

Rail trail will provide missing link

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By DICK BEAMISH , Adirondack Recreational Trail Advocates

The Adirondack Park appears poised to welcome bicycling as a major outdoor activity alongside hiking, paddling and fishing. Such a move reflects national trends, with bicycling second only to walking as the most popular form of active outdoor recreation.

We got a glimpse of the potential for bicycling in the Adirondacks this past summer. A rail bike business, operating on 6 miles of rail corridor between Saranac Lake and Lake Clear, attracted some 11,000 customers who paid \$25 apiece to pedal on machines, affixed to the tracks, between these two points. The popularity of this enterprise suggests that many more people will jump at the chance to ride real bicycles, free of charge, whenever they feel like it, on that very same corridor when it becomes part of a recreation trail connecting Lake Placid, Ray Brook, Saranac Lake, Lake Clear and Tupper Lake.

The Adirondack Park Agency is expected to give final approval to this project, as proposed by the New York state Transportation and Environmental Conservation departments, before the end of the year.

The potential for attracting bicycle-riding tourists was also reflected in the "Leisure Travel Study" released last month by the Regional Office of Sustainable Tourism in Lake Placid. Not surprisingly, the study found that "most visitors to the region were drawn by outdoor recreation." Their survey also revealed the following order of preference for outdoor activities in this part of the Adirondack Park: hiking (85.5 percent), canoeing-kayaking (55.7 percent), fishing (36.1 percent), cycling (18 percent), skiing-boarding (16.8 percent), cross-country skiing (8.7 percent) and snowmobiling (7.7 percent).

While an 18 percent share for biking tourists wasn't bad, it could be a whole more than that in the future, right up there with hiking and paddling. It's intriguing to imagine this region as a bicycling mecca 10 years from now, with the Adirondack Rail Trail linking Placid and Tupper. The key to success is that the rail trail be installed promptly and properly, that its surface be firm enough for thinner-tired road bikes (along with wheelchairs, baby joggers and the like).

Based on experience elsewhere, the Tri-Lakes rail trail will, on its own, attract tens of thousands of cyclists from all over. Just look at the comparable Virginia Creeper Trail in Virginia with some 250,000 annual visits last year, the Lehigh Gorge Rail Trail in Pennsylvania with 281,145 visits, and the Withlacoochee State Trail in Florida with 405,632 visits. (My wife and I recently biked each of these rail trails and found them models for what we can expect in the Adirondacks.)

But there's more to it than just the bike path. The Adirondack Rail Trail will serve as a catalyst for biking throughout this region, on and off the rail corridor. Consider the current situation

facing cyclists in Lake Placid. There is no safe, easy way to bike from there to anywhere else. To pedal out of town on a bicycle one must be willing to 1) ride on the narrow, hazardous road leading from Lake Placid through Wilmington Notch, 2) bike the narrow, hair-raising highway through Cascade Pass to Keene, or 3) risk a death-defying ride to Saranac Lake on Route 86.

With the rail trail in place, cyclists will be able to ride peacefully and pleasantly from Lake Placid to Saranac Lake and beyond, far removed from trucks and cars. From there, bikers can continue on the corridor all the way to Tupper or, for a change of terrain, they can leave the corridor at the McMaster Road crossing or Lake Clear Junction to ride the quiet, scenic country roads of the northern Adirondacks. In this way, the Adirondack Rail Trail will attract bicycle riders who can take advantage of the many other biking opportunities the rail trail opens up to them. When you add the 34 miles of level, easy rail trail riding to the hundreds of miles of bikable backroads, the Adirondack Park will become known as THE place in the Northeast not only for hiking and paddling, but for pedaling as well.

That's the prospect as of December 2015. We have literally thousands of miles of foot trails and canoe routes, countless mountains to climb and "forever wild" forests to explore, an enviable network of lakes and rivers for paddling, fishing and swimming. You name it, we've got it all - except for that one missing component. Now we're about to rectify that omission.

The Adirondack Rail Trail should put us on the map as a haven for cyclists of every stripe, including local bike riders of all ages and abilities and droves of happy, healthy, money-spending tourists from near and far.

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