

Questions for Gov. Cuomo in the rail vs. trail debate

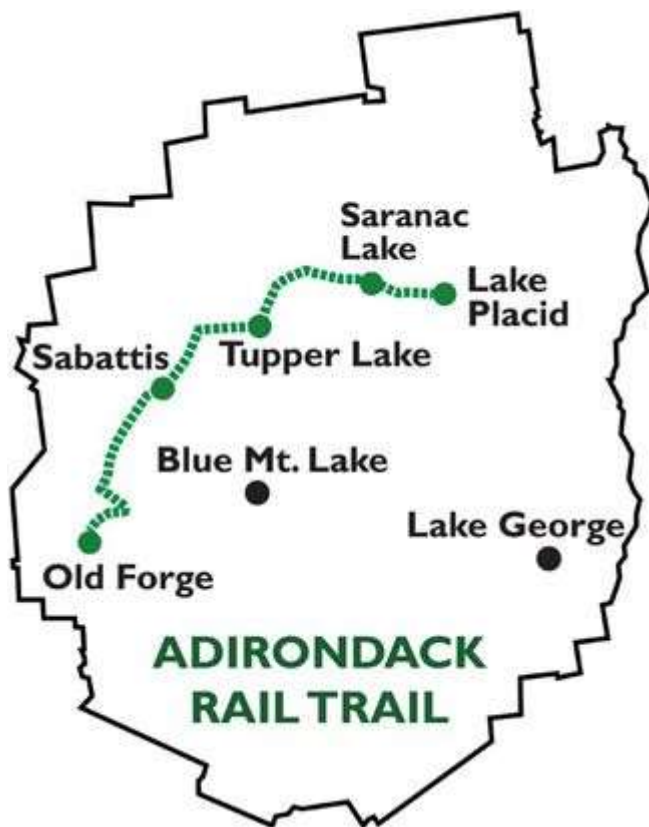
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By DAVID BANKS , Adirondack Recreational Trail Advocates

"I love the train!"

We've all heard it. Most Tri-Lakes residents ride the tourist train rarely, if at all, but many still like the IDEA of a train. Perhaps we hear a train whistle and recall happy, sunny days from our youth. The problem is, that train died many decades ago. It was briefly revived for the 1980 Olympics, died again and was reincarnated years later as the Adirondack Scenic Railroad.

Five years ago, after more than a decade of hard work and taxpayer expense, many people across the region were disappointed with the tourism impact of the tourist train between Lake Placid and Saranac Lake. The unused rail corridor from Saranac Lake south to Old Forge was in a state of near abandonment.



Opportunity knocks

At the same time, old rail corridors across the nation were being converted to rail trails. Bikers, walkers, runners and fresh air enthusiasts were flocking to these essentially level rail trails, well away from motor vehicle traffic, where they could safely recreate without needing elite athletic skills or a thousand-dollar bike. A group of community leaders saw the same opportunity for the Remsen-Lake Placid Travel Corridor through the Adirondack Park. They studied this publicly owned resource, considered the multiple benefits rail trails were bringing to other areas and proposed a 90-mile Adirondack Rail Trail on the corridor from Lake Placid to Old Forge. Such a trail would clearly attract tourists to our region. Meanwhile, tourist train operations would continue south of Old Forge.

In 2015, the state finally decided, by way of a "compromise," that a 34-mile Tri-Lakes rail trail would draw more tourists and be of greater benefit to our regional economy than a marginal tourist train. The state also proposed that rail operations be extended north to Tupper Lake from Utica, a total distance of 106 miles, from its current 62-mile run from Utica to Big Moose. Such an extension would make this by far the longest-distance tourist train in the nation. The longest, in Alaska, runs only 67.5 miles.

What do we know?

The state review of rail vs. trail compared the costs of building and maintaining a rail trail in the corridor versus the costs of refurbishing and maintaining the rail infrastructure for a seasonal tourist train. The state concluded that the costs of rail and trail were similar. Based on the experience of rail trails nationwide, it was also clear that a year-round, multi-use recreational trail connecting Tri-Lakes communities would serve more people and benefit our economy more than an unproductive excursion train.

However, the state review neglected the costs of operating an extended tourist train. Fuel, maintenance and every other current expense would increase substantially. The volunteer workforce for the Adirondack Scenic Railroad would not suffice, and personnel costs would skyrocket for multi-hour trips. Yet the question of operational costs was not seriously considered.

Also, the state unquestioningly accepted ASR revenue estimates for extended operations. However, given that no scenic railroad in the U.S. travels such a long distance, there is no good basis for such an estimate. Therefore, operational costs and revenues for an extended scenic railroad are best described as "unknown," as is the long-term cost to taxpayers.

Questions for Gov. Cuomo and his agencies

ASR appears determined to expand not only to Tupper Lake but beyond to Saranac Lake - or even as far as 140 miles from Utica to Lake Placid. This would preclude any possibility of connecting the Tri-Lakes region with a rail trail. Before such a proposal can be considered further, Gov. Cuomo, his relevant agencies (the New York state conservation and transportation departments) and the public would need answers to the following questions:

* How much are state taxpayers currently spending per year in support of the tourist train? What ASR expenses are paid by the state?

* What would be ASR's total annual cost for operating a much longer tourist line?

* What is the state's estimate for annual revenue from an extended tourist train, and what is the basis for that estimate?

* Any expansion of ASR's operations will require major capital expenditures. Given ASR's precarious financial health, as noted by ASR's own auditors, how would those expenditures be funded?

* What would be the annual taxpayer burden for extended ASR operation?

* What forms of state assistance to essential community services might need to be sacrificed to fund annual taxpayer assistance for extended ASR operation?

What we know, and don't know

We know how much it would cost to build and maintain the Adirondack Rail Trail. Based on rail trails elsewhere, we know it will become an important tourist destination, drawing thousands of visitors and their dollars on a year-round basis.

We do NOT know how much it would cost to operate an extended tourist train, how much revenue it might generate, how many tourists it might attract, or how much it would cost taxpayers to support their operations of only four months a year. Our experience with the existing excursion service is anything but reassuring.

Final questions: Can we afford to issue a taxpayer-funded "blank check" to a near-bankrupt ASR in pursuit of their nostalgic but unrealistic dreams? Is it enough that some people say, "I love the train?"

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