

Cuomo should back trail

Governor Andrew Cuomo has demonstrated an appreciation for both the natural wonders of the Adirondack Park and for the economic potential of increased tourism in the region. From whitewater-rafting races, to funding for a refurbished Whiteface Memorial Highway, to his (unfortunate) support for a snowmobile connector trail through the newly acquired Essex Chain Lakes Tract, Cuomo has viewed the Adirondack experience from the point of view of economic opportunity.

It's surprising, then, that he has not championed one of the most exciting proposals under discussion in the Adirondacks in recent years: the conversion of an underused ninety-mile rail line through the heart of the Park into a multi-use recreation trail. This route from Old Forge to Lake Placid could become a premier attraction, drawing tourists to bike, hike, jog, and stroll through some of the most beautiful wild lands in the country. In the winter, snowmobilers could make better use of a route that would offer a longer season and safer travel when rail tracks are removed. For residents of the Lake Placid-Saranac Lake corridor, the trail would provide a safe and aesthetically superior route for bicycle commuting.

Advocates for this rail trail have urged the state, which owns the rail line, to remove the largely unused track. They cite feasibility studies showing the clear economic benefits of the multi-use trail. The first study, in 2011, showed that the status quo in which a tourist train operates over the nine miles between Saranac Lake and Lake Placid is a less desirable option than either converting to rail trail or expanding the rail operation over the full length of the line.

Two studies in 2012 demonstrated the clear financial advantages of a rail trail compared with operating train service over the full line. The cost to the state of repairing the decrepit tracks would be prohibitive. The far lower cost of removing the tracks and surfacing the bed would be largely offset by salvaging the rails and ties. Other regions of the country have proved the worth of rail trails. The Rails-to-Trails Conservancy has estimated that the sixty-two-mile Pine Creek Rail Trail in Pennsylvania generates \$3 million to \$5 million a year for local communities. The 150-mile Great Allegheny Passage in Maryland and Pennsylvania brought in \$40 million in a recent year, according to the Allegheny Trail Alliance.

Those proposing to preserve the tracks rely heavily on a mix of nostalgia and wishful thinking. Admittedly, there's a certain romantic appeal to the notion of train touring through a beautiful region where Gilded Age tycoons once arrived by private rail car. But with an estimated expenditure of \$44 million to refurbish the tracks, the cost to the state of such sentimentality is beyond reach. Some proponents argue that we should preserve the tracks to be ready for a day when expanded rail service could meet increasing passenger or freight demand. But there is little prospect of demand surging for a remote line with few passenger destinations or industries to connect to markets.

The possibility of keeping the rail line and constructing a trail alongside might seem a logical solution, but, sadly, it's not



Photo by Gary Bunk

Cyclists ride the Great Allegheny Passage Trail, which winds 150 miles through Maryland and Pennsylvania.

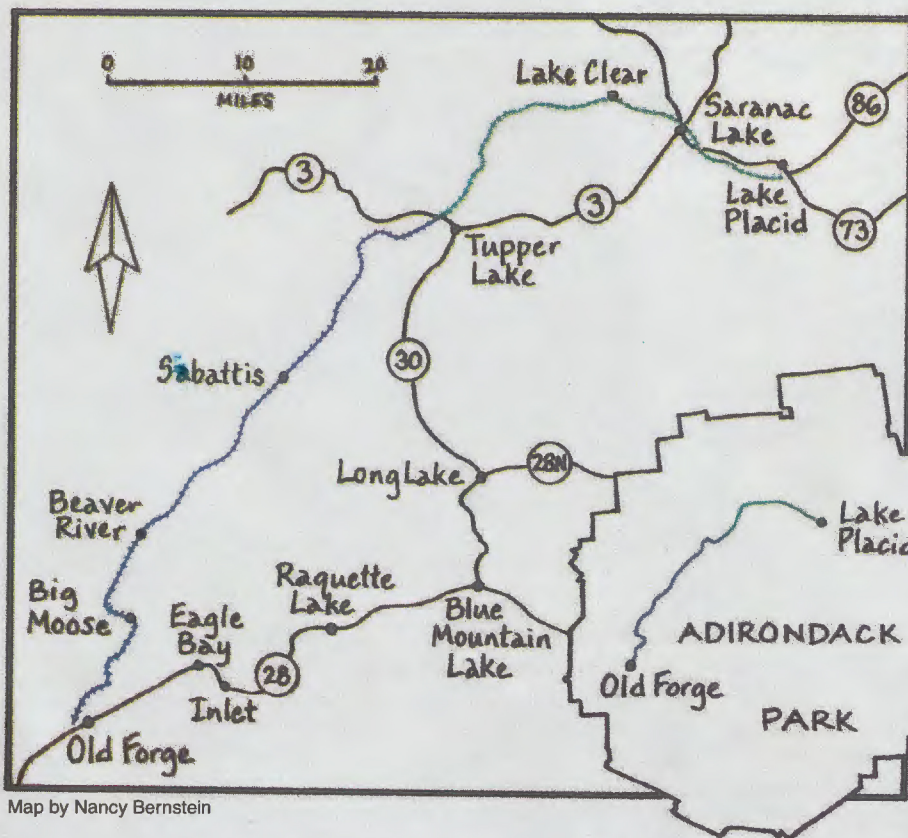
practical. The financial cost and environmental damage of that heavy construction through wild forest and wetlands eliminates that alternative. Even the limited ambition of creating a trail alongside tracks in the Lake Placid-to-Saranac Lake corridor has proved impractical. The town of North Elba, which includes the village of Lake Placid, explored that option and located some potential funding.

But it concluded last fall that the cost of engineering and environmental studies would be too high. It abandoned the idea of a side-by-side trail and called for removing the tracks and creating the rail trail.

With such a clear case for converting the rail line to a recreation trail, it's baffling and discouraging that the state has not acted. The proposal has been the subject of public discussion for years. (*The Explorer* called for the trail in an editorial in the March/April 2010 issue.) Last year the state departments of Transportation and Environmental Conservation held a series of meetings to gather public comment. But as of press time, they had not proceeded to the step of opening a review of the unit management plan that controls use of the rail line. While that review would not guarantee a decision to create the trail, the conversion cannot happen without it.

The state has the chance to add an invaluable new resource that could introduce hundreds of thousands of new visitors—families and adventurers alike—to the natural wonders and welcoming communities of the Adirondacks. Whether they venture out for day trips from a base in a nearby lodge, or undertake a through trip across some of the most beautiful land in the nation, these visitors will spend money and strengthen the economy of the region. And many are likely to return again and again, extending their enjoyment and compounding their financial impact. The governor, who has done so much to promote the tourist potential of the Adirondacks, needs to make this rail trail a reality.

—Tom Woodman, Publisher



Map by Nancy Bernstein