

Neither DOT nor DEC did its homework on railroad

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Last fall, the New York State Department of Transportation and the Department of Environmental Conservation held a series of "listening sessions" to determine whether the unit management plan for the Adirondack rail corridor should be reviewed. The two agencies deliberated, decided that the plan should be reviewed, and then a year later held another round of recently completed public hearings.

During this year of deliberations, both the rail and trail sides of this debate submitted relevant material to the DEC and DOT. One of these submissions was the Adirondack Railway Preservation Society's business plan, which envisioned full (Utica to Lake Placid) corridor operations.

At the recent hearings on the plan for the Adirondack rail corridor, DOT's presenter, Ray Hessinger, said that DOT had been "doing their homework" since last year's listening sessions. Unfortunately, it doesn't appear that the ARPS business plan was on the list of "required reading." This despite the notion that the ARPS business plan might just be crucial in determining whether the state should invest tens of millions of taxpayer dollars to achieve ARPS's goal of full corridor operations.

Phantom train connections

As one who has "done his homework" and actually read the ARPS business plan, I noted that on at least eight occasions the plan mentioned "cross-platform transfers." The plan emphasizes that this potential direct relationship with Amtrak sets the ARPS-run Adirondack Scenic Railroad apart from other tourist railroads, and it strongly implies that cross-platform transfers would ensure success in carrying a profitable number of passengers from Utica to Lake Placid. Unfortunately for ARPS, my research determined that the business plan's proposed schedule for full corridor operations did not provide for any convenient cross-platform transfers. My research entailed looking at the printed schedule in the business plan and comparing that to the Amtrak schedules available online. Research time was about five minutes - minutes that DOT seemingly couldn't be bothered to spend during its year of deliberations on the plan. DOT officials contacted at the listening stations in Tupper Lake and Lake Placid admitted that they had not done this elementary five minutes of research to verify the claim of cross-platform transfers.

Specifically, the proposed timetable only shows an Adirondack Scenic Railroad train leaving Utica at 8:40 a.m. The first Amtrak train from New York City doesn't arrive until two hours later. There are other Amtrak trains through Utica during the day, but any travel to Lake Placid from the most populous urban market would require an overnight stay in Utica.

An eastbound Amtrak train mentioned in the ARPS business plan does provide a connection after a 45-minute wait, but that's assuming one is willing to board in Buffalo at 4:30 a.m. Sunday return trips to New York do benefit from Amtrak's Sunday schedule so that an 11:30 a.m. departure from Lake Placid, a change of trains in Tupper Lake and a one-and-a-half-hour wait in Utica would bring a passenger to New York City at 11:45 p.m. (Hope there is a good Starbucks on your way to work the next day!)

More neglected homework

Other basic information that DOT apparently missed in this homework assignment was whether the proposed operating budget matched the increase in train traffic. A few minutes comparing the Adirondack Scenic Railroad's operating timetable in 2012 to the timetable proposed in the ARPS business plan shows a tripling of train miles operated. Operating costs, however, only increase by 45 percent from those reported for 2012. (2013 figures are not yet publicly available.) This rather miraculous "efficiency" is especially remarkable given that daily, long-distance operations could only likely be carried out with paid train crews and not volunteers.

The DEC also apparently failed to do its homework with regard to environmental issues. Case in point: The DEC presenter, from seemingly out of nowhere, declared that tracks removed from bridges over rivers designated "wild" or "scenic" could not be replaced if removed. (The possibility that rails could be restored at some future time has always been seen as an option, should the railroad be converted to a trail.) Slightly more lengthy research on my part determined that the rail corridor does not actually cross any rivers at the point where they are classified as "wild" or "scenic."

The Raquette River has "scenic" stretches above and below Tupper Lake and Raquette Pond, but where the railroad crosses, it is only classified as "recreational" with no restrictions on rail restoration. Likewise, the "scenic" designation for the Bog River only begins below the dam at Hitchins Pond. The cited Moose River bridge is south of Thendara and not proposed to be part of the trail.

Since the hearings, the DEC has retracted its statements about the river crossings. Nevertheless, I don't think I am out of line to suggest that our public officials should be expected to do a better job of determining the facts. A great deal of information has been presented to DOT and DEC by advocates of both the rail and trail scenarios, but a year should have been sufficient time to sort out the competing claims for the ultimate use of this publicly owned facility.

The state's duty to do its homework becomes even more important when one possible outcome involves the expenditure of tens of millions of taxpayer dollars.

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