

# Rail vs. trail: a matter of perspective

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By ED DONNELLY

As a relatively new resident of the Adirondacks, I've been watching with interest the debate over the Remsen-to-Lake Placid rail corridor. Anyone following this issue has already heard or read all of the pros and cons from the trail advocates and the rail supporters. Each side is equally committed to their special vision. However, important questions need to be addressed.

For instance, which option would provide the most economic advantage to the region? Which option will benefit the most people? Which option utilizes the resource to its fullest potential? Both sides of the debate have provided their answers to these questions.

I have been considering writing a commentary addressing the rail-vs.-trail controversy for some time. I felt that as a new resident it was not my place to comment on this contentious local concern. However, two events have prompted me to weigh in on the matter. First, on a recent trip to Pennsylvania, I drove through Old Forge. I was amazed at how many snowmobiles were buzzing around the area. The parking lots of restaurants, gas stations and stores were packed with snowmobiles. The motels were lined with trucks that had snowmobile trailers. All that I kept thinking was, "This could be Tupper Lake! Our community is seriously missing out on an excellent opportunity." Needless to say, we all know why the snowmobilers seldom venture up here. The rails make travel unsafe. It's hard to fathom the economic loss to our area. Those who do not think there is anything to be gained from the snowmobilers should visit Old Forge during the winter.

Second, I had an insightful conversation with a lifelong Tupper Lake resident. During our chat about the prospects of the community, the subject turned to the rail debate. He asked if I had signed the petition in support of keeping the rails.

"Actually, I believe the trail would bring more economic benefit to the area," I replied. He responded by saying, "No one will come up here to ride a bicycle on a path in the woods." That's when I realized why it's taking so long to build the rail trail. It's a matter of perspective. The gentleman remembered a time when bicycles were children's toys and the trains brought lots of people into the area. From his point of view, the only sensible thing to do would be to bring the train back. No wonder there is such opposition to the trail.

The flaw in this reasoning is that he is not aware of what's going on throughout the country. He has not witnessed the growing interest in outdoor activities especially by people in metropolitan areas. Additionally, there is a huge desire to explore and experience nature away from cities and traffic. Before I retired, I worked in a department of about 30 employees. Twenty-five percent were avid cyclists. They would regularly go on 60 to 90-mile cycling trips. They would travel to distant destinations to ride their bicycles. Furthermore, I have seen the popularity of rail trails in the Pittsburgh area. My frame of reference is very different than that of my neighbor's.

I am not a bicycle or snowmobile enthusiast. I have no vested interest in either of these activities. However, I do have a deep personal interest in my new community. It saddens me to see this missed opportunity. In my opinion, the economic future of the Adirondacks is in tourism. The younger generation that seeks outdoor experiences are the people that we should be working hard to attract. They are the ones who will bring the economic growth that is needed. However, they do not want to be tied to schedules and modes of transportation other than their cars. They want to be free to explore on their own terms. The tourist train and rail bikes will not facilitate this.

A rail trail will not solve all of the economic issues facing our region. Nevertheless, it would definitely be a large piece of the puzzle. I have no doubt that eventually the trail will prevail. It is time to transform the outlook of a generation whose mindset of the Adirondack railroads ended decades ago.

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