

Rex Smith: Love a train, but embrace your bicycle

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Photo illustration by Jeff Boyer / Times Union

Among my favorite possessions are the watch my wife gave me on our first Christmas, an oil painting by my mom showing my dad and me in a canoe and, these days, my bicycle.

Yep, I really like my bike. It doesn't tug at my heart like the watch and the painting, but it gives me a lot of enjoyment. From home, I can pedal into the rolling hills of Rensselaer County or through urban neighborhoods, or I can drive the bike to one of the growing number of bike trails that cater to the expanding ranks of adult bicyclists.



Bicycling is particularly rising among older Americans and people with higher incomes. Over the past two decades, bicycling among people over age 60 has grown by more than 320 percent, and among people between 40 and 59 by 160 percent.

Biking clears the head and the lungs. It tightens muscles and concentration. It's good for you, but not in the way that broccoli is good for you. That is, it's fun.

So you wouldn't think a plan to build a bike trail would be all that controversial. But in the Adirondacks they've been arguing for years over a proposal to turn part of a 119-mile state-owned rail corridor into a broad trail that could be used for bicycling, walking, skiing and snowmobiling.

Here's the glitch: Track at each end of the corridor is now leased by a seasonal tourist train, and some people want state funding so the train can run all the way from Utica to Saranac Lake. Sides have been taken, with some rare alliances – snowmobilers with environmentalists who are often their foes, and some mom-and-pop businesses opposing economic development groups.

This week, Gov. Andrew Cuomo, perhaps aspiring to the solomonesque, approved a two-part solution: \$8 million to convert 34 miles of track from Tupper Lake to Lake Placid into a trail and \$15 million to extend the route of the Adirondack Scenic Railroad, by renovating 45 miles of tracks between Big Moose and Tupper Lake.

The bicyclists and snowmobilers seem pretty happy – probably figuring that some trail in the corridor is better than none – but the train people are furious. The Adirondack Railway Preservation Society, a not-for-profit that operates the train, filed suit to block the compromise, and the railway CEO went on a Utica radio station to suggest that the governor was stingy, or maybe bribed.

“You keep talking about pay to play in the governor’s office – I certainly think that could be the case here,” Bethan Maher said.

Bold talk, considering that the governor is the railroad’s landlord. But people who love trains tend to be passionate about them – and I can understand that.

There’s a romance to trains that touches lots of guys my age. I’ve ridden Amtrak halfway across the country, and I’ve enjoyed excursion trains, including what many consider North America’s most scenic: the Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad. Its 45-mile climb up the Animas River Gorge in the Colorado Rockies is breathtaking, as a coal-fired locomotive pulls open cars through otherwise inaccessible wilderness.

With all due respect to our beloved Adirondacks, the experience behind a diesel engine starting in Utica is not comparable. Maybe that’s why the number of passengers on the train hasn’t grown sufficiently to be fully self-sustaining, and why the train hasn’t fueled the economic development that people in the Adirondacks crave.

Which, in turn, explains why a lot of businesses are behind the rail-to-trail conversion. They seem to think that year-around bike and snowmobile tourism holds greater promise for the region than pumping dollars into keeping the trains running.

There aren’t hard figures for the Adirondacks, but other areas have studied biking’s impact: In Oregon, a 2012 review concluded that bike tourism was worth \$400 million; in Montana, a 2013 study showed that bike tourists spend about \$75 a day, compared to the average tourist’s \$58 a day. A Michigan study added increased health and productivity from biking, and concluded bicycling was worth \$668 million a year to the state.

You can understand why people in Utica might oppose the bike trail; they want the train that starts there to go all the way to Saranac Lake, figuring that tourists might stay overnight in Utica before heading north.

But if Utica really wants more economic benefits from the rails, it should push Congress to upgrade the Amtrak system. In comparison to other developed nations, the U.S. is far behind in development of fast, cost-effective, fuel-efficient rail travel.

As I said, I’m a fan of rail travel. My first train ride, at age 5, turned me into an avid model railroader. As a kid, I treasured my HO-gauge trains. But there came a time to part with them. It’s good to know when it’s time to let nostalgia yield to reality.