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Groups say railway bed may contain carcinogens

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Two statewide environmental coalitions are warning that soil under the rail bed of the proposed Lackawanna Cutoff line in Morris, Sussex and Warren counties could be filled with carcinogens and want NJ Transit to investigate that possibility.

But NJ Transit officials contended there is no such evidence.

The Association of New Jersey Environmental Commissions and **New Jersey Highlands Coalition** jointly warned yesterday a host of toxic compounds -- possibly the result of decades of coal-burning engines on that line -- could be unearthed if construction proceeds.

David Peifer, Highlands project director for the Association of New Jersey Environmental Commissions, said coal burning from train engines may have left behind toxic materials, including polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, which are known carcinogens. He contended the soil under the rail beds is filled with coal ash, cinders and lead.

Construction could unearth dangerous compounds in a rail bed mostly undisturbed for more than three decades, since trains last ran on the line, environmentalists said.

"The public needs to know that this project will be safe and will not threaten the health of anyone living nearby. For all the public investment in this project, they need to make sure it won't make us sick," said Julia Somers, executive director of the Highlands Coalition.

But NJ Transit officials responded that a federal environmental assessment had been done, with a finding that the line would pose "no significant environmental impact."

"We held public hearings on this issue and gave everyone a chance to have their say," said NJ Transit spokeswoman Penny Bassett Hackett, who said the first phase of the rail project is scheduled to proceed later this winter.

The proposed \$551 million rail project would restore commuter rail service from Scranton to Hoboken along the Lackawanna Cutoff, a line nicknamed for the miles it cut off train trips from Pennsylvania to New Jersey. Proposed stops in New Jersey would be Blairstown in Warren County, Andover in Sussex County and Port Morris in Morris County, where the line would connect with existing NJ Transit service.

The goal of the project is to provide commuters with alternative transportation into New York, while reducing traffic congestion and air pollution along Route 80 and other highways.