

It takes a community to create a rail trail

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By Joe Mercurio , Adirondack Recreational Trail Advocates

Flashback to August 2010. Adirondack Recreational Trail Advocates is incorporated as a not-for-profit organization and conducts its first public meeting in Lake Placid with a handful of founding board members to promote the idea of a multi-use recreational trail along the 90-mile Remsen-Lake Placid Travel Corridor. It was not too long thereafter, as I recall, that ARTA board member Hope Frenette of Tupper Lake and I were manning an informational table at an economic development conference at the Crowne Plaza in Lake Placid when we were approached by an individual representing a prominent North Country institution. Long story short, Hope and I were politely, but firmly, informed: "We have worked with the state's Department of Transportation for years, and I will tell you right now there is absolutely no way DOT is going to remove the tracks on that corridor to put in a recreational trail. What you are doing here, quite frankly, is a waste of time." ARTA's prospects for success were dubbed "slim to none."

Fast-forward to June 2015.

Rob Davies, DEC's director of lands and forests, informs a meeting of the Adirondack Park Agency in Ray Brook of the state's proposal to remove the tracks between Lake Placid and Tupper Lake and create a 34-mile recreational trail for such multi-use activities as bicycling, hiking, birding, snowmobiling and skiing. What is now being referred to as the Adirondack Rail Trail is no longer some long-shot possibility. It looks like it is about to become a reality.

That said, it's been a long, hard road. The great Adirondack Rail Trail debate has been an especially divisive and hard-fought campaign, pitting passionate recreational trail advocates against equally passionate train buffs for close to five years. We likely would not be where we are today, however, were it not for the tremendous support and combined efforts of numerous dedicated individuals, organizations, business owners and government officials both at the state and municipal levels.

As a play on the phrase, "It takes a village to raise a child," it takes a community to bring forth a rail trail. ARTA has been at the forefront of this effort, and remains active and willing to help form or participate in a working group to set goals and conditions for the construction of the rail trail. The successful implementation of a project of this magnitude, however, hopefully will be a joint venture. That means, for starters, working closely and in cooperation with the departments of Transportation and Environmental Conservation, as well as the Adirondack Park Agency. It also means seeking the support and involvement of such diverse organizations as - to name but a few - the Olympic Regional Developmental Authority, environmental groups like the Adirondack Council and Adirondack Mountain Club, preservationist groups such as Historic Saranac Lake and Adirondack Architectural Heritage, Parks and Trails New York, Barkeater Trails Alliance, New York Bicycling Association, New York State Snowmobile Association, the town and village governments between Lake Placid and Tupper Lake, and, yes - their long-

standing support for the rehabilitation of the tracks and restoration of passenger service along the travel corridor notwithstanding - the Adirondack North Country Association and North Country Regional Economic Development Council. Additionally, ARTA is bringing Carl Knoch, the author of the Rails to Trails Conservancy study and just-retired RTC trails development manager, on board to help in this effort.

In closing, the state's proposal to remove the tracks between Lake Placid and Tupper Lake and create a 34-mile multi-use recreational trail is a huge step forward. Now is the time for us to pull together cooperatively to make this section of the corridor an engine for local economic growth as well as a wonderful amenity.

Interested parties are encouraged to attend and speak out at the state's final public hearing on this issue to be held at the Tupper Lake Middle-High School, 25 Chaney Ave., 7 p.m., Wednesday, July 8. Or you can submit your thoughts on this subject before July 27 by emailing adirondackpark@dec.ny.gov or by creating a customized letter with simple clicks by visiting the ARTA website (www.thearta.org).

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