

A SOCIAL STUDIES CURRICULUM GUIDE: WHAT CAN THE HIGH LINE TEACH US ABOUT COMMUNITY ACTIVISM?

Grades 4 and 5

Materials:

Period 1:

- PowerPoint presentation
- Death Avenue headlines
- Preserving the High Line headlines
- Activism worksheet

Period 2:

- Argument worksheet

LESSON GOALS

Students will:

- Learn that the High Line was built in the 1930s to carry freight along Manhattan's west side
- Learn that the High Line is now open as a public park
- Learn that before the High Line, freight lines ran at grade along sections of 10th, 11th, and 12th avenues
- Learn that the sections of avenues where the freight train ran was known as "Death" Avenue
- Learn that citizens rallied and fought against Death Avenue for nearly 70 years
- Learn that trains running along "Death Avenue" were preceded by a flag-waving "West Side Cowboy" riding on horseback to alert pedestrians
- Learn that it was citizen activism and participation that eventually led to the elimination of Death Avenue
- Learn that once the High Line was built, it did help mitigate traffic
- Learn that the High Line eventually fell into disuse and was abandoned in 1981.
- Learn that property owners underneath the High Line lobbied for its demolition
- Learn that community members came together to preserve the High Line
 - These members came together as Friends of the High Line
 - FHL was successful in fighting the city's plan to demolish the High Line
 - From the time FHL was formed until the new park opened, it took nearly a decade.
 - FHL is dedicated to retaining the High Line and advocated for its reuse as a park
 - FHL will manage and operate the new High Line

Duration: 2 periods

Period 1—PowerPoint presentation/debate brainstorming

Period 2—students stage two debates, one focusing on the effort to eliminate Death Avenue, and the other focused on the effort to preserve the High Line

Extension or Homework—write newspaper story covering one of the debates

PERIOD 1:

Ask students, ‘What is a community?’ (Answers include a neighborhood, a place where people live, work, go to school, shop, etc.) Ask if in addition to living in a community or working in one, can people be involved in their community? (Yes.) What are some ways people can be involved in their community? (Organize a block clean-up, plant trees or flowers, donate food, etc.) Ask if any of the students have been involved in any community efforts themselves and encourage them to share their experiences. (Some may have helped clean up a park or block, taken part in a block party or other community event, etc.) Ask if ordinary citizens can have a positive impact upon their communities. (Yes, although sometimes it may not seem that way.) If people in a community want to accomplish something, is it most effective to work by themselves? With others? (With others.) Explore the idea of ordinary neighbors coming together to work towards a common goal. Once people in a community do come together to achieve a goal, what are the ways they might try to do that? Elicit circulating a petition, writing letters to elected officials, staging a protest, etc.) Tell students that the High Line, a freight train line, shows us a lot about what regular New Yorkers can accomplish if they are patient and if they set their mind to their goal. Ask students if they are familiar with the High Line. (Some may be, others may not be.) Explain briefly that it is an elevated freight train line that was abandoned and is now being turned into a park. Say, ‘Let’s find out how the High Line inspired ordinary New Yorkers to get involved and be committed to a positive change—twice in its history!’

Slide 1: 12th Avenue, c. 1920.

Ask students to describe the scene. It is a crowded, congested nightmare! Trains, horse-drawn carriages, trucks, cars, and people all try to make their way. Point out the train tracks in the roadbed. What does that mean? (Trains travel there.) Ask students if they know where this picture is. Explain that it is in New York City, on the west side of Manhattan, around the year 1920. Ask students to share what they know about shipping in New York City’s history. (Shipping is vital to the city’s economy; historians agree New York’s status as the world’s city is due to its harbor’s natural attributes.) Why were ships and the river so important to New York’s early economy? (Explore the role trade has played in the development of New York City.) Given the fact that shipping was so vital to New York’s (and the country’s) economy, does this image look like anything is getting through? (No.) Where were all these trucks and wagons and trains going? (They were picking up or delivering goods to ships and also picking up or delivering goods from warehouses.) Explain that there were many warehouses and factories located close to the Hudson River. Why? (To be convenient for shipping.)

Slide 2: 12th Avenue, c. 1920.

Explain that in addition to the slow-down of shipping, this traffic had another, very serious problem. Point out the train in the upper right of the image. This is a freight

train, traveling right in the street, along with all the other traffic. Ask students if they have ever seen a freight train. (Many may not have.) Ask if they think it would've been safe to have freight trains so close to pedestrians and people traveling in a horse-drawn wagon? (Not at all.) In fact, these streets where the train ran at grade, came to be known as "Death Avenue."

Slide 3: *New Yorker* cover, Sept. 1933.

Ask students to describe everything that is going on in the drawing. Explain that it was common knowledge that the streets leading to the piers on the Hudson River were a cacophony! Point out the train with the man who is riding horseback. Who is he and what is he doing? Elicit that he is riding in front of the train to help alert pedestrians of the train's arrival. What is he carrying that would help alert people? (A red flag.) Explain that he was known as the "West Side Cowboy," and that was his job. Ask students if they think the problem of Death Avenue was serious? (It was.) Explain that at that time, the railroad was very powerful. Many people wanted to get rid of Death Avenue by getting the tracks off the street. Ask if people felt they might be able to fight the railroad. (Maybe yes, maybe no.)

Slide 4: The West Side Cowboy.

Why would it be necessary to have a man riding a horse in front of the train on Death Avenue? (To alert people that the train was coming so they could get out of the way.) Tell the class that many, many people wanted Death Avenue to go away. Why? (Elicit that it was a public safety issue.) Explain that many people protested for years and years and years.

Slide 5: Construction of the High Line, 1933.

Tell the class that getting rid of Death Avenue was very popular with New Yorkers, but there was one thing standing in the way of eliminating Death Avenue, the railroad. Explore why the railroad might not have wanted to eliminate Death Avenue. (Having the trains travel at grade was convenient for them, making a change would be very expensive.) Explain that eventually, the railroad understood that they had to eliminate Death Avenue. What was their solution? Freight still had to be delivered. (Build the railroad tracks high, off the street.) Explain that is exactly what the High Line was.

Slide 6: National Refrigerator Company and High Line, 1933.

Ask students to describe the traffic. (It is light, orderly.) Where is the train? (Up above.) Explain that when the High Line was built, they also built platforms for the train to go directly into the warehouses. Have the students identify this on the image. In this image, students can see that the High Line is still under construction; there are many workers on the line. But it has already had a positive impact. Ask the students if the public was successful in forcing the railroad to eliminate Death Avenue. (Yes.)

Slide 7: The High Line, c. 1998.

Tell the students that the High Line did its job for many years. But then things changed, and people stopped using trains so much to deliver goods. Ask what forms of transportation might have become more common. (Answers include planes and trucks.) Explain that since trains weren't so popular anymore, what might have happened to the High Line? (It shut down and sat idle, beginning in 1981.)

Slide 8: High Line railing, c. 1998.

Explain to the students that when some people saw the High Line sitting there, empty, they got ideas. Some people said it was ugly, and should be torn down.

Slide 9: High Line, c. 1998.

Other people said the High Line would make a great park. Explain that just like the fight over the elimination of Death Avenue, there were two sides. The side that wanted to save the High Line was called Friends of the High Line. They wrote letters, and organized people, and many people agreed with them. Eventually, Friends of the High Line won the argument, and today, the High Line is a public park.

Distribute the Death Avenue and Preserving the High Line headline sheets as well as the activism worksheet. Divide the class into groups of three or four. Have the students work through the activism worksheet, using the two headline sheets to answer the questions.

DEBATE

PERIOD 2:

Remind the students that they have learned about two sides of two different issues involving the High Line. One, from years ago, when the argument was about getting rid of Death Avenue and building the High Line. One, more recent, was about demolishing the High Line or saving the High Line. Explain that they will now split into four groups and they will stage two debates: One from long ago, when the issue was over Death Avenue, and the other from more recently, when the issue was the demolition or preservation of the High Line.

Assign the students to groups as follows:

Group 1: The interests of the railroad, i.e., opposed to eliminating Death Avenue

Group 2: The interests of the New Yorkers, i.e., in favor of eliminating Death Avenue because of concerns with public health and safety.

Group 3: The interests of the people who own property underneath the High Line, i.e., in favor of demolishing the High Line.

Group 4: The interests of the New Yorkers, i.e., in favor of saving the High Line and turning it into a park.

Give each group the argument worksheet. Before you stage the debate, allow each group to work together to brainstorm some of their arguments. Then come together and stage the debate. Students may base their arguments upon the headlines they read yesterday.

EXTENSION OR HOMEWORK:

Students may write two newspaper stories about the debates. They should imagine that the first debate took place 100 years ago and that the second took place about 10 years ago.

ARGUMENT QUESTION SHEET

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Group Member Names _____

Date _____

Instructions: Answer the following questions to help you and your group prepare for the debate.

1. Is your debate over the question of Death Avenue or the question of preserving the High Line? _____

2. What side of the argument is your group on? _____

3. What are some of the reasons you can think of in favor of your argument?

a. _____

b. _____

c. _____

d. _____

4. How do you think the other side will respond to your arguments?

a. _____

b. _____

c. _____

d. _____

5. What can your side say that is more convincing? _____

DEATH AVENUE HEADLINES

CALLS 'DEATH AVE.' MUNICIPAL CRIME

**"The Nuisance Stage Is Past,"
ex-Alderman Doull Says at
Great Mass Meeting.**

SPEAKERS ATTACK N.Y.C.R.R.

The New York Times, April 8, 1910

CENTRAL WON'T MOVE 11TH AVE. TRACKS

**Railroad Company Ready to Defy
Ahearn's Order Directing Their
Removal Within 30 Days.**

The New York Times, June 6, 1909

CHILDREN PARADE AGAINST DEATH AVE.

Five Hundred Little Friends of
Boy Who Was Killed There
Make Public Protest.

OTHER PARADE TO FOLLOW

New York Times, Oct. 25, 1908

DEBATE BILLS TO END DEATH AVENUE ILLS

New York Times, July 22, 1911

ACTIVISM QUESTION SHEET

Grades 4 and 5

Group Member Names _____

Date _____

Instructions: Read the Death Avenue headline sheet. Answer the following questions.

1. What is Death Avenue called? _____

2. What do you think this means? _____

3. What won't the "Central" do? _____

4. Whom do you think the "Central" is? _____

5. Why did children stage a parade? _____

6. Why do you think speakers attacked the N.Y.C.R.R.? (New York Central Railroad)

PRESERVING THE HIGH LINE HEADLINES

Art dealers join battle to save the High Line

A \$40 million plan to re-develop the elevated train passageway in Chelsea is under threat

The Art Newspaper.Com, 2002

One Track Mind

Chelsea Group Works to Save an Abandoned Rail Line

December 27 - January 2, 2001

The Village Voice

High Line Reversal

by Anne Schwartz

December, 2002

The Bloomberg administration has taken the first step toward making the abandoned elevated freight line known as the High Line into a public park and promenade. The 1.5-mile viaduct goes from 34th Street to Gansevoort Street on the far West Side, running alongside -- and sometimes through -- warehouses and industrial buildings. Unused since 1980, the rusting rails have been colonized by wildflowers and even trees. Its gritty charm inspired a group called the [Friends of the High Line](#) to campaign for the transformation of the line into an aerial greenway, similar to the Promenade Plantee in Paris, an old elevated rail line turned into a green promenade that revitalized the district around it.

From Gotham Gazette

Judge rules against demolition plans for New York's historic elevated rail

Story by Elizabeth Brennan / Mar. 14, 2002

From Preservation Online

Instructions: Read the Preserving the High Line Headlines sheet. Answer the following questions.

1. What is the name of the group that is trying to save the High Line? _____

2. Who ruled against the plans to demolish the High Line? _____

3. Whom do you think the “Chelsea group” is? _____

4. Why does the headline say they have a “one-track mind?” _____

5. What politician helped in the effort to save the High Line? _____

6. In addition to Friends of the High Line, who else would like to preserve it? _____
