

Misinformation about Virginia Creeper Trail

As submitted to the Adirondack Daily Enterprise, February 12, 2016

To the editor:

The factoids streaming from the train advocates are becoming more strident in their absurdities. The last letter from the guy in Pennsylvania arguing that keeping the train is the best way to assure the future of snowmobiling was over the top. I feel sorry for the Tri-Lakes community that a handful of impassioned train advocates continue to delay what will be the best thing to happen to the area since maple syrup.

How the train advocates twist the realities was most evident in a letter from Bill Branson, president of the board of the Adirondack Railway Preservation Society. He cites the Virginia Creeper trail in Damascus, Virginia, as proof that there would be next to no economic benefit from converting the railroad bed to a recreational trail, saying, "Although many people use the trail, only 4 percent of visitors are 'primary purpose overnight visitors,' people who buy rooms and meals, etc. The residents of Damascus gain no economic advantage from the vast majority of trail users."

Having bicycled the Virginia Creeper Trail more than once, I have seen how hikers and bikers flood this tiny town of 813 residents. From personal observation, I knew this was just one more blatant lie, so I shared what Branson had to say with the vice mayor of Damascus and asked for his response. Here is what he wrote:

"I am not comfortable getting into a tit-for-tat argument with 'the president of the train advocates' since I do not know who this person is. I can tell you that before the Creeper trail, we had very little transient lodging or B&Bs. Almost half of the town's buildings were empty. We now have seven bike shuttle/rental shops located within the one-mile town limit. To say that the town residents receive no benefit is simply not true. About 15 percent of our budget comes from meals and lodging taxes. I am not going to say that the things (said by) the 'president of the train advocates' are completely false, but it boils down to how you view information - is the glass half full or half empty? There are many benefits other than money. Our residents take advantage of having the opportunity to jog, walk their dogs, bike, and do these things safely from vehicle traffic. If you did a survey of the residents, most would say having the trail is a great asset. We have a beautiful setting as a town, with or without the trail, but I can tell you that having the trail has brought many residents from across the country to spend their retirement years here or invest in the town through transient lodging. Simply put, the Creeper trail has filled a void that was here when the textile plants left. P.S.: The Virginia Creeper Trail is listed on the national list of historic trails."

Seven bike shuttle/rental shops in a town of 813 residents, and Branson wants to convince you these businesses rely on the townspeople for 96 percent of their business. Or, said another way, all across the country bicycle enthusiasts by the carload and planeload flock to rail trails for their

vacations. How many people would travel way up to the North Country to take an 8-mile excursion on a non-descript tourist train pulled by a modern diesel engine?

Respectfully,

Ken Youngblood

Taos, New Mexico