

A trail to better life, health

By Robin Dropkin, Commentary, Albany Times Union

Friday, January 30, 2015

New York has an opportunity to create a multi-use trail through the Adirondacks that would be a wonderful addition to the constellation of upstate multi-use trails, including the Erie Canalway Trail that connects Albany with Buffalo.

The state should amend its 1996 management plan for the 119-mile Remsen-Lake Placid Travel Corridor to allow for the establishment of a year-round Adirondack Recreational Trail between Lake Placid and Tupper Lake. After further evaluation, the trail could be extended from Tupper Lake to Old Forge, thereby traversing much of the Adirondack Park.

This kind of recreational amenity has gained wide popularity in the United States during the past 30 years. The benefits include improving individual mental and physical health, stimulating tourism, bolstering local economies, and enhancing the quality of life for both residents and visitors.

The Adirondack corridor also offers a way to tell the inspiring story of the Adirondack Park during the past 150 years. This rich history includes the role of the railroads, lumbering, health care, tourism and conservation in making this region unique in our country.

The bicycling experience alone will have great tourism appeal for both the recreational cyclist and the long-distance adventurer. There are few bike trails that can transport users to a variety of mountain, lake and forest environments with a wilderness feel.

Bicycling is now the second most popular outdoor activity in America, according to the Outdoor Foundation (running is first). Americans age 6 and older went on 2.7 billion bicycling outings in 2013. Half of all adults in the U.S. participate in adventure vacations each year and 27 million have taken a bicycling trip in the past five years, according to the U.S. Travel Association.

This trend also means new business and new jobs. A study for the 34-mile section of corridor between Lake Placid and Tupper Lake projected that bicycling tourists could pump \$63.86 to \$99.30 per day into local economies and add \$19.8 million a year in tourist revenues. A recent Parks & Trails New York report on the economic impact of the Erie Canalway Trail demonstrates a trail traffic volume of nearly 1.6 million visits per year, which generates an economic impact of approximately \$253 million.

More difficult to quantify, but no less important, are the benefits that the Adirondack Recreational Trail will provide for improving public health and addressing rising health-care costs for local residents and the governments of Essex, Franklin, Hamilton, and Herkimer counties. In 2009, spending on obesity-related diseases in New York state totaled \$11.1 billion, \$4 billion of it financed by Medicaid and \$2.7 billion paid by Medicare. These expenditures directly impact personal and property taxes and the services supplied by all levels of government.

A close-to-home trail linking Lake Placid, Saranac Lake and Tupper Lake would enable all residents of the region, irrespective of age or fitness level, to increase their daily physical activity by bike or on foot. This

would lead to improved health and well-being. And it would help to reduce health-care costs and ease the burden on government budgets.

Development of the Adirondack Recreational Trail clearly represents the corridor's highest and best use.

Dropkin is the executive director of Parks & Trails New York, a statewide nonprofit organization based in Albany.