

Questions for Gov. Cuomo about Remsen-Lake Placid Travel Corridor

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By David Banks , Adirondack Recreational Trail Advocates

The state departments of Transportation and Environmental Conservation will soon decide the fate of the Remsen-Lake Placid Travel Corridor. That decision will, the state said, specify future uses that "yield that greatest benefit to the people living, working, and visiting along the Corridor."

Currently, the state's "compromise proposal" is to turn the northern section of the corridor - linking Lake Placid, Saranac Lake and Tupper Lake - into a recreational trail for bikers, walkers, nature lovers, snowmobilers, etc. The state would also extend the scenic railroad north from Big Moose to Tupper Lake, extending by 44 miles what is already the nation's sixth-longest scenic railroad. At nearly 62 miles (Utica to Big Moose), the Adirondack Scenic Railroad is currently the longest-distance scenic railroad east of Denver, and only 6 miles shorter than the 67.5-mile White Pass & Yukon Route Railroad - the longest-distance scenic railroad in the country.

Gov. Andrew Cuomo has been a great champion for tourist development in the Adirondack Park. Prior to a final decision on the corridor management plan by the Adirondack Park Agency, I hope the governor will seek answers to some important but unasked questions.

Article Photos



A girl rides on the Virginia Creeper Trail, created from a former railroad in southwestern Virginia.

(Photo provided — Richard Smith)

Does it make sense?

The questions the governor needs to ask are pretty basic: Does the compromise proposal make sense - especially the part about extending the tourist train 44 miles north from Big Moose to Tupper Lake? Would the benefits of such an extension justify the costs to taxpayers?

The state's previous analysis of expenditures and revenues did not address key aspects of the compromise proposal. Here are a few specific questions that the governor's agencies need to address before authorizing what would be the most extensive and quite possibly the most useless tourist train in the United States.

The Adirondack Scenic Railroad has been operating along the corridor since 1992. What have been the costs to taxpayers, per year over the past decade, for improving and maintaining the corridor for rail use? What other railroad-related expenses, if any, has the state paid for? Who knows? Nowhere has there been a serious review of past costs to taxpayers. With the railroad's continuing secrecy, all we really know is that the tourist train has struggled financially and has had no appreciable economic impact on the Tri-Lakes region.

Tourist train revenues

More questions for the governor to require answers to: What are the train's revenues per year over the past 10 years? What are yearly tourist-train revenues for the segments Utica-Remsen (outside of the state-owned corridor), Remsen-Thendara, Thendara-Big Moose and Saranac Lake-Lake Placid? It appears that the northern segments have generated little revenue for many years and have burdened the railroad financially. If so, how can a multi-million-dollar northern extension of the tourist train be justified?

The state provided estimates for ridership and revenue from Utica to Tupper Lake, a distance of 106 miles. However, those estimates are suspect, being based on calculations provided by the tourist-train operators, who have their own ax to grind.

The hard, cold fact is this: No scenic railroad in the United States operates over a distance of more than 68 miles. Why? Because there's so little demand for such a train ride.

Future public costs

How much would it really cost New York state taxpayers over the next 20 years to upgrade and maintain the corridor, within fractions of an inch, for extended rail service? And to support day-to-day operations? How much will the proposed scenic railroad maintenance facility in Utica ultimately cost taxpayers? Again, nobody knows. What about Adirondack Recreational Trail Advocates' recent characterization of the state's 106-mile scenic rail proposal as "a costly, risky experiment in taxpayer-funded, long-distance scenic railroading?"

The state will seek a suitable rail operator for this project. Will the state require demonstration of financial solvency and capitalization sufficient to undertake extended rail operations? Let's hope so.

What happens if no financially solvent, adequately capitalized entity submits a proposal? If the current tourist train operator is the sole applicant and its finances are found lacking, will they be allowed to continue to operate along the Remsen-Big Moose segment of the corridor?

One final question: How about FIRST installing the recreational trail between Lake Placid and Tupper Lake? Study the results over a five-year period. How much use does the trail get and how much new business does it generate? Review the accumulating evidence for (or against) the scenic railroad. After five years, decide which option south of Tupper Lake makes more sense economically, recreationally, and as a public health benefit. Make an evidence-based, rational decision, and avoid potentially wasting taxpayer dollars that are needed so desperately elsewhere.

Abundant evidence supports the success of rail-to-trail conversions, and this represents one of our best opportunities for tourism development in decades. Conversely, when it comes to a major extension for a little-used tourist train, a service for which there is no obvious demand but high costs, we should look before we leap.

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