

Trail over rail is best plan

Rail trails are flourishing across upstate New York, capitalizing on hundreds of miles of abandoned railroad rights of way that have been reborn as multi-use, year-round recreational corridors for cycling, running, walking, rollerblading, cross-country skiing and, in some places, snowmobiling.

An example of this is right here in the Capital Region. Crowds flock to the Mohawk-Hudson Bike-Hike Trail on weekends to take in both the fresh air and the spectacular river views.

Still, there are those who understandably feel remorse in abandoning our passenger rail infrastructure. Arguably, many of these rail beds could be preserved for when trains make a comeback. Perhaps the Mohawk-Hudson trail could instead have been used for a viable light rail system linking Schenectady, Albany and Troy, had the right vision — and significant funding — been in place.

Similar issues are at play in the Adirondacks over the future of existing railroad tracks. While some parts get

THE ISSUE:

In the debate over a recreational trail vs. rail lines, the state is on the fence.

THE STAKES:

An extended unified trail would better serve the needs of the Adirondacks region.

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good use from popular historic trains, other large sections have been idle since the 1960s and are deteriorating. A compelling case is made to keep the rails intact. With proper public funding, the rails could serve the planned Big Tupper development. Such a system could carry passengers and be a cost-effective alternative to delivering the tons of food, fuel and other freight that now has to be trucked into the region. Properly executed and funded, the rail system could leverage the existing track and rights of way to connect Lake Placid and Saranac south through Tupper Lake to link with the current Amtrak line that passes through Utica. But there are a lot of big and expensive “ifs.”

The proponents of the alternate plan to convert most of the aging rails into a recreational corridor make a

compelling case, too, pointing to the huge potential economic lift to the region by offering more hiking, biking and snowmobiling options.

Pressured by both camps, the state departments of Transportation and Environmental Conservation offer a compromise: Convert 34 miles of an old rail line between Lake Placid and Tupper Lake into a recreational trail, while retaining the 56 miles of unused track between Big Moose and Tupper Lake for future use. Potentially at least, the latter could someday be used to expand the existing service from Utica to Big Moose farther north to Tupper Lake, though some track would require substantial upgrades.

The state’s attempt at compromise, however, is shortsighted. It ignores the reality that the biggest industry in the Adirondacks is tourism — much of it hiking, biking and snowmobiling. It’s hard to see these large stretches of unused track ever being used again in the sparsely populated park.

While preserving the rail segments that currently are being used, the state should open up the rest for other purposes. Sadly, it means removing the rusting old tracks and the rotting ties. But for the region’s future, it’s the best way to go.