not easy for first-responders to reach.

It is protected from bridge traffic by a fortified and continuous jersey barrier topped by a fence along its complete 3.6-mile length. There are gates in the fence at regular intervals.

First-responders park in the right breakdown lane on the bridge at the gate nearest to the incident and open the gate with keys kept by fire and ambulance crews, he said.

If an injured path user needs to be transported, they must be lifted over the jersey barrier through the gate.

"One of the reasons it was decided to send the fire department is, if they have two volunteers on the rescue truck, they can help with the ambulance corps," Barbelet said.

Tarrytown 1st Assistant Fire Chief Kelly Murphy said the Thruway reimburses her department for calls made to the bridge.

"The amount varies with the calls we respond to," she said. "Reimbursement, to the fire department's accounts directly, is between \$65 and \$250, depending on what actions they take."

Ready to listen

Thirty emergency calls over a six-month span is not extraordinary, given the popularity of the path, Barbelet said. He said the Thruway has been "very attentive" to any concerns that have been raised.

Last month, Senate Majority Leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins, Sen. Tim Kennedy from Buffalo, chair of the transportation committee, and Thruway Executive Director Matthew Driscoll met with Slingerland, Mayor Tom Butler and Barbelet to talk about the path and the bridge.

"They were very willing to listen, (asking) do we have any ideas to make it better, is there anything we might need? They were very amenable to listening," Barbelet said.

He is quick to point out that his department doesn't patrol the path, and that the state police have been great partners to work with.

Popular path, parking problems

Even while drawing nearly 250,000 visitors, the bridge was given a sort of "soft open," with demand dampened by the pandemic. It was popular without attracting the crush that might have been expected. It has also shown there are areas for improvement.

"For us in Tarrytown, the parking is more of a detriment to us than going out on medical calls," Barbelet said.

The summer saw the landing lot fill and path-goers turn to nearby private lots, at Transfiguration Church and the Bridge Plaza shopping area, bringing complaints.

"You get a nice sunny day on a Saturday or Sunday, there's just not enough parking allocated just for the shared-use path," he said.

It was the same story on the Rockland shore.

South Nyack Mayor Bonnie Christian said her village has "seen additional parking on our residential streets, which has been an imposition."

In Tarrytown, Transfiguration Church put up cones to keep out unauthorized parkers, who might have taken advantage of the church's diminished capacity amid the pandemic, the chief said.

"They may be only getting 10 or 20 cars in there on a Sunday, but, knock on wood, when COVID's gone in a few months, when 2021 summer rolls

around, I could see the parking being an issue."

Givner, at the Thruway, said the issue of parking at peak times was largely addressed by the introduction of a free weekend bus shuttle devoted to the path. It served 5,601 passengers before shutting down for the season on Nov. 1.

The Thruway used the bridge's Twitter account, website and message boards to alert people to full parking lots at the landings.

A learning curve

If Albany is asking the right questions and is ready to listen, Barbelet said the answers are still being worked out.

"This is still new to us," he said. "We're all learning how this is going to work."

Tarrytown has been testing out some ideas, Barbelet said, adding last summer's trial of temporary bike racks on Main Street that didn't draw much use.

Part of it could be that "some of these people drive very, very expensive bikes and want keep them very close," he said, adding: "I don't know if they felt comfortable putting them on the bike rack where we had it."

But the Tarrytown chief is confident answers will be found and the spirit of cooperation will help.

"We'll work out the hiccups," Barbelet said. "Everyone that's involved, the state police, New York state, they've all been willing to listen. They haven't just thrown this on us and said, 'Go deal with it.'"

"I think parking is something that if this thing kicks off, we're going to have to address," he said. "But as far as people needing assistance on the bridge, they call and we'll send the people out."

A bridge in 'close-out phase'

The path was the last major piece of the bridge to open, and Givner said the bridge is complete, "in terms of public use."

"For the contractor, the project is in its close-out phase with some punch list items left, along with some remaining work and warranty work," she said.

The bridge's builder, Tappan Zee Constructors, has been paid "99% of its contract," she said, and "the project remains within its \$3.98 billion budget."

Peter D. Kramer is a 32-year staffer at The Journal News. He can be reached at pkramer@lohud.com or on Twitter at [@PeterKramer](https://twitter.com/PeterKramer). Read his latest stories. Please follow the link on the page below and become a backer of this kind of coverage. It only works with you as a subscriber.