

What is going on?

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By Lee Keet, Adirondack Recreational Trail Advocates

For four years my volunteer colleagues and I have been trying to get the state to make some productive use of the mostly abandoned rail corridor connecting Old Forge and Lake Placid. When I started out on what seemed a no-brainer project, we worked through AdkAction.org, a group that does not take positions on controversial issues. We raised funds to study the options and commissioned the Camoin report of 2010.

The report's conclusion was that:

1. A recreational trail, even if just to Tupper Lake, will produce 61 percent more in new local spending (\$1.2 million) than would extension of train service over the same path.
2. A trail will create 54 percent more permanent jobs (20) and 75 percent more temporary jobs (25) than would restoration of the rail service.
3. Extending the 9-mile "scenic railroad" to 34 miles, an increase of 278 percent in length, will produce a 75 percent increase in ridership while the passengers per mile will drop 37 percent from 1,555 per annum to 980.

Adirondack Recreational Trail Advocates was formed to pursue that option. One of ARTA's first actions was to build on the Camoin study by asking the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy for detailed comparisons of our proposed Adirondack trail with others of similar geography, length and demographics. The RTC's report, released in 2012, predicted an impact on our local economy of nearly \$20 million in tourist revenues from conversion of just the 34-mile section from Tupper Lake to Lake Placid to a recreation trail. (The entire trail would run 90 miles through the Adirondack Park.)

Later in 2012, those favoring rail restoration commissioned a study by Stone Consulting that more or less confirmed the Camoin findings - in fact, Stone's projected ridership from rail restoration was lower than the Camoin projections, just 7,000 new visitors a year for an investment of taxpayer money of between \$18 million and \$50 million. This large variable in cost is due in part to how fast the train would be able to go: Class 2 up to 30 mph and Class 3 up to 60 mph. (Class 2, the less costly alternative, would mean a four-hour, one-way trip from Utica to Lake Placid without stops - an unacceptable pace for an excursion train.)

If regular train service is restored, all other uses of the corridor would have to cease, notably snowmobiling in the winter. Yet this corridor is regarded as a key snowmobile connector route linking Quebec with Pennsylvania, which could produce far greater economic benefits once the old, rusting tracks (a major impediment right now for snowmobilers) are removed.

After the multiple reports, the towns, villages and counties along the corridor began to weigh in, nearly all of them requesting that the state remove and salvage the tracks and replace them with a

recreation trail for biking, snowmobiling, etc. These local governments along the corridor include the towns of North Elba, Harriestown, Piercefield, Colton and Tupper Lake, the villages of Lake Placid and Tupper Lake, and St. Lawrence County. No municipality requested restoration of train service. More than 12,000 citizens and 400 businesses have also called for a recreation trail. (There may be a business somewhere that wants the trains back, but so far the evidence is missing.)

Then finally, proposals started to come in from contractors willing to build the rail-trail for nothing if given the scrap. Yes, nothing. With these proposals in hand, ARTA told the state that, if given the charter, it would manage the process of converting the corridor to a world-class, multi-use, multi-season recreation trail.

So what is going on here? After conducting four hearings in 2013, the state held four more in 2014. But the state's presentations at the latest meetings betrayed a strong bias in favor of railroad restoration, at least south of Tupper Lake. Apparently without considering the success of comparable rail-to-trail conversions (there are now nearly 2,000 rail trails throughout the United States), state officials picked an incomplete and totally irrelevant rail trail to use as a model to gauge potential visitation on the proposed Adirondack recreation trail. And they picked a year-round tourist train running on someone else's track between major population centers in Ohio to gauge the benefits of rail restoration here - a ridiculous comparison to our rural rail corridor originating in Utica, not Cleveland.

There were other distortions in the state's presentation, like noting that, once up, the rails could never go back down, an error that the state admitted to when pressed, but after the hearings. Worse, data on the relative costs of both construction and maintenance bore no relation to reality.

Isn't it time for those in positions of power to respect the rule of law, due process and the will of those they represent? Isn't it time to stop the shenanigans?

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