

Adirondack railroad for Olympics?

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By Scott Thompson , Adirondack Recreational Trail Advocates

At first I thought it was an April Fools Day joke published a day late. But the letter in this paper from Wayne Tucker, "Railroad would be needed for another Lake Placid Olympics," was dead serious.

"Been there, done that."

In the 1970s, a group of rail enthusiasts persuaded the state to spend millions in taxpayer dollars on restoring the then-abandoned Adirondack Railroad to facilitate transportation and ease road congestion and parking for the '80 Olympics. It turned out that only a handful of the anticipated passengers chose to ride the train. Interest from the business community and the traveling public did not merit the investment to continue developing the operation going forward. The company was bankrupt.

Now we hear the same argument 35 years later from Mr. Tucker. He tells us that the rail service should be extended from Old Forge to Lake Placid again, that the state should spend tens of millions of dollars based on the possibility of relieving a "mammoth traffic or parking problem" if Lake Placid is again awarded the Winter Olympics at some future time. Mr. Tucker assures us that "Full corridor operation would create a portal via Utica's Amtrak connections for the rest of the world," apparently not noticing that Utica has no airport, limited travel infrastructure, and a much longer travel time to Lake Placid than Albany offers to East Coast population centers.

The day before Mr. Tucker's letter appeared, a news item appeared that was not an April Fools joke, either. The headline announced: "Tourist train losing money, hopes to sell Adirondack tracks."

The news of the Saratoga-North Creek operation losing over \$1 million a year is a crystal ball to our corridor's future. With less population (under 70,000 in the Utica area vs. over 1 million in the Capital District) to draw from and substantially more mileage to maintain, the prospects for successful train service between Utica and Lake Placid are less than promising.

It is time to put aside old, failed ideas and take advantage of this important public corridor for a boost in our local and regional economies. A year-round Adirondack Recreational Trail from Old Forge to Lake Placid will serve all ages of bicycle riders, health walkers, hikers, birders and sports enthusiasts. And it will connect with a regional system of snowmobile trails from Pennsylvania to Canada to provide a major stimulus to our economy in the winter and shorten our shoulder (mud) seasons, spring and fall, when it's most needed.

The state is currently considering proposed amendments to the management plan for the corridor. Based on misinformation provided earlier by the departments of Transportation and

Environmental Conservation, serious deficiencies need to be corrected prior to the next round of public hearings. The benefits that will flow from creating a world-class recreation trail were dramatically underestimated by the state in the last round of hearings. Moreover, the cost of converting the rail to a trail have been greatly overblown, especially for snowmobiling, which requires only that the tracks be removed. And the salvage value of the rails, according to reports from two salvage companies, will prove much greater than the state has projected and will go a long way toward funding trail improvements for bicycling.

As a rail, the corridor is limited to a selected operator, specialized equipment and trained labor. As a trail, graded and covered with compacted stone dust, the corridor will be open not only for a range of recreational uses but also provide easy access for workers and maintenance equipment, including service vehicles of all kinds.

Final facts:

Most towns and villages along the line have called for the recreational-trail option.

Snowmobile costs are nothing and economic benefits great.

Trail development can be done over time, unlike rail development that must be completed prior to use.

Rail-to-trail conversions have been a success nationwide, while the Remsen-Lake Placid tourist train is a three-time loser.

When the state holds its next round of public hearings, it is important that the public interest be strongly represented.

Please attend!

Scott Thompson is a resident of Beaver River and a board member of Adirondack Recreational Trail Advocates.