

State favoritism toward trains?

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Should the old Adirondack rail corridor be converted to a year-round, multi-use recreation trail? Should it be rehabilitated for an extended tourist train? Or should we split the difference and build a trail in the northern section from Lake Placid to Tupper Lake, and run a tourist train south from Tupper Lake to Old Forge?

All are important questions raised at recent meetings conducted by the state in Utica, Old Forge, Tupper Lake and Lake Placid. The purpose was to elicit public input on the best use of the Adirondack rail corridor. Unfortunately, however, much of the information provided by the spokesman for the New York State Department of Transportation betrayed a bias in favor of rail over trail.

The DOT's Ray Hessinger stacked the deck against converting the rail bed to a 90-mile recreational trail when he tried to show that a train through the Adirondacks would draw many more riders than a trail would draw outdoor recreationists - even though such a trail would be level and wide, safely separated from roads and traffic, open year-round, be free of charge and could be enjoyed by all kinds of people (young and old, fit and unfit) on a daily basis. Trail activities would include bicycling, hiking, running, strolling, fishing, bird-watching, dog-walking, snowmobiling and so on.

In comparing the benefits of a multi-use trail with a tourist train, Mr. Hessinger pointed to the Cuyahoga Valley Scenic Railroad here in Ohio, which he claimed is similar to the proposed tourist train in the Adirondacks. The Cuyahoga train "carried over 210,000 passengers in 2012," Mr. Hessinger noted. Yet the differences between the two tourist-train operations (one real, one fanciful) are glaring.

The Cuyahoga train runs for 30 miles. It is a three-hour round-trip, including stops, through the Cuyahoga Valley National Park. It is close to the Cleveland metropolitan area to the north and the Akron-Canton metropolitan area at the south end. (These two urban-suburban centers have a combined population of 3,515,646.)

Incidentally, the centerpiece for the Cuyahoga Valley National Park, which had 2.1 million visitors in 2013, is a recreation trail on the old Ohio & Erie Canal Towpath Trail, which is similar to recreation trails on former rail beds. This all-season hiking and biking trail is used by an estimated 70 to 80 percent of park visitors, which amounts to 1.5-plus million users! Snowmobiles are not allowed on the trail.

The extended tourist train proposed for the Adirondacks would be a very different operation from the Cuyahoga Valley Scenic Railroad both in customer base and the time commitment required of riders.

While the Cuyahoga train has millions of potential riders living nearby, the train from Utica through the Adirondacks has a very sparse population base to draw on. The city of Utica, at the south end of the line, has 61,800 inhabitants. The population of Tupper Lake is 4,000, and Lake Placid is 2,500. That's a stark contrast to the Cleveland-Akron-Canton market.

A tourist train currently operates between Utica and Old Forge. The state has recommended extending the train for another 56 miles to Tupper Lake, and the train advocates would like to extend it another 34 miles to Lake Placid.

The trip from Utica to Tupper Lake, a distance of about a hundred miles, with stops along the way and at speeds often under 30 mph, would take at least four hours to complete, and a round-trip would take all day. Can you imagine anyone, especially a family with restless and easily bored kids, willing to pay for such an experience?

Mr. Hessinger came up with another dubious "comparable" in favor of extending the tourist train. He likened the proposed 90-mile recreation trail on the Adirondack corridor, which would connect Lake Placid and Old Forge, to the 90-mile Genesee Valley Greenway Trail, which runs south from Rochester. The DOT spokesman told his audience that the Genesee Valley trail attracts 70,000 annual users on its northern section near Rochester but only 2,455 users on its rural southern section. The implication is that the trail proposed for the Adirondack travel corridor would experience similar use.

What Mr. Hessinger did not mention is that the Genesee Valley trail is still, according to its website, "a work in progress." The southern portion of the trail lacks decked bridges in many places and requires many on-road detours, which helps to explain the low usage figures at this stage of the trail's development.

One wonders why the DOT spokesman could not come up with a better comparison. Certainly there is no shortage of them.

The Rails-to-Trails Conservancy reports that there are now more than 500 rail trails throughout the U.S. covering more than 25,000 miles - with new trails being created all the time. According to an RTC study done two years ago for a nonprofit group called Adirondack Recreational Trail Advocates, a more apt comparison to the rail trail envisioned for the Adirondacks is the 62-mile Pine Creek Rail Trail in Pennsylvania, which attracted 138,227 annual visits at latest count. Or the 21-mile Heritage Rail Trail, also in Pennsylvania, with 394,823 annual visits. Or the 34-mile Virginia Creeper Trail in the Blue Ridge Mountains of southwest Virginia, with 103,172 visits a year.

It is encouraging that New York state officials are considering the costs and benefits of rail trails vs. tourist trains in the Adirondacks to determine the best use of this extraordinary travel corridor. Let us hope that our state officials will henceforth be more objective in separating truth from fiction, reality from wishful thinking.

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