

Lessons from the Virginia Creeper

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By Dick Beamish , Adirondack Recreational Trail Advocates

What was he thinking?

State officials recently held four meetings (following the four similar meetings they held a year ago) to elicit more public input on the best use of the underutilized railroad bed through the Adirondacks. At the opening of each meeting, Ray Hessinger, speaking for the state Department of Transportation, made a number of misrepresentations, including a pair of unlikely comparisons.

Mr. Hessinger cited the Cuyahoga Valley Scenic Railroad in Ohio as a potential model for the kind of tourist train he envisions for the Adirondacks, though there is little similarity. And he singled out the Genesee Valley Greenway Trail, running south from Rochester, as a potential model for the kind of rail trail many of us hope to live long enough to see on our travel corridor.

Article Photos



A woman walks dogs on the Virginia Creeper Trail.
(Photo — Richard Smith)

But there's a problem here: The Genesee Valley trail, which Mr. Hessinger said attracts some 73,000 visits a year, mostly on the northern section near Rochester, is still a work in progress. It bears little resemblance to the 90-mile Adirondack Rail Trail that could connect Lake Placid and Old Forge.

Why, when there are now nearly 2,000 rail trails in the United States, couldn't the DOT spokesman have picked one that more closely resembles what's proposed for the Adirondacks? Take the Virginia Creeper Trail, for example, in the Blue Ridge Mountains. This one is the subject of a cover story in the current issue of the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy magazine. The headline highlights its success as a tourist attraction: "Appalachian Engine: The Virginia Creeper Trail Keeps Bringing Visitors Back."

This 34-mile rail trail connects Abingdon, Damascus and Whitetop Mountain in southwest Virginia. This happens to be the same as the distance between Lake Placid and Tupper Lake, which is Step 1 of the wide, level pathway envisioned by Adirondack Recreational Trail Advocates.

My wife and I biked the Creeper Trail last spring, and we can attest to 1) its huge appeal for bikers, not to mention walkers and runners, and 2) the marvelous opportunity we have to create something every bit as successful here.

"Today," reports Maureen Hannan, who wrote the article, "the sleepy towns of Abingdon and Damascus welcome about 250,000 trail riders a year, more than 25 times their combined populations. The trail is an economic engine for the communities, generating business for bike shuttle service, rental cottages, restaurants and shops." (Halfway along the trail in Damascus, Rachel and I counted six bike shops in a village of 1,000 residents!)

Tenille Montgomery, the former marketing coordinator for Abingdon (population 8,000) where the trail begins and where we lodged for three days, says that each overnight trail visitor spends more than \$700 while staying in the area.

"And according to the town's best estimates, trail-related tourism revenues stand at about \$25 million a year," writes Ms. Hannan.

Wayne Miller, president of the Virginia Creeper Trail Club, is also cited in the article. Merchants aren't the only beneficiaries, according to Miller. Homeowners have seen jumps in property value, the artisans and musicians of an Abingdon-based folk culture collective are finding new outlets, and farmers enjoy growing demand for their produce.

Especially fascinating is the story of how strong opposition to the trail in the beginning soon morphed into widespread enthusiasm for the benefits the trail provides.

"In fact," Ms. Hannan reports, "some of the farmers who once vocally opposed the trail now leave baskets of free vegetables and flowers for trail users."

Kevin Costello, Abingdon's economic development director, acknowledges that a lot of guesswork is required when counting visitors on a public-access trail like the Creeper.

"But one critical fact Costello knows for sure," reports Ms. Hannan, "is that each year, nearly 100,000 visitors begin with a stop at one of the local bike rental shops."

Abingdon's first priority, according to Costello, is to welcome those out-of-town riders before they hit the trail. A new trailhead visitors' center, which opened in October, showcases the area's growing array of businesses. The town is also tackling an ambitious project to make all of Abingdon bike accessible. The idea is to connect bike riders to restaurants, shops and inns.

"Whether you talk with shop owners, town officials, trail volunteers or innkeepers," writes Hannan, "you'll hear a single refrain: 'People always come back.'"

"The pathways to capturing the full economic potential of the Virginia Creeper Trail are still emerging," she concludes, "but one thing is clear: Each visitor on a bike brings the promise of new vitality to this corner of Appalachia."

Our state officials at DOT and Department of Environmental Conservation, who will be reviewing the corridor management plan in the months ahead, have promised a decision in 2015. Let's hope it's the obvious one - a multi-use recreation trail for all ages and abilities. And let's also hope that Gov. Cuomo, who sees tourist development as a key to our economic future, will keep a close eye on the process.

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