

Train advocates miss connection

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To the editor:

In his recent commentary ("The rest of the story"), Robert DeMaro argued that the Erie Canal Trail from Albany to Buffalo and the Swamp Rabbit Trail in Greenville County, South Carolina, are not comparable to the proposed Adirondack Rail Trail. And he's right. There certainly are more people living in Albany, Buffalo and Greenville than in Lake Placid, Saranac Lake and Tupper Lake.

Mr. DeMaro made the obvious point that no other region can compare to ours. However, he appears to have missed the broader point. As has been shown in example after example, rail trails are engines of economic development across a wide range of settings: from Manhattan to the Monongahela, from major cities to remote areas. Tourism is our primary business, and the Adirondack Rail Trail will undeniably draw many tourists to our region.

How many people have traveled to the Tri-Lakes to ride the Adirondack Scenic Railroad? More relevant to the state's pending decision on the future of our rail corridor is this question: How many long-distance, 25 mph scenic railroads can ASR advocates point to as evidence that an expanded tourist train in the Adirondacks will improve the region's economy?

Mr. DeMaro offered unsubstantiated assurances regarding the ASR's finances, which ASR's own accountants have called into question. In that same issue of the Adirondack Daily Enterprise, Paul Titterton of Wilmette, Illinois, asserted that the financial plight of the Saratoga & North Creek Railway, which is reported to be losing \$1 million a year, is not relevant to this debate. With ASR alarm bells already ringing, we should ignore the financial problems of the Saratoga-North Creek Railway, the nearest and most similar tourist operation to what ASR has in mind? Not a great idea.

The Adirondack Scenic Railroad would need many millions of dollars of state-funded improvements to expand its operations. There are good reasons to question ASR's ability to survive as it presently operates, let alone waste more taxpayer money to expand its operations from Utica to Lake Placid. Mr. Titterton advocates taxpayer support for rail travel, and who could disagree? The state should improve Amtrak's Adirondack Line to enable efficient transportation from Albany or Montreal to Westport, with shuttle service from there to Lake Placid. And there's no question that more government support is needed for high-speed train service between our major cities. But what ASR is proposing is not serious rail travel. It is a long, slow, costly tourist train - five hours from Utica to Lake Placid! - for which there is no demand and no public benefits.

We can do better, much better. An inexpensive, tourist-attractive Adirondack Rail Trail is the answer.

David Banks

Board member

Adirondack Recreational Trail Advocates

Lake Clear