

No, we can't have both trail and railroad

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To the editor:

I'm puzzled. The Enterprise is usually (and commendably) quite rigorous in demanding accuracy in Guest Commentaries. So I wonder why you do not question one patently false statement that often appears on your Opinion page.

For years, train advocates have insisted that we can have both a railroad and a trail on the single-track travel corridor through the Adirondacks. The latest appearance of this bogus claim came in a recent commentary by Mark Kavosaurian. Once train service is fully restored on the corridor, Mr. K told your readers, you will be able to take the train from Old Forge to Lake Placid with your bicycle, unload it in Lake Placid and bike back to Old Forge. You could do this, Mr. K tells readers, on a side-by-side trail constructed next to the tracks. He refers to the Lake Placid-to-Saranac Lake bike path as though it could actually happen.

He overlooks the fact that North Elba has abandoned the project for financial and environmental reasons. North Elba has opted instead for a multi-use, year-round recreation trail asking for the tracks to be removed. Yet we continue to hear assurances from train advocates that "we can have both."

Fact: We can't have both. It has to be one or the other, rail or trail. It's not Adirondack Recreational Trail Advocates saying we can't have both. It's the New York State Department of Transportation and Department of Environmental Conservation.

There is another false claim that goes unchallenged in your Guest Commentaries. When its finances are brought up, the Adirondack Scenic Railway will always claim that it pays its own way. The facts here are very clear and easily attainable. ASR's tax return shows a functionally insolvent operation. From 2009 to 2012, ASR received \$1,844,765 from the taxpayers. ASR spent \$1,621,850 on corridor maintenance, and another \$50,000 per year went toward operating costs.

Fact: ASR does not even cover its operating costs, much less infrastructure repair and improvements. For example, their derailment earlier this year in Lake Placid cost taxpayers over \$70,000 to repair 200 feet of track. Yet ASR stated in this newspaper that it would cost \$3,000.

Now we find out that the railroad-sponsored Trails and Rails Action Committee has no plans to include snowmobiling in its proposed "alternate route" between Saranac Lake and Tupper Lake - despite the huge economic benefits to be gained from snowmobiling once the old rails have been removed.

Fact: This "rails and trails" concept has little relation to the wide, level rail trail proposed by Adirondack Recreational Trail Advocates.

Yet ASR proclaims that their alternative trail will work for everyone. Well, it won't work for everyone except backcountry mountain bikers, which is a real slap in the face to the businesses up and down the line that need winter tourism.

Facts are sometimes hard to swallow. But getting our facts right is the only way we can determine the best use of our travel corridor - the greatest good for the greatest number of people - through the Adirondack Park.

Jim McCulley

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Lake Placid