

The glass is half full

June 16, 2015, By Lee Keet , Adirondack Recreational Trail Advocates

It is now over five years that Adirondack Recreational Trail Advocates and the towns and villages along the way have tried to get something, anything, done with the virtually abandoned Remsen-Lake Placid corridor. Finally we have an answer, and I applaud the state for taking on the challenge.

It is clear that the 34 miles from Lake Placid to Tupper Lake that they propose to convert to recreation will attract tens of thousands, more likely hundreds of thousands, of new visitors who will bolster local coffers. It will also let those of us who live here enjoy a safe, level trail that will connect the Tri-Lakes and points in between.

So why is this not a decision to be celebrated fully? The answer is that this was a purely political decision, and under extreme pressure, the Department of Environmental Conservation and Department of Transportation tried to give something to the snowmobile and trail advocates, and something to the vocal minority of train advocates and a few of their powerful friends. And that political decision is founded on faulty data and wishful thinking, at least for the 56 miles south of Tupper Lake.

But before saying why the glass is half empty, let me say why it is half full. This, even at the 34 initial miles, will be a phenomenal draw to our area, an attraction to rival Whiteface Mountain and a joy for locals. Kudos to our state officials for seeing that. But the rest of the trail deserves better.

The premise seems to be that people will ride the train for nearly four hours to get to Tupper Lake, or a little less to camping sites along the way. But the prior Stone Consulting study, underwritten by the Scenic Railroad folks, put the usage of an even longer ride (to Lake Placid) at only 7,000 people per year. Now we are asked to believe that this number going just to Tupper Lake will be three times as big. Permit me to doubt.

Then there is the question of the key C7 snowmobile corridor. It connects (in theory) the southern Adirondacks to Tug Hill and Montreal using the Remsen-Lake Placid train corridor. I say "in theory" because without several feet of snow, the rails represent a booby trap for sleds, and many riders get no further north than Old Forge or further south than Charlie's Inn in Lake Clear because of the threat of sled damage. Recent winter statistics show that in the increasingly rare instances when the tracks are well covered, there is a huge volume of north-south traffic. With the rails up, it only takes 6 inches of snow for this corridor to come alive.

How much would the financial impact of opening up that corridor in the winter by removing the rails be? An interesting question that the state did not answer, but it would seem that it might outweigh the railroad benefits by a lot. The New York State Snowmobile Association suggests that it could be \$7 million a year, which is a lot of train tickets.

And then there is the cost of expanding the tourist train. The state now estimates that it can rebuild the railroad to a 30 mph standard for \$12 million. But DOT's 2008 published Rail Needs Survey put the cost of the entire 90 miles at \$45,702,000. Since the Remsen-to-Tupper Lake stretch is 56 miles, it seems unreal that 56/90 times \$45 million could be \$12 million (it is actually \$28 million). This is taxpayer money that does not include the cost of building newly proposed alternative snowmobile trails to get from the Old Forge area to Tupper Lake, a clear attempt to get the support of towns that want snowmobile connections. Note, however, that the most direct, most level and most accessible path between Remsen and Tupper Lake is (surprise) the existing C7 corridor, i.e., the rail bed. So simply removing those rails would provide all of the benefits that the state claims it wants, at a fraction of the cost.

Despite the clear errors in the analyses that led to this decision - and there are many more - we (I am on the Adirondack Recreational Trail Advocates board) suspect that the draft unit management plan will become the actual UMP with few modifications.

What do we all do to make sure that taxpayer funds are not wasted (again) on a railroad operation that most would say is doomed from inception? Here are my suggestions:

1. Ask the state to commit no new taxpayer funds for rail restoration until the need is demonstrated by real studies, the real costs are known and the alternative benefits of rails versus trails are established.
2. Assess the benefits of phase 1 of the project (the rec trail from Lake Placid to Tupper Lake) before a final decision to restore train service is made.
3. Do an impact analysis of snowmobile revenues in the connected towns under three scenarios: tracks in, tracks out and with the proposed alternative trails.
4. If a rail restoration plan is warranted after the three preceding steps, do not give a long-term operating lease to any entity that is not financially sound and that cannot put up a performance bond matching its lease.
5. Approve no new snowmobile trails that are not already on the master plan for snowmobile trails, as is the C7 corridor.

I encourage every rail trail advocate to come to the public hearing at 7 p.m. on July 8 in the Tupper Lake Middle/High School auditorium and make it known how you feel, especially with the proposal south of Tupper Lake. In my opinion, we do not need another failed railroad operation after huge taxpayer expenses when the right solution is staring us in the face.

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