

# Rails-to-trails thoughts

Adirondack Daily enterprise, June 10, 2015

By Ron Hartlaub

I am writing this from the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, where I have done a lot of researching and hiking on rail trails throughout our region for a story that I had recently published. I have found that there has been talk in New York about hopes of converting all or part of the Adirondack railroad corridor into a multi-use recreation trail, and I wanted to share with you my thoughts on what I have found about the rail-to-trail movement.

According to the website [www.railstotrails.org](http://www.railstotrails.org), there are more than 1,900 rail trails in the United States that cover over 22,000 miles of former railroad corridors. That number is growing, with an additional 715 projects now under development that will soon push the mileage count over 30,000.

I had my first experience with rail trails when some friends invited me to hike the Greenbrier River Trail in eastern West Virginia, which runs 77 miles across eastern West Virginia. Ever since my first trip there, I have been hooked.

As compared to some of the more challenging trails, rail trails can be enjoyed by people of all fitness levels. If you are a hiker, a walker or a cyclist seeking a peaceful ride away traffic and exhaust fumes, rail trails provide a safe place to enjoy the outdoors that is accessible to nearly everyone. I've seen people pushing wheelchairs or strollers, giving those who could not do it otherwise an exhilarating outdoor experience.

Not only does it provide opportunities for those that live in those areas, but it also promotes tourism. I have driven over two hours to enjoy just the Greenbrier River Trail alone several times, and I spend money in communities like Marlinton and Lewisburg when I go.

I also have ventured to many other trails this year alone, including over three hours to the Virginia Creeper Trail in southwest Virginia. I would have never made that trip if not for the allure of a chance to experience another rail trail, and I will be back.

I am not the only one that does this. I have talked to several other people that will hit the road to hike or bike along these trails. And we don't even have snowmobiling on this side of the Mason-Dixon Line, so a trail in the Adirondacks would provide even more appeal.

My wife and I are currently in the preliminary stages of planning a trip to the 150-mile Great Alleghany Passage Trail, which runs through parts of Maryland and Pennsylvania. When we make this vacation, we will need lodging in about seven communities along the trail and will spend money at each on food and supplies. These are places we would never visit if they were not along the Great Alleghany Passage Trail.

One day I would love to make a 10-hour trip to northern New York to enjoy a hiking experience in another part of the country where I have never been. Without a rail trail, I really have no reason to head that way.

I have to admit that I have no idea the impact of the current railway system to your local economy. But I have seen how rail trails like the Greenbrier and several others bring visitors to their areas, as well as providing convenient recreational options for citizens already in their communities.

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