

90-mile rail trail is best option

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By Tom Woodman , Adirondack Explorer

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New York state's announcement that it will review the management plan for an underused rail line through the Adirondacks is very welcome. It's a key step toward establishing a rail-to-trail recreation way that would be a major draw for visitors to the Adirondacks.

In announcing the review, though, the state indicated a preference for a half measure that would fall short of the goal of a world-class trail for 90 miles through some of the most scenic wild country in the nation. As the departments of Transportation and Environmental Conservation complete their studies and public hearings, they should be prepared to think beyond the partial trail that has been proposed. The best option is to create the full multi-use trail from Lake Placid to Old Forge.

For more than four years, advocates, including the Adirondack Explorer, have called for removing rails from the corridor. In place of the tracks, the state would construct a trail that visitors could hike, bike (on road bikes as well as mountain bikes) and, in the winter, snowmobile over. This upgrade would bring activity to a route that is now barely used.

A tourist train operates over the 9 miles between Lake Placid and Saranac Lake for a couple of round-trips a day during the summer and early fall. Most of the rest of the line is used only twice a year to bring the tourist train back and forth to its winter storage in Utica. A tourist train based in Old Forge has drawn more business than the Lake Placid-based line and will remain in service regardless of the decision on the rail trail.

The train's supporters say it is a tourist draw and that the state, which subsidizes track maintenance, should expand the tourist service to Tupper Lake and beyond. The train's economic benefit on its current route is dubious, however, and the need to upgrade the rail line to accommodate regular rail service for its full length makes expanded service financially unwise. Instead of clinging to a seasonal service that can hardly be considered a destination attraction in the Park, the state could generate year-round activity that would draw users for repeated use.

Rail trails have proved themselves to be important economic drivers. The Pine Creek Rail Trail in Pennsylvania, for instance, and the Great Allegheny Passage in Maryland and Pennsylvania, generate millions of dollars a year for nearby communities.

In June, the state said it would review the unit management plan that governs the use of the rail line, with the idea of creating a rail-to-trail route. But its proposal envisions the trail only for the 34-mile section between Lake Placid and Tupper Lake. It would retain the tracks for the 56-mile corridor south of Tupper Lake as far as Old Forge. Officials said they wanted to "and realize the full economic potential of rail service on the remainder of the corridor." DEC Commissioner Joe

Martens also said that the remoteness of the stretch between Tupper Lake and Old Forge raises concerns about the safety of trail users and the difficulty of maintaining and patrolling the corridor.

The Lake Placid-to-Tupper Lake trail would indeed be a great step forward for the region. It would serve communities that already have robust tourism and facilities in place to serve visitors. The villages of Lake Placid, Saranac Lake and Tupper Lake would act as hubs, providing trail users access to other attractions, restaurants, shopping and lodging. A trail on that section would also create the possibility of bicycle commuting, especially for the residents of Lake Placid and Saranac Lake, who now must brave heavy traffic and narrow shoulders on Route 86 if they want to pedal to work.

But that limited development falls short of the idea's full potential. A recreation trail along the entire length of the rail corridor through remarkable wilderness tracts would be unparalleled and would draw aficionados of backcountry cycling from all over. And safety questions don't seem any more difficult to address than those posed by long backcountry hiking routes.

There is little prospect of a longer tourist train route from Old Forge to Tupper Lake generating substantial business. And the state can't bear the cost of upgrading the tracks to a level that can support regular train use. (The estimated cost is \$15 million to bring the tracks up to Class II, a standard for 30-mile-per-hour trains like the current route between Lake Placid and Saranac Lake. To reach Class III, which can accommodate 60-mile-per-hour traffic, would cost an estimated \$44 million.)

In the decision-making process that will begin with public hearings this fall, the state is not limited to considering its own proposal. Participants can and should make the case for converting the full 90 miles between Old Forge and Lake Placid into a rail trail. New York has the opportunity to create a premier attraction that would introduce hundreds of thousands of new visitors to the wild lands and human communities of the Adirondacks and pump much-needed revenue into the region. It shouldn't stop halfway.

Tom Woodman is the publisher of the Adirondack Explorer, based in Saranac Lake. This piece appeared as an editorial in the magazine's September-October issue.