

Hearing swings to trail

Trail's fans outnumber railroad's at 1st of 2 hearings on state plan

July 9, 2015 By CHRIS KNIGHT - Senior Staff Writer (cknight@adirondackdailyenterprise.com), Adirondack Daily Enterprise

TUPPER LAKE - State officials got an earful Wednesday on their plan to split up the Adirondack rail corridor, mostly from supporters of removing the railroad tracks, including a large contingent of snowmobilers.

More than 120 people showed up at the Tupper Lake Middle-High School auditorium for a public hearing on the proposed amendment to the Remsen-Lake Placid Travel Corridor Unit Management Plan. Thirty-seven people spoke during the marathon, two-and-a-half-hour-long session.

The state departments of Transportation and Environmental Conservation, which jointly manage the corridor, want to remove the tracks between Tupper Lake and Lake Placid and create a 34-mile recreational trail for walking, biking, cross-country skiing and snowmobiling. Construction cost estimates range between \$7.8 million and \$9.8 million.

The 37 people who spoke at a rail/trail plan public hearing Wednesday night include Adirondack Recreational Trail Advocates members David Banks, Hope Frenette and Chris Kenniston; Adirondack Railway Preservation Society officials Bill Branson, Al Dunham and Al Heywood; Historic Saranac Lake director Amy Catania; rail bike businessman Alex Catchpoole; New York State Snowmobile Association director Dominic Jacangelo; town of Tupper Lake Supervisor Patti Littlefield; and Marcel Carrier, who advocated for 'forgotten locations' like Piercefield, Conifer, Childwold and Cranberry Lake.
(Enterprise photos — Chris Knight)

DOT and DEC have also proposed expanding rail service by rehabilitating the tracks between Big Moose and Tupper Lake, which would allow passenger service to run for a contiguous 86 miles, at an estimated cost of \$11 million.

The state proposal is a compromise in a debate that has swirled for more than five years between those who want the tracks preserved and those who want them replaced with a multi-use trail.

"I know this has been a very emotional and heated issue," DEC Citizen Participation Specialist David Winchell told the crowd at the start of the hearing. "Emotions don't help us make a decision. What we need is information."

Support

Not surprisingly, plenty of speakers were Tupper Lake residents and officials, many of whom said removing the rails could help jump-start the village's economy.

Town Supervisor Patricia Littlefield said she was pleased with the state's compromise plan, although she noted the town had passed a resolution calling for removal of a longer, 90-mile stretch of rails.

"It is a win-win for us," Littlefield said. "We're thrilled. We're looking forward to snowmobile traffic in Tupper Lake. We're looking forward to access to the corridor for bikes, cross-country skiing and every other access we can get."

Referencing the lengthy review and legal fight over the Adirondack Club and Resort project in Tupper Lake, village Trustee Rick Donah urged people who don't like the state's plan not to drag it into the courts.

"Please don't submit us to 10 more years of legal battles," he said. "Ultimately, we have to come to a compromise. Everything in the (Adirondack) Park is a compromise."

Hope Frenette, a Tupper Lake resident and board member of Adirondack Recreational Trail Advocates, said she's excited about the proposed recreational trail even though it doesn't go as far as her group pushed for.

"We can look forward to increased tourist traffic from the campers at Fish Creek and Rollins Pond, as well as Lake Clear, Saranac Lake and Lake Placid," Frenette said, "but what we also need is the economic boost in the winter that snowmobilers will bring to the community."

Snowmobile link

Pete Edwards of the Tupper Lake Snowmobile Club said his group supports the state's plan, for now. However, he said, there needs to be a safe and more direct snowmobile link from the west into Tupper Lake's business community.

"We're asking that if you do implement this, you add an additional 3-mile rail and trail from Tupper Lake into Piercefield, to Gull Pond Road," Edwards said. "That will significantly help the community of Tupper Lake and surrounding areas for winter tourism."

Marcel Carrier said the removal of the rails doesn't go far enough. He said he was speaking on behalf of the "forgotten locations," including Piercefield, Conifer, Childwold and Cranberry Lake. The tourism-based businesses in these communities are heavily dependent on snowmobile traffic in the winter, but the rails hinder that business, he said.

"Don't leave the rails in place," Carrier said. "Please give the forgotten locations the same chance you're giving Tupper Lake, Lake Placid and Saranac Lake."

Rail Challengers

ARTA board member David Banks questioned the state's decision to invest more money in the railroad. He noted that there are few long-distance scenic railroad operations in the country. The longest east of the Mississippi, the 57-mile Saratoga-North Creek Railway, recently announced it's losing \$1 million a year, Banks said.

A study by Camoin and Associates found the state's compromise plan for the corridor would create \$2,739,881 in spending and 25 jobs. Camoin's study projects visitation to the corridor would increase from 90,350 each year to 215,233 under the state's plan, which includes 80,155 visitors by rail, 73,215 people using the trail and 61,863 snowmobilers.

Banks noted that the Camoin study used comparable rail-trails to come up with its estimates for trail visitation but relied on estimates from the Adirondack Scenic Railroad to gauge potential train riders.

"The state should not proceed with spending many millions of taxpayer dollars on an experiment in long-distance scenic railroading north from Big Moose," Banks said.

Several speakers questioned whether people would ride such a long tourist train from Utica to Tupper Lake, noting the scenic railroad's current Utica-to-Big Moose run is a nine-and-a-half hour round-trip ride.

"If anybody here has kids, young kids under 10 or 12, if you put them on a train in a confined space and you take them from Utica, maybe they'll make it to Big Moose," said Mike Vilegi, drawing laughs from the crowd. "To go another four hours to Tupper Lake, I don't understand how any kid would not go crazy on a trip that long. They're going to get to Tupper Lake, and the parents are going to call a cab."

Rail backers

"I'm not expecting a lot of applause," said Adirondack Railway Preservation Society President Bill Branson. "We recognize that we're not entirely welcome here. But what goes on up here does not just affect the people up here."

Branson said ARPS, which does business as the Adirondack Scenic Railroad, is happy to be able to get the chance to serve Tupper Lake, but he added, "We don't believe delivering tourists to the edge of the Tri-Lakes is the answer.

"We will do it if that's what we're told to do, and we'll do it happily and successfully," Branson said, "but we don't believe it will have the best economic impact on the Tri-Lakes."

Branson said creating the proposed recreational trail "will provide exclusivity to the users, will discriminate against the elderly, the unfit and very young, and will create a resentment.

"We believe there's a better way to do it, and we're going to continue to strive for that," he said.

Al Dunham of Saranac Lake, an ARPS board member, said the state wants to remove "protected historic artifacts so we can bicycle for a few miles on a flat surface."

"Whatever happened to real hiking and real bicycling?" Dunham asked. "If the rails are removed, you saw the numbers on the (projected increase in) snowmobiles. They'll be going higher speeds, running longer hours, an extended season and more snowmobiles. In the end, what are we going to leave our grandkids and their kids?"

Dunham and other rail supporters also chastised DOT and DEC for rejecting a trails-with-rails plan developed by the Trails with Rails Action Committee, which the state said wasn't feasible.

The operator of a new pedal-powered rail bike service on the railroad tracks between Saranac Lake and Lake Clear also spoke in favor of keeping the rails. In four days of operations, Alex Catchpoole of Rail Explorers, who recently brought his enterprise to the Adirondacks from Australia, said every seat has been sold out. He said he's had visitors from as far away as New Jersey and Connecticut.

"We represent accessibility," Catchpoole said. "On Friday we had a young man in a wheelchair who was lifted into the rail bike and he and his family went along this beautiful 6-mile stretch and had a fantastic time. This is a section of wilderness this man probably wouldn't be able to experience if the rails were gone."

Going forward

Rob Davies, director of DEC's Division of Lands and Forests, said he heard a lot of things Wednesday that he's heard before, along with some new ideas.

"I heard a lot of detailed, knowledgeable information from local community people," he said. "I also heard some ideas of what the department should be looking at outside the corridor to connect Tupper Lake and this Remsen-Lake Placid corridor to some of the western communities. That was something that did strike a chord with us, and we will definitely look into that."

A second public hearing will be held July 20 in Utica. The public comment period on the amendment is open until July 27. Written comments can be sent to either John Schmid, NYSDEC, 625 Broadway, Albany, NY 12233-4254, or Dawn Klemm, NYSDOT Region 2, Utica State Office Building, 207 Genesee St., Utica, NY 13501, or emailed to adirondackpark@dec.ny.gov.