

Lessons from the Swamp Rabbit Trail, ADE, January 16, 2015

By David Banks , Adirondack Recreational Trail Advocates

For the past 30 years, a rail-to-trail movement has been sweeping the country. Abandoned or obsolete railroad lines like the 34-mile travel corridor linking Lake Placid, Saranac Lake and Tupper Lake are being converted into recreation trails that celebrate regional history as they provide health and economic benefits to local communities.

Consider the three-year-old Swamp Rabbit Trail, which runs 20 miles along the Reedy River between Greenville and Travelers Rest in South Carolina. I've enjoyed this trail many times while visiting family living nearby, and I've seen its economic benefits for those communities.

An intriguing aspect of this trail is its formal name: the Greenville Health System Swamp Rabbit Trail. In 2007, the Greenville hospital and health care network made a 10-year grant of \$1 million to help open and market the trail. Why? Because it saw the community outreach value of this "naming opportunity." More to the point, the Greenville Health System recognized that this safe, easy, accessible trail would encourage enjoyable exercise - biking, walking, running, etc. - and thus confer a major public-health benefit on surrounding communities.



People ride bikes on the Swamp Rabbit Trail in Greenville County, South Carolina. (Photo courtesy of Greenville County Parks, Recreation and Tourism Department)

"They realized this would help to get people out and about," Colin Young of the Greenville County Parks, Recreation and Tourism Department told Adirondack Recreational Trail Advocates. "They saw it as a way to fight obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, even mental health problems."

How has the Swamp Rabbit Trail fared so far? A report issued in December shows that there were 501,236 annual visits to the trail, up 20 percent from the previous year. The great majority were bicycle riders. Some 25 percent of visitors - accounting for 125,236 user days - were tourists from outside the "upstate area" of South Carolina who spent \$6.7 million while in Greenville County. The trail has clearly served as a catalyst for new business development.

(The survey was conducted by Julian A. Reed, associate professor of health sciences at Furman University, and was partially funded by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the Bikes Belong Foundation.)

In 2013, the mayor of Travelers Rest (pop. 4,576), a community the size of our Tri-Lakes villages, was quoted in the Greenville News as follows: "The trail has been phenomenal for the whole county, but more so for us in Travelers Rest. I can't begin to tell you how much of an economic boost it's been to this town." A 2012 Greenville News editorial described the Swamp Rabbit Trail as "one of the most popular assets in Greenville County, proving that when it comes to such trails, if you build them they will come."

Out of 55 parks and other public recreation facilities in Greenville County, "this is by far the most popular," according to Colin Young, who says it has inspired people who haven't bicycled in years "to get back in the saddle now that they have a perfect place to ride bikes right here in their own backyards."

Colin also noted that kiosks have been set up along the trail providing historical insights into the region, including a history of the railroad that once plied this corridor. More interpretive kiosks are planned, as is a 5-mile extension of the trail.

Though no survey has yet measured the impact of the Swamp Rabbit Trail on local property values, Young said there's a lot of anecdotal evidence that the trail is a big selling point for real estate: "Our office gets calls from people telling us they are moving here because of the trail and asking 'How close can we get?'"

Dianna Turner, city administrator for Travelers Rest, also gives the trail a rave review.

"We've probably quadrupled our number of downtown businesses," she told the Times-News, a newspaper based in Hendersonville, North Carolina. "We used to have dozens of empty buildings on Main Street. Now there are only a handful. Even on U.S. 25, which is our bypass, we've seen considerable growth. I think Travelers Rest has more media exposure and people are more enticed to come here and make an investment because of the trail."

On Jan. 12, the Greenville City Council voted unanimously to provide \$2.5 million for an extension of the Swamp Rabbit Trail. Bob Mihalic, governmental affairs coordinator for Greenville County, told Fox Carolina television news, "Where Greenville County owns the rail lines - we're always looking for ways to turn those rails into something productive for the community."

David Banks lives in Lake Clear and is a board member of Adirondack Recreational Trail Advocates.