

Playing monopoly with tourist trains and rail bikes

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As New York state nears a decision on the best use of the Remsen-Lake Placid Travel Corridor, let's review the options.

Tourist train advocates want to extend their operation from Utica all the way to Lake Placid, 140 miles. A new business utilizing 6 miles of track for "rail bikes" between Saranac Lake and Lake Clear hopes to keep the tracks in place to continue their operation. Yet most of the Tri-Lakes towns and villages along the corridor prefer a third option. They have requested that the tracks be removed and replaced with a recreation trail which, based on the success of rail trails throughout the country, would provide economic, health and recreational benefits to residents and visitors.

A framework for decision

Adirondack Recreational Trail Advocates believes that the state should allow and promote the widest possible range of productive uses for a public asset like the Remsen-Lake Placid corridor. Of course, those uses must be compatible with each other, and they should require minimal public expense. Conversion of the rail corridor to a recreational trail for bicycling, jogging, exercise walking, strolling, wheelchair use, nature study, snowmobiling, etc., clearly meets this standard. On the other hand, use of the corridor by a long-distance tourist train, or by a rail bike operation on a small section of the line, are incompatible with more popular and productive uses of the corridor that are possible once the tracks have been removed.

Free public use vs. private monopoly

The Adirondack Rail Trail will enable FREE use of the state-owned corridor. The alternative is a MONOPOLY, granted by the state, for commercial tourist-train or rail bike use of the corridor. In the latter scenario, residents and visitors would have to pay the railroad or rail bike operators for use of a public corridor that we all own, at whatever price they want to charge, and only if, when, and how the railroad or rail bike operators allow such use. For these private interests to lobby the state government, seeking exclusive use of the corridor, is defined as "rent-seeking." This would certainly benefit the business interests of the Adirondack Scenic Railroad and Rail Explorers (the rail bike operators), but it would seriously shortchange local communities along the way in terms of lost opportunity costs.

What these lost opportunities amount to can be seen by example. The hugely popular Virginia Creeper Rail Trail in the Blue Ridge Mountains of southwest Virginia is the same length (34 miles) as the proposed Lake Placid-Tupper Lake section of the Adirondack Rail Trail. The latest report from Rails-to-Trails Conservancy estimates that there are now 250,000 annual visits to the Virginia Creeper Trail and \$25 million in trail-related revenues. That averages more than \$2 million a month!

Railroads and rail bikes

Adirondack Scenic Railroad has operated at the southern and northern ends of the Remsen-Lake Placid corridor for nearly two decades. During this time, at least in the section connecting Lake Placid and Saranac Lake, it has not noticeably helped our local economies or stimulated tourism. Extending the line in the south from Old Forge to Tupper Lake, as state officials have suggested, would increase the risk of bankruptcy for what is already a financially precarious operation. And running the tourist train 106 miles from Utica to Tupper Lake would cost taxpayers dearly.

Adding to the absurdity of this proposal is the track record for long-distance tourist trains in this country. The longest U.S. scenic railroad is under 68 miles - and they want 106 or 140 miles, at taxpayer expense, with no evidence of demand for excursion trips of that length?

We need jobs and paychecks. We need a thriving tourist industry that supports our hotels, restaurants, shops, art galleries, museums and other attractions. The tourist train has failed to meet this challenge.

As for the new and much-publicized rail bikes, this limited (and limiting) use of a 6-mile section of the corridor has evidently generated profits for the operators and provided fun for the customers. Perhaps rail bikes look good because the Adirondack Scenic Railroad looks so bad here. There is little evidence that the rail bike concession has contributed significantly to the region's economy - in contrast to the dramatic economic impact of many rail trails nationwide.

Since it's clear that some folks have enjoyed pedaling for several miles on machines attached to the railroad tracks, I'll conclude with a suggestion for the rail bike entrepreneurs. As has been done with great success on the Withlacoochee Rail Trail in Florida, the Rail Explorers could rent out recumbent tricycles for a similar experience on our Adirondack travel corridor - but without the restraint of being confined to railroad tracks. This would also allow for a great many other public uses of this public corridor, all free of charge, when the tracks are removed and a firm (but non-paved) surface is laid down.

True, renting out recumbent trikes would be a tougher business challenge for the rail bike entrepreneurs. But that's how the free market, as opposed to a monopoly, is supposed to work.

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