

# Governor green-lights rail-trail plan

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Gov. Andrew Cuomo on Tuesday announced \$23 million in funding for a plan to split the state-owned Remsen-Lake Placid Travel Corridor into one section for trains and another for a trail.



The state departments of Environmental Conservation and Transportation first announced the proposal nearly two years ago, and the Adirondack Park Agency signed off on it three months ago, but the governor's office had been silent until Tuesday's press release.

Now the governor says the state will "immediately invest in the implementation of the plan," pledging \$15 million to upgrade the railroad from Big Moose north to Tupper Lake and \$8 million to build a multi-use trail between Tupper Lake and Lake Placid. Those expenses are roughly in line with, but a little higher than, estimates from June 2015, when the DOT said it expected track rehabilitation to cost \$11 million and the 34-mile trail to cost \$7.8 million to \$9.8 million.

Railroad tracks are dusted with snow at Saranac Lake's Union Depot in February, which is normally prime snowmobiling season on the state-owned travel corridor.

It will all be done in three years, the press release said.

Fierce debate has swirled for the last five years or so about what to do with the 124-year-old railroad. Grassroots groups have formed advocating for a trail to replace the rails as well as for a trail that would weave roughly parallel to the tracks. Supporters of the railroad and of a rail bike business that started last year in Saranac Lake have started raising money for a possible lawsuit, and the Preservation League of New York State has put the railroad on its "Seven to Save" list.

The state, however, is now all aboard and moving full steam ahead with this so-called compromise plan.

The upgrade would bring the railroad up to federal standards for passenger train speeds of 30 mph on the 45-mile section between Big Moose and Tupper Lake. The state would also give a longer-term lease to the Adirondack Scenic Railroad instead of the one-year leases the nonprofit company's officials have complained about in the past.

ASR's excursion trains on the 10 miles of track between Saranac Lake and Lake Placid would have to end this November. They would continue next year and beyond between Utica and Thendara, and could soon be expanded north to Tupper Lake. Train stops would be established in communities along the railroad, including some linkage at the wilderness-surrounded Lake Lila.

"This proposal will strengthen the existing excursion railroad from Utica and extend its operation to Tupper Lake - a distance of more than 100 miles," said DOT Commissioner Matthew Driscoll. "At the same time, we will work to mitigate impacts and to preserve the character of communities along the rail corridor."

The trail, with a railroad's flat grade, would be a place for cycling, snowmobiling, cross-country skiing, running and walking. The state Olympic Regional Development Authority would have a hand in managing it.

"This long-distance, multi-use recreation trail between Lake Placid and Tupper Lake will complement our facilities like no other here in the Olympic Region," ORDA President and CEO Ted Blazer said in the release. "Families, elderly people and a wide range of outdoor enthusiasts will be able to safely and easily bike, walk or ski between (Lake Placid, Saranac Lake and Tupper Lake). The trail will not only provide economic growth for the region, but can also be used to educate users about the history and culture of the communities and the corridor. Those using the trail will also observe and learn about the wonders of the Adirondack Forest Preserve."

"From Tupper Lake to Lake Placid, the Adirondacks is home to unparalleled natural beauty, and today we are building on what makes this region so special," Cuomo said in the release. "By rehabilitating the railway and building a scenic trail, we are better utilizing the corridor and its surrounding lands to create more economic and recreational opportunities for residents and visitors alike. I am proud the state is moving forward on this important project and this is yet another example of our commitment to ensuring the Adirondacks remain a first-class tourism destination for generations to come."

One hurdle is that the railroad corridor is listed on the state and national registers of historic places. The governor's press release said state officials would consult with the state historic preservation office about ways to mitigate the impact of removing the rails and ties.

Snowmobilers would still be able to use the entire corridor in winter, although the steel rails obstruct their movement when snow cover is shallow. As part of the plan, the state plans to develop snowmobile trails between Tupper Lake and Old Forge on Forest Preserve and conservation easement lands, and connect them to trails in the western Adirondacks and Tug Hill Plateau.

Questions were raised last week about whether the plan was being reconsidered. Asked on May 10 if the tracks would be removed at the end of this year, Cuomo deferred to DEC Acting Commissioner Basil Seggos, who said, "DEC is reviewing it all now and will make a decision shortly." After the meeting, Seggos told North Country Public Radio his office would review all

aspects of the plan and may make some "tweaks here and there." The plan Cuomo announced Tuesday, however, appears to be identical to the one that had been in the public eye.

The railroad line was built over a span of 18 months by William Seward Webb and began operating in 1892. It was operated by the New York Central Railroad, which ended passenger service in 1965, and then the Penn Central Railroad until freight service ended in 1972. The state took ownership of the corridor between Remsen and Lake Placid in 1974 and leased it to the Adirondack Railway Corporation during the 1980 Winter Olympics until that short-lived company went bankrupt.