



# Keeping Track?

*A closer look at the rail-trail debate*

**JUST NORTH OF** the village of Saranac Lake lies a stretch of decrepit train track that traverses Lake Colby. On either side a light breeze ruffles the deep blue surface. A pair of red-breasted mergansers take turns gliding and diving. In the distance a stand of pine and hemlock is framed by the timeless profiles of Whiteface and Moose Mountains.

The silent tracks offer a sampling of the vistas at the heart of an unusual tug-of-war playing out in the Adirondacks.

On one side is the Adirondack Railway Preservation Society (ARPS), which operates scenic rail excursions just east

of here, between Saranac Lake and Lake Placid, as well as far to the south, from Big Moose, near Old Forge, to Utica. The nonprofit society now wants to expand its operations by filling in the corridor's 69-mile midsection with passenger service. By all accounts, the central spine represents the most beautiful part of the corridor, but because of deteriorated track conditions, the segment is now used only to move rolling stock from one end of the line to the other.

But just as supporters of the preservation society's Adirondack Scenic Railroad have outlined a bullish future with

a new business plan, a competing vision for the rail corridor has gathered momentum. A group that calls itself Adirondack Recreational Trail Advocates, or ARTA, wants to rip up the tracks and turn most of the corridor—90 miles from Lake Placid to Old Forge—into a multi-use trail that would immerse visitors in the park's wild scenery.

The advocacy group, which so far has attracted more than 12,000 signatures on a petition, makes a case that the railroad has outlived its usefulness, hobbling along with the help of volunteers and state subsidies and providing min-

imal economic benefit. By contrast, the group argues, a rail trail would enable those of all physical abilities, from young families and people in wheelchairs to joggers and bicyclists, to delve into the heart of the Adirondacks on a gentle path whose grade change is a mere two percent.

Lee Keet, a member of ARTA's board of directors who owns a house on Lake Colby, said that the railroad's existing excursion through the High Peaks region—past thickets, backyards, swamps and a golf course—has nothing on the stretch south to Old Forge. "It's virgin territory—mountain views, boreal forests and wildlife."

The rail-trail advocates are now asking the state's Department of Transportation (DOT) and Department of Environmental Conservation to reopen the

**THE DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION HAS RECEIVED MORE THAN 2,100 LETTERS AND EMAILS ON THE RAILS-VERSUS-TRAILS DEBATE; COMMENTS HAVE BEEN SPLIT DOWN THE MIDDLE.**

unit management plan for the rail corridor, in effect since 1996. (The trail proponents' plan would leave the railroad with its busiest leg, from Old Forge to Utica, a hub with connections to Amtrak and Greyhound.) The agencies, whose decision could trigger a lengthy review of the corridor, have held public hearings, solicited comments and met with both trail advocates and ARPS staff. "We had over 2,100 letters and emails come in, and interestingly enough," said Beau Duffy, a spokesman for the transportation agency, "all of the comments are split right down the middle, 50-50." In a statement, ARTA said that if the plan isn't reopened, "we will use every economic, electoral, public relations and legal means at our disposal to ensure that democracy and due process are served."

While some have proffered a compromise of running a trail alongside the existing tracks, ARTA rejects the idea on



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environmental and financial grounds. It says that because the tracks cross rivers, lakes and wetlands on narrow causeways, widening those sections to accommodate a new trail would require dumping fill in waterways, which would not meet environmental regulations.

In Tupper Lake, residents have waited years for the rail line to be extended from Saranac Lake. A group called Next Stop! Tupper Lake raised money to rebuild a historic train station from the 1890s. The new station, finished in 2009, houses a small railroad exhibit and is leased for special events.

Dan McClelland, the group's board chairman, called ARTA's unwillingness to consider a side-by-side path frustrating. "We're in a 100-foot-wide travel corridor and if you get the Army Corps and federal government in here, I think there are ways to widen that ballast," he said. "This isn't rocket science. If we work together, I think we could have both."

On the other hand, McClelland said he's eager for any amenity that would inject new life into the town's ailing economy. "If ARTA is right and we're wrong and that trail brings 10,000 people to Tupper Lake," he said, "then I'll be the first to pat them on the back."

For its part, the railway preservation society is fighting to keep the current management plan in place. And it is asking the state, which owns the corridor, for a 20-year lease so the nonprofit can expand its offerings. The society, which began operating train excursions in 1992 on four miles of track, has for years operated with just a 30-day permit from the state. That month-to-month arrangement, the society says, has prevented it from securing grants and private financing that might have enabled it to revive the central section.

"It's a major detriment," said Bethan Maher, the society's executive director. "It makes sense that very few private investors will put money into something that may not be around very long."

Maher, who oversees a staff of 20 full-time and seasonal employees, acknowledges that a large network of volunteers has helped the railroad stay afloat: 200 people donate some 13,000 hours per

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year maintaining tracks, clearing brush and operating the trains. (The DOT reimburses the society for major track work done professionally.) And, she says, the nonprofit society has been blessed by the generosity of its 18-member board, with some members loaning tens of thousands of dollars in recent years. But while some proponents of the rail trail sketch a picture of a strapped nonprofit operating on a shoestring, Maher insists that its finances are sound.

“A few years ago, was the railroad in fairly dire financial condition? Yes,” she conceded. “But I think we’ve turned that around. We have eliminated all of our long-term debt, which has freed money up to maintain the equipment and hire more staff.”

Maher herself has become something of a flashpoint, with her youth and relative inexperience drawing the attention of those pushing the rail-trail concept. At 25, she has served as executive director since 2012; before that, she was the ARPS station manager in Utica, where the preservation society is based. An anthropology major at the State University of New York at Geneseo, Maher traveled to Mexico after graduation and worked with a group of women in the Yucatan on sustainable tourism.

She bristles at the notion that her age should enter in the debate over the future of the rail corridor. She has since taken classes in running trains and has tapped the knowledge of the society’s board members, some with experience in commercial railroads—CSX; Mohawk, Adirondack and Northern; Metro-North. Bill Branson, president of the board of the Adirondack Railway Preservation Society, defended Maher. “She’s an extremely well-educated woman,” he said, “and I would much rather hire someone who comes with no bad habits whom we can train. Bethan has worked with an awful lot of state officials and they hold her in extremely high regard.”

The struggle over the corridor has chugged on for years, but has become pitched in recent months. The Adirondack Scenic Railroad has the support of two influential groups: the North Country Regional Economic Development

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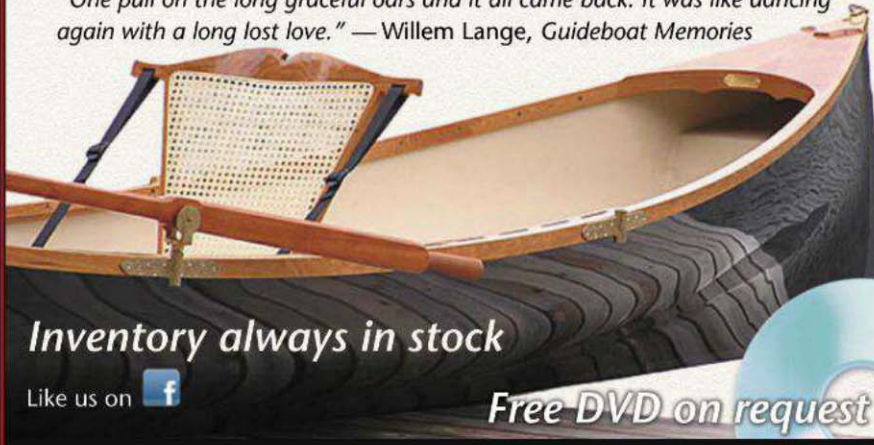
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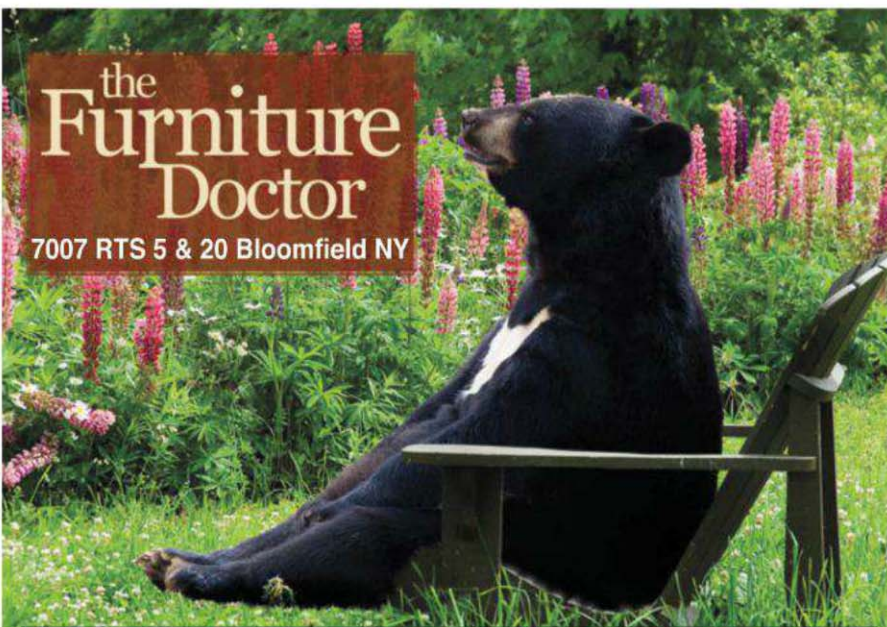


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Council and the Adirondack North Country Association (ANCA). And, of course, the railroad has another thing going for it—the simple fact that the operation already exists.

But Adirondack Recreational Trail Advocates has rallied unusually broad support beginning in 2011. In addition to the petition to the governor, the group has won endorsements from more than 400 local businesses and coaxed several local governments into passing resolutions in favor of a recreational trail. Moreover, outdoors enthusiasts who typically find themselves on the opposite side of many land-use issues have come together on this one.

Snowmobilers have joined forces with those who prefer a quieter wilderness experience to lobby for conversion of the corridor. A linear trail, they say, would accommodate snowmobiles in the winter and the latter group year-round. Jim McCulley, president of the Lake Placid Snowmobile Club, said that pulling up the rails would open up many miles of new terrain for snowmobiles. The tracks, he explained, are currently used by snowmobiles, but they require at least two feet of snow to prevent damage to sleds. If the tracks were gone, snowmobiles would be able to zip along on only eight inches of snow.

"I love trains," McCulley said. "Trains have been part of the American landscape for a long time. But [ARPS's] plan is all about nostalgia."

In their respective campaigns, the two sides have presented competing economic-impact analyses and conflicting estimates on the cost of each other's proposals. The preservation society estimates that it would cost \$15.2 million to rehabilitate the 69 miles of tracks and ties south of Saranac Lake. The trail advocates counter that the cost would be closer to \$40 million and say the expense would be borne by taxpayers, while its path could be financed by the sale of the steel rails for salvage. ARTA points to a 2007 letter from a state transportation official estimating that the state investment in the rail corridor had, at that time, amounted to \$32 million since its acquisition in 1974. (Beau Duffy,

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of the DOT, explained that, from the start, the agency assumed responsibility for track maintenance.)

Branson said that ARTA had not fully considered the expense of pulling up and disposing of miles and miles of tracks and ties. Removing the 39-foot steel tracks is particularly labor intensive since it requires a torch to first cut the rails into smaller pieces, plus there may be disposal fees for creosote-treated ties. "You have to pay a lot of money just to get rid of them," he said.

Branson also questioned the safety of a recreational trail through the wilderness south of Saranac Lake. With no cell service or crossroads for long stretches, he believes the area would be too risky for all but the hardest to explore either on foot or by bicycle. "It's a dangerous place to be," he said. "This is thoroughly remote. If you're on a bike and break a leg or have a heart attack, you're in trouble. You're going to die there."

Then there are the dueling estimates of economic benefits. ARTA commissioned the national Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, based in Washington DC, to study the potential use of a rail trail through the Adirondacks. The group determined that the first planned section, 34 miles between Lake Placid and Tupper Lake, could attract an estimated 224,260 visitors spending an average of \$86.02 a day, with \$19.8 million in new revenue a year to the local economy.

The numbers for an expanded scenic railway are not nearly as rosy. A 2011 study by Pennsylvania-based Stone Consulting that was commissioned by area chambers of commerce and endorsed by ANCA found that extending passenger service along the 69 miles would bring 7,000 new visitors, adding \$649,000 in revenue. (In 2012, the scenic railroad had 70,777 passengers, its biggest ridership since 1993.) Maher challenges the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy's numbers. "When you're paying for a study, you are going to get a positive answer," she said, adding that the railroad receives no public subsidies for its operations, like administration, marketing, fuel and equipment maintenance.

Regardless of the numbers, the ulti-

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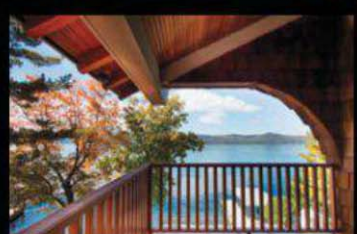
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mate fate of the corridor likely rests on more intangible factors. Both sides seem to know that the public relations contest is less about competing statistics and more about a world view: the connection to the past versus the trends of today. The preservation society, which has jazzed up its offerings with wine-tasting trips and staged train robberies, is, as its name suggests, ultimately about preserving a link to another century. (Starting in the 1890s, visitors arrived laden with trunks via a new railroad that was built through the heart of the Adirondacks.)

"I have spent a lot of time in the Adirondacks hiking and biking, and that's obviously one of the draws," said Maher, who remembers riding the train as a child. "But there are 2,000 miles of trails in the Adirondacks.... Once the rails are taken out, it's not something you are going to get back."

Equally ardent are the rail-trail advocates, who say that a new recreational trail would provide a wilderness experience for people who love high peaks and forests but will never become Forty-Sixers. With growing concerns about obesity rates, a nearly level trail would be a less intimidating venue for outdoor exercise than the side of a mountain.

Tony Goodwin, an ARTA board member from Keene, was never one to shy from a physical challenge. A Forty-Sixer by age 11, he is co-editor of the Adirondack Mountain Club's High Peaks guide and executive director of the Adirondack Trail Improvement Society, which maintains 115 miles of High Peaks trails. He has worked tirelessly on the plan for a new multi-use path, which, he says, has the potential to rank among the finest rail trails around the country. "When you're in an unfamiliar place, it's a great way to get to know the area," he said. "Any trail is a good trail." 🌿

**Lisa W. Foderaro is a reporter for *The New York Times*.**

*Send your opinion on the rail-trail debate to Adirondack Life at Box 410, Jay, NY 12941 or aledit@adirondacklife.com.*

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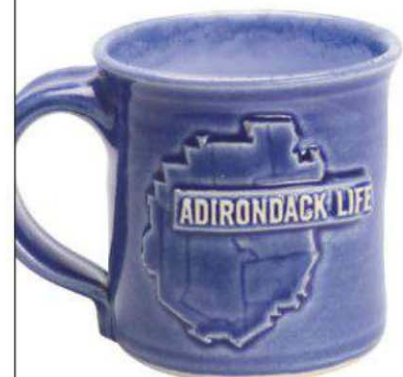
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