



Marion River Railroad, circa 1920s. F. L. Wells

RAILS OR Should the Adirondack

FOR RAILS

I write in support of maintaining the rail service between Lake Placid and Saranac Lake provided by the Adirondack Scenic Railroad (ASR). I also support the long-overdue extension of rail service to Tupper Lake and on to Thendara. But I also understand many of the reasons why some wish to see a discontinuation of the Lake Placid-Saranac Lake service. These reasons are justified.

From 2000 through 2003, the novelty of the ten-mile ride created immense crowds and great enthusiasm. But the novelty has worn off, crews have changed hands several times, the railroad has done little new, riders have to be sought from ever-increasing distances beyond the Adirondacks, and ridership has dropped.

Most tourist rail lines provide special events such as dinner, wine, fall foliage, robbery, Santa Claus, and Halloween trains. The ASR has provided most of these. It is what it is not providing that creates the desire among some people to discontinue service.

I do not find fault with the hardworking volunteers who have their hands full just keeping the trains running. But the ASR and Adirondack Railway Preservation Society leadership, with an extremely rapid turnover of officers, seems unable to supply the invention and creativity required to take full advantage of what the railroad could offer. One reason may be because many of the officers are not teachers.

I propose that, in addition to the regularly scheduled trains for the general public, trains be chartered by myriad non-profit organizations such as museums, libraries, clubs, sports groups, and scientific, arts, and historical societies—and, yes, even the Adirondack Mountain Club. So that the railroad can break even, these additional educational and/or recreational tours would be run only when all, or nearly all, the seats are full:

- * astronomy groups with overnight stopovers for observation far from lights
- * Adirondack meteorology/climatology groups
- * geological and soils groups observing railroad cuts
- * wildlife societies
- * botanical societies for spring wildflower tours

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- * forestry societies for forest history tours
- * railroad historical societies for railroad facility and industrial tours
- * local and regional history associations
- * hunting and fishing clubs
- * mountain biking, snowmobiling, and all-terrain vehicle societies
- * cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, hiking, canoeing, and kayaking groups
- * scouts, 4H clubs, and the Grange
- * conservation groups
- * arts groups—painting, music, writing—all inspired by wilderness not accessible by highway

Recreational and sports society members could be dropped off at points on the railroad, along with their equipment carried in baggage cars, to board the train again later in the day.

The Adirondack Scenic Railroad has already provided some recreational and educational trains, but only on a small scale. Canoeists and kayakers paddle down the North Branch of the Moose River from Thendara and make the return trip from Minnehaha by train. A ranger-naturalist offers weekly tours to passengers between Thendara and Carter Station. A general history of the line is provided on most trains by railroad crew members over a public address system. These opportunities are to be commended, but need to be expanded many, many times.

Removing the tracks between Lake Placid and Saranac Lake is not a solution because of the great difficulty and expense of replacing them when the ASR decides to fully open its service to those who seek to learn more about the Adirondacks, recreate in areas inaccessible by highway, and gain spiritual renewal through the arts in wilderness settings.



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TRAILS:

Scenic Railroad Stay or Go?



The Island Line Rail Trail in Burlington, Vermont, is an example of what we could have here in the Adirondacks.
Courtesy of the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy.

FOR TRAILS

We have the opportunity to add a new recreational dimension in the Adirondack Park, while providing enormous economic benefits to the region. This is the ninety-mile Adirondack Rail Trail, connecting Lake Placid and Old Forge, a rail-to-trail conversion of under-utilized rail bed that a citizen group, Adirondack Recreational Trail Advocates (ARTA), believes could be one of the best things that ever happened to the North Country.

The Adirondack Park offers thousands of miles of hiking trails and seemingly endless waterways for canoeing and kayaking. But nowhere in this largest American park outside Alaska is there an easy, level, long-distance trail that links our communities, traverses wild and beautiful terrain, and can be enjoyed by people of all ages and physical abilities. Such a trail, properly surfaced with crushed limestone or locally mined wollastonite, would be a magnet for cyclists, walkers, joggers, people in wheelchairs, families with young children, bird watchers, and more. Without the tracks, the rail bed would also provide a greatly improved trail for snowmobilers and a boon for communities like Tupper Lake that otherwise shut down in winter. (This is also a much better place for snowmobiles than the forever-wild Forest Preserve.)

Think of it—a serene, safe, scenic recreation trail running nine miles between Lake Placid and Saranac Lake and twenty-five miles from there to Tupper Lake, through some of the loveliest lake-and-forest country in the Northeast. It's a bike ride of perhaps four to five hours, but what's the rush? You can linger in Saranac Lake to soak up the history and charm of the village. Later, you can stop for a swim along the trail, watch loons, picnic by a pristine lake, or try your luck at fishing. In Tupper Lake you can bike to the Wild Center, climb a nearby mountain, spend the night and pedal back the next day, enjoying an entire-

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ly new view as you head toward the High Peaks. Or, for more adventure, you can cycle on to Piercefild, Sabbatis, Lake Lila, Beaver River, Big Moose, and Old Forge.

The national Rails-to-Trails Conservancy has released a study showing that the 34-mile segment connecting the Tri-Lakes area could attract a quarter-million overnight visitors each year. These folks would spend an estimated \$20 million while there. This is about thirty times the economic impact from restoring rail service between Utica and Lake Placid, something the Adirondack Scenic Railroad, which operates tourist trains at both ends of the line, hopes to do. According to ASR's recent study, restoring service on the entire 141-mile route would attract 7000 new overnight visitors each year who would spend \$648,836.

The train advocates insist that "we can have both"—restored rail service and a parallel trail. Yet having both would require widening the rail bed by twenty feet, which would entail dumping huge amounts of fill into lakes and wetlands. While a parallel trail may be possible between Lake Placid and Saranac Lake—for which some state funding has already been allocated—there's no way, financially or environmentally, that side-by-side trails could be continued from there. Between Saranac Lake and Old Forge it can be only one or the other—restored train service (for which there is no demand) or a world-class recreation trail (which would benefit residents and visitors alike).

The Adirondack Rail Trail seems the clear choice. If you agree, please go to our website, www.thearta.org, sign our petition to Governor Cuomo, and learn more about this golden opportunity.

Dick Beamish is a member of ARTA's board of directors and founder of the Adirondack Explorer magazine.

