

# State's rail/trail findings dubious

Adirondack Daily Enterprise, November 29, 2014 By John Sammon

I am writing in the belief that the state has not conducted a professional evaluation of the rail-to-trail options and has presented an indefensible recommendation based on conjecture, bias and a desire to placate advocacy groups.

At recent public meetings, the state (Department of Environmental Conservation and Department of Transportation) presented a fact sheet ([www.dec.ny.gov/lands/99372.html](http://www.dec.ny.gov/lands/99372.html)) outlining the state's estimates of the costs involved in rehabilitating the rail line from Big Moose to Tupper Lake (also known as the southern section) at \$11 million and separately estimated the rehabilitation costs from Tupper to Lake Placid (aka the northern section) at \$6.7 million. They then compared these costs to the estimated trail conversion costs of the Big Moose-to-Tupper section at \$11.4 million and the trail costs of the Tupper-to-Lake Placid section at \$9.8 million. The reasoning underpinning the division of the corridor into the northern and southern sections, seemingly, was that the two sections traverse different types of environments. The northern section has more populated communities along the corridor whereas the southern section traverses a more remote section of the Park.

Either explicitly or most certainly implicitly, the state recommends that the northern section be converted to trail and that the southern section be rehabilitated for rail.

There are serious questions relative to the state's estimate relative to the cost of conversion of the rails to trails. The state's estimated costs associated with the trail conversation stand in stark contrast to the estimate of others such as Joe Hatstrup, president of Iron Horse Preservation Society ([www.ironhorsepreservation.org](http://www.ironhorsepreservation.org)), who testified that his organization, which has completed numerous rail-to-trail projects, could do the conversion for no cost to the taxpayers by using the salvage value of the rails and ties to fund the trail construction. ARTA (Adirondack Recreational Trail Advocates) has conducted its own study, came to the same conclusion and has offered to do it for no cost. Finally, the Rails to Trails Conservancy in Washington has published a "How to Manual" on rail-to-trail conversions and similarly states that the salvage costs can offset the cost of trail ([www.railstotrails.org/resource-library/resources/acquiring-rail-corridors-a-how-to-manual](http://www.railstotrails.org/resource-library/resources/acquiring-rail-corridors-a-how-to-manual)).

While there are advocates on both sides of this issue, the fact is that the state has not presented sufficient, professionally prepared data so that taxpayers and neutral advocates can make an informed decision. While the state's cost estimates for conversion to trail are highly suspect and need to be professionally evaluated, there is also a real need to understand the future economic value of both options to the communities affected by the state's decision. The state presented some anecdotal stories regarding projects in other locations, but such stories are not sufficient when committing taxpayers' money. Although much more needs to be learned, there exists factual historical economic data on the largely volunteer-run Adirondack Scenic Railroad which depends on continuing state subsidies for its existence. This data should be used as a baseline for estimating future economic value

It appears that the state wants to placate both groups by recommending trails for the north and rails for the south. It is anything but clear how such a recommendation is based on professional analysis. Forty-two years have passed with no use of the corridor from Big Moose to Saranac Lake, and now we have an opportunity to decide on the use of what is arguably the most important economic development opportunity for the North Country. Therefore, I believe that the state should take the time to engage unbiased professionals to develop the complete economics of both options so that the public can reach an intelligent, informed opinion.

John Sammon lives in New Hartford, near Utica