

‘Merchants of Doubt’

As submitted to the ADE, November 5, 2015, By Le Keet

I just finished reading "Merchants of Doubt," a book about how a handful of supposedly civic-minded people used diversion, red herrings and false "facts" to stave off anti-smoking, anti-acid-rain and other regulations. About halfway through, I realized that this was what some pro-train people have been doing to slow down or kill off the state's chosen path to a recreation trail on the Remsen-Lake Placid corridor.

Having lost the central argument - i.e., what do the people, businesses and communities along the way want - these ideologues have changed tactics and are raising every diversionary issue they can find to try to derail (pun intended) the recreation movement. Rail bikes are now the savior for the unused train corridor. Historic preservation now trumps economic development (as if these were mutually exclusive options). A parallel train-with-trail option is still a real choice.

Let's hope these tactics do not slow the state's plans to build a recreation trail soon, at least from Lake Placid to Tupper Lake, where the trail will get the highest use and bring in the most economic benefit. And let's hope our elected and appointed representatives in Albany are not swayed by the diversionary tactics.

The truth is that the rail bikes are a great success, which simply proves that people want to access the otherwise off-limits rail corridor for recreation. In fact, the rail bikes are so successful that they take in far more than the tourist train and, unlike the train service, actually make money. Does that mean that we should give up the money-losing train and keep the tracks so people can continue to pay \$25 for a 6-mile bike ride? Of course not. Taking up the tracks will let everyone bike, hike, skate, run or walk that entire corridor for free. Will taking up the tracks kill off a successful new business? Again, of course not. Many rail trails have businesses that rent recumbent trikes, and there is no reason why that could not be the case in Saranac Lake. Alternatively, the rail bike business could simply move to Tupper Lake, where the rails will remain for now.

And then there is the question of historic preservation. Yes, the rail corridor is on the registry of historic places, as it should be. But is putting something that you make inaccessible and let deteriorate on a registry enough to honor its past glory? This train line brought tens of thousands of people to Saranac Lake to "cure" from the scourges of TB, my grandmother included. When TB was rendered treatable by antibiotics in the early '50s, the train lost most of its passengers, the rest giving up as automobiles and roads improved. By 1972, all train service ended due to no demand. Since then, this historic corridor has been left to mostly rot. It would take many tens of millions of dollars to rebuild it, but for what? No community along the corridor has asked that train service to be restored, and no businesses have come forward asking for freight trains.

The best way to honor the train corridor's history is to use it, and to put appropriate signage and information kiosks along the way. One way to do this would be by partnering with the Wild Center and the Adirondack Museum to create small exhibits at the restored depots to honor the history of the rails: for logging, transporting goods into the region when roads were poor and

sometimes impassable, and for bringing all of those patients here to hopefully recover in the absence of pharmacological means.

But can we just pull up those historic rails? Yes, we can. It is not the rails that are historic; it is the corridor. Bob Kafin, one of the finest property rights lawyers in New York (and current chair of the Adirondack Council), has stated, "Arguing over whether the rails and ties themselves are part of what is listed on the National Register of Historic Places is a red herring. It doesn't matter. Because the entire right of way is listed, any 'project' that involves state agency action within the listed right of way will require going through a process set up by the New York State Historic Preservation Act of 1980. The listing does not prohibit the removal of the rails and tracks, nor does it prohibit turning the right of way from one used by trains to one used by bikes, snow mobiles and pedestrians."

And then there remain the "Let's have both" advocates, as if there was some valid argument for keeping a taxpayer-subsidized, money-losing rail service alongside the planned recreation trail. They persist, even after it has been dismissed as unaffordable and undoable by the state. Even the planned and short parallel path between Saranac Lake and Lake Placid was killed off by its sponsors for being impractical, unaffordable and probably not permissible due to excessive wetlands.

So once again we have diversions and red herrings instead of any new facts that would support ANY reason to keep the tracks. Let's all accept that the arguments have been made, the people, municipalities, businesses and state agencies have all had their say, and the answer is to stop fighting old battles and move on to make the Adirondack Rail Trail an attraction that will, as one person put it, rival Whiteface in attracting tourists.

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