

Rail/trail decision due soon

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By Dick Beamish , Adirondack Recreational Trail Advocates

By the end of June, the state is expected to make a decision about the best use of the historic rail corridor through the Adirondack Park. This follows a proposal last fall by the New York state departments of Transportation and Environmental Conservation in which two concurrent courses of action were suggested:

1. Replace the tracks on the 34-mile section between Lake Placid and Tupper Lake with a year-round, multi-use recreation trail.
2. Consider extending the tourist train over the 56-mile corridor from Old Forge to Tupper Lake.

Article Photos



The train expansion, for which there is no need and little demand, would cost taxpayers dearly. The rail-to-trail conversion, its cost largely covered by salvaging the tracks, would provide substantial economic, recreational and health benefits for Adirondack communities - a prediction based on the success of "rail trails" elsewhere.

Many of these rail-trail success stories have been the subject of letters and commentaries on this page over the past three years, including these:

* Island Line Trail: Across Lake Champlain, the 14-mile Island Line Rail Trail has become the most popular recreation trail in Vermont. It runs north from Burlington to South Hero Island, providing a safe, scenic place where children and families can enjoy healthy exercise away from road traffic. An estimated 150,000 visitors use this trail annually.

* Virginia Creeper Trail: The 34-mile Virginia Creeper Trail is in the Blue Ridge Mountains. Similar in many ways to the proposed Adirondack Rail Trail, it connects Abingdon (population 8,000) and Damascus (population 1,000) with Whitetop Mountain.

"Today (these) sleepy towns welcome about 250,000 trail riders a year," reports the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC) magazine. "Trail-related tourism revenue is estimated at \$25 million a year. Each visitor on a bike brings the promise of new vitality to this corner of Appalachia."

* P'tit Train Du Nord: A letter writer described this 124-mile rail trail as "a great draw for cyclists from all over. My wife and I, along with 13 friends, rode this route through the low-lying hills of the Laurentians north of Montreal. This is something that anyone who enjoys a wilderness experience from the vantage of a bike saddle should not miss. Many of the old stations have been turned into restaurants, museums and tourist-friendly shops. We enjoyed four days of beautiful biking."

* Elroy-Sparta Trail: "Take the (rail trail) I know well," a seasonal resident wrote. "The Elroy-Sparta Trail (runs) 32 miles through the Wisconsin countryside. In 1970 you could not find anyone outside the area who knew where Sparta and Elroy were. There are no huge tourist draws and the population is rural and sparse. Then the trail went in. Now hotels along the route book solid a year in advance. There are a score of new businesses in these towns."

* Root River Trail: Another writer noted the economic impact of the 51-mile Root River Trail on the community of Lanesboro in southeast Minnesota.

"Pre-and post-trail Lanesboro, a town of about 800 residents, differ dramatically. Before the trail was built, (the county) hospitality tax collection was less than \$250,000 annually. In 2007, thanks to 200,000 trail users each year, the hospitality tax produced \$4.7 million. Post-trail Lanesboro now boasts twelve B&Bs, eight restaurants, an art gallery, a museum, and a thriving community theater well-off enough to offer housing to its actors. The Root River Trail has been very, very good for Lanesboro."

* Cape Cod Trail: This 22-mile rail trail drew a rave review from a couple that lives half the year in the Adirondacks, half on Cape Cod.

"Our house is one mile from the trail," they wrote. "We can (bike) as long as there is no snow, but walkers, runners and skiers enjoy it also. The trail is used especially in the summer and during the spring/fall shoulder seasons. Bike shops are everywhere. There are links into all the towns abutting the trail. It is a boon to the economy."

* Pine Creek Trail: An "octogenarian couple" from Long Lake wrote about the 60-mile Pine Creek Rail Trail in northern Pennsylvania.

"Since it is a destination trail and we bike about 20 miles a day and did out-and-back trips from the trailheads, we were in the area for six days. The trail parallels Pine Creek and travels through state forests and private property following the former Pine Creek railroad bed. (We saw) lots of bikers of all ages riding all types of bicycles, walkers, runners, people in motorized wheelchairs, canoeists, kayakers, fishermen, lots of kids. Highlights were some large turtles laying eggs in the sand next to the trail. Our hope is that this kind of trail might become a reality in the Adirondacks."

According to the latest RTC study, the Pine Creek Rail Trail had 138,227 annual users and accounted for \$6,081,712 in visitor expenditures.

* Torrey Brown Trail: Another writer described the 20-mile Torrey C. Brown Rail Trail in Maryland.

"People who lived in the rural hamlets that were originally rail stops feared the potential influx of outsiders bringing trash, creating traffic and (causing) property damage. Thirty years later (the trail) has proved to be a great resource for thousands of hikers, runners, cyclists, dog walkers and families with young kids. (The concerns) have given way to widespread support of the trail, which has proven to be not only a great recreational asset but something that has enhanced the value of all neighboring properties." (RTC estimates 800,000 annual visits on this trail and \$5,508,640 in visitor spending.)

The list goes on and on, from the Swamp Rabbit Trail in South Carolina to the Hiawatha Bike Trail in Idaho to the Withlacoochee State Trail in Florida and the Shining Sea Bikeway in Massachusetts.

Bottom line: We can't afford to lose any more time in creating the Adirondack Rail Trail, which could be one of the best of them all!

Dick Beamish is a board member of Adirondack Recreational Trail Advocates and founder of the Adirondack Explorer magazine. He lives in Saranac Lake.