

Inn owners profit from rail bikes, prefer trail

As contributed to the Adirondack Daily Enterprise, February 13, 2016 By TOM SALITSKY - Staff Writer

While many railroad supporters in nearby Saranac Lake were disappointed by the Adirondack Park Agency's approval of the state's plan to split the Remsen-Lake Placid Travel Corridor into an upgraded rail and a recreational trail, the owners of one Lake Clear establishment couldn't be happier with the news.

"I'm so excited," John Brockway, the owner of Charlie's Inn, said Thursday. "What people don't understand is we could be riding the corridor right now if the tracks weren't there. Even with the limited amount of snow we have, they could be riding from Lake Placid to Saranac Lake to here to Tupper Lake, and it helps people, not only us - it helps everybody. It helps the people at Mountain View: Trailside, Belly's, all your little mom-and-pop little rentals and cabin rentals and places to stay." I can't believe it's taken 20-some years to get this phone call."



People pedaling a long line of Rail Explorers "rail bikes" arrive at Charlie's Inn in Lake Clear on Oct. 4, 2015.

(Enterprise photo — Morgan Ryan)

"We've been waiting for someone to do something," said Jill Brockway, John's wife. "We're ecstatic."

For the past 21 years, the Brockways have owned the restaurant, bar and hotel at the Lake Clear Junction, where a rail line once split off the

remaining one, going north to Malone. Charlie's Inn sits near the old train station, and it got a boost last year from customers of Rail Explorers, a company that debuted rail bike rides in July between Lake Clear Junction and Saranac Lake. But the Brockways would gladly trade that for the benefits of a trail without rails. Charlie's is a popular stop for snowmobilers, but not enough yet to make it profitable year round, they say, especially with exposed rails obstructing snowmobiles' way.

As pretty much everyone in the Tri-Lakes area knows, the rail-trail debate has caused a great deal of controversy over the last five years or so, with many arguing to rehabilitate the tracks along the length of the corridor and many others pushing to tear out the tracks and build a recreational trail. In 2014, DEC and DOT proposed a so-called "compromise" plan that came to be known as Alternative 7, which called for upgrading the rails for train use from Big Moose to Tupper Lake and ripping the tracks out to build a recreational trail for hiking, biking, cross-

country skiing and snowmobiling from Tupper Lake to Lake Placid. After a lengthy public comments period, the APA approved Alternative 7 Thursday.

Last summer, however, a new wrinkle in the old debate developed when Rail Explorers, owned by Australian husband and wife entrepreneurs Alex Catchpoole and Mary Joy Lu, began offering excursions along the 6 miles of track between Saranac Lake and Lake Clear. They say they gave more than 11,000 rides. Some downtown Saranac Lake businesses, most notably Two Horse Trade Company, publicly called Rail Explorers an economic boon for the village, and the Harrietstown Town Council reversed its pro-trail position to pro-rail after a presentation from Catchpoole and Lu.

The Brockways profited from Rail Explorers' trips, which ended at their front door, but they say a recreational trail will provide a better source of income.

John Brockway said people who can afford to own, insure and maintain \$13,000 snowmobiles usually have plenty of disposable income to spend when they visit the area, and Charlie's Inn has taken a big hit this year because of the lack of snow on the corridor's tracks.

"Years past, when we had good snow, we'd get big groups from down there that would come up, spend the night, and go back the next day," John Brockway said. "They'll come up from New Jersey - six, eight, 10 of them - stay at our place, and they'll dump a couple thousand dollars on a weekend when they can ride. This is big business, and it's all for the local economy, and we all know when that's big, the state gets their taxes. Everybody wins.

"If I had to guess right now, I'd say we're at least at a 70 percent loss for this winter because we can't use that corridor. People have broken their arms, people have broken their ribs, people have broken their collarbones because they get on these tracks and their snowmobile catches them and flips them over the handlebars, and it's dangerous.

"I have to go out and run my construction company for Charlie's Inn to survive," he added. "That's the brutal reality of it. If the tracks come out, there is a chance that I may not have to work outside in the cold every day.

"These rail cars, even if they did help a little bit, that's not the answer."

"The rail cars were great for the summer, but they only operate in the summer," Jill Brockway said. "(Catchpoole and Lu) come from Australia. They're not U.S. citizens. They haven't been here 20 years waiting for a decision. And then, all of a sudden, because they come one year and have a successful year, we're supposed to throw out 20 years of waiting for something to happen so that we can use the tracks for the summertime?"

John said Charlie's also stands to make more money from a recreational trail during the warmer months.

"Fish Creek and Rollins Pond, when they're at max capacity, hold around 6,000 people," he said. "Those 6,000 to 6,500 people will now be able to take a bike and ride 9 miles to Tupper Lake

and do things - go to the Wild Center, whatever else they want to do, which is going to help Tupper - or they can come 9 miles this way and come to Lake Clear, to Charlie's, and then go another 5 miles and then be in Saranac Lake.

"It's going to be a year-round deal. ... It's really a great thing for me. I'm really excited, and I hope it's not a false high, if you will, because we really want to move forward now that they've approved this, and we're excited to see when, because that's the next big thing."

Charlie's Inn isn't the only hospitality business near Lake Clear Junction. The Lake Clear Lodge & Retreat has arranged package deals with Rail Explorers, but its owners, Ernest and Cathy Hohmeyer, declined to comment for this story.