

Biking is next big thing for Adirondacks

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By Jim McCulley, Adirondack Recreational Trail Advocates

A news story appeared recently in the New York Times about the new rail bike operation between Saranac Lake and Lake Clear. Patrons shell out \$25 apiece to pedal two on a machine over the 6 miles of tracks to Charlie's Inn and then back again to Saranac Lake. The rail bike operator has complained that, if the tracks are removed as expected to create a "rail trail" between Lake Placid and Tupper Lake, he would be out of business and we would lose a promising new industry.

Yet the future of the rail corridor is now widely known. It appears that the tracks will soon be removed in favor of a year-round, multi-use recreation trail for bicycling, jogging, strolling, snowmobiling and cross-country skiing. The rail bike operation seems like a desperate, last-ditch effort to keep the tracks in place. The rail bike operators insist that they have created jobs and provided a boost to the local economy.

This claim is comical, but it does prove something that many have recognized all along. It shows that a growing number of people are bicycling these days - in fact, biking is now the most popular outdoor activity after walking. And it shows that many of these recreationists want to experience the rail corridor not by train but by pedaling on it under their own power.

Article Photos



Rail Explorers offers rail biking trips on the railroad tracks between Saranac Lake and Lake Clear.

(Promotional photo)

It's true that the rail bike operation will have to shut down once the tracks are removed. But this activity would also be eliminated if the tracks were restored for tourist train service from Utica to Lake Placid, a dream that train advocates have long been pursuing. The rail bikes are able to operate over the 6 miles between Saranac Lake and Lake Clear only because that section of track is considered out of service. The Federal Railroad Administration would not allow this use on an in-service section of track. Nor would the rail bikes continue to operate if, as anticipated, the section between Lake Placid and Tupper Lake is converted into a recreation trail.

The rail bike operators claim 10,000 riders so far. If correct, this proves that pedaling on the corridor is far more popular than riding the tourist train. But how about that far greater number of outdoor enthusiasts who would much prefer to ride their own bikes on the corridor once the tracks are removed? To judge by the experience of other rail trails around the country, there will be many more residents and tourists riding their own bikes on this corridor at a time of their own choosing, and not just once but repeatedly, as weather permits.

The Rails-to-Trails Conservancy estimated 243,000 visitor days on the proposed 34-mile section of rail trail connecting the Tri-Lakes. Compare this to the experience of riding a rail bike. You are confined to a 6-mile stretch of corridor, attached to the tracks, pedaling in a straight line with no deviations, at a scheduled time. And you must pay \$25 for the privilege of pedaling on a taxpayer-owned corridor. On your own bike, when the tracks are gone, the ride will be free of charge, and you will be free to go where you please at your own pace.

The popularity and economic value of converting the rail to a trail also extends to snowmobiling during four or five months of the year. Removing the tracks over the full 90 miles from Old Forge to Lake Placid would not only create one of the nation's finest recreation trails; it would also help winter businesses along the corridor to thrive instead of just survive. Greatly improved snowmobiling, on a corridor perfectly suited for it, would bring millions in sales tax to the region and keep open some of the 55 percent of Adirondack businesses that close every winter.

The rail bike operation is an interesting gimmick and might be fun to do once. But it should in no way influence the state's impending decision on the future use of our rail corridor - except by proving that bicycling on the corridor, through some of the most scenic land east of the Mississippi, will be one of the most popular attractions in the Adirondacks.

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