

Who will ride long-distance tourist train?

July 4, 2015

By Dick Beamish , Adirondack Recreational Trail Advocates

Gov. Andrew Cuomo and our state government deserve credit for their move to convert the unproductive, underused rail corridor between Lake Placid and Tupper Lake to a safe, easy, accessible multi-use trail - the one recreational amenity sorely lacking in the Adirondack Park.

The state has also called for extending the tourist train from Utica and Old Forge north to Tupper Lake, as a compromise intended to satisfy (at least partially) both the trail and the train proponents. What is striking about this proposal, however, is what is missing. For comparison purposes, there are a number of examples of successful rail trails but no examples of successful long-distance tourist trains.

In the economic impact study commissioned by the state and undertaken by Camoin Associates, a number of comparable rail trails in other parts of the country are used to gauge the benefits of converting the corridor to a recreational trail for hiking, biking, running, walking, better snowmobiling, etc. Three of the referenced rail trails provide good examples of what we can have in the Adirondacks: the 60-mile Pine Creek Rail Trail in Pennsylvania, the 34-mile Virginia Creeper Trail in the Blue Ridge Mountains of southwest Virginia, and the 74-mile Greenbrier River Trail in West Virginia.

But the Camoin report failed to come up with any comparable tourist trains to illustrate the economic benefits of creating a 105-mile excursion service from Utica to Tupper Lake. What explains this omission? The answer seems clear: There's nothing comparable. And why not? Because very few tourists would shell out \$100 (or whatever the charge) to sit on a train for four hours, crawling along at a maximum speed of 30 mph, to finally arrive in Tupper Lake - and then be faced with a four-hour return trip to Utica. Talk about fanny fatigue!

A data search reveals that more than 110 "scenic railroads" operate in the United States. However, only nine of them (other than the Adirondack Scenic Railroad between Utica and Big Moose) go more than 40 miles. Of those, only these three are east of the Rocky Mountains:

1. In New York state there's the 57-mile Saratoga & North Creek Railway in the southern Adirondacks, which recently reported losing more than \$1 million a year.
2. The Great Smoky Mountains Railroad in North Carolina operates over 53 miles, though its usual routes are out-and-back trips of about four hours on 32 or 44 miles of track.
3. The Cuyahoga Valley Scenic Railroad in Ohio. Interestingly, this was singled out as a "comparable" excursion train at the public hearings last fall by the New York State Department of Transportation. In citing the Cuyahoga train, the DOT was attempting to justify the state's

proposal to extend the Utica-Old Forge tourist train to Tupper Lake. It was a questionable comparison and for good reason did not reappear in the latest economic-impact study.

Why questionable? Because the Cuyahoga operation runs 30 miles and takes 90 minutes one way. It also draws on 3.5 million residents in the Cleveland, Akron and Canton metro areas, attracting more than 200,000 riders annually. By contrast, Utica, with a population of 61,000, would be the main market for the Utica-to-Tupper Lake train, which involves an eight-hour round trip.

That leaves three examples out west that tourist train boosters might point to, though in truth they are no way comparable. There's the historic Durango and Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad in Colorado, a 90-mile round trip. With a layover in Silverton, it is an eight- to nine-hour excursion. Long, yes. But you're looking out at the Rocky Mountain high country, and you're riding on a truly historic train. (Even so, it's worth noting that that passengers are offered the option of a speedier return via van.)

There's the Cumbres & Toltec Railroad in New Mexico and Colorado, which involves an eight-hour ride on 64 miles of track with a return via bus. This is an authentic stream-era train going over a 10,000-foot pass and down through a narrow canyon.

And finally, there's the Algoma Central Railway in northern Ontario. This is probably the model that the Adirondack Scenic Railroad would most like to emulate. It is a 228-mile round trip with an hour-and-a-half layover in Agawa Canyon, a 10-hour ride that includes some of Canada's most awesome scenery. It's also notable that this excursion train is on a working railroad, so the track is maintained to a high standard for more than just the tourist operation.

It appears there is sometimes a market for a short-distance tourist excursion, but it's a highly dubious proposition for a longer trip, unless you have Rocky Mountain scenery and historic trains as attractions.

Before committing itself for 20 years (as proposed) to extending the Adirondack tourist train from Utica to Tupper Lake, shouldn't the state look before it leaps? Before spending many millions of taxpayer dollars on track rehabilitation, shouldn't the state conduct a real market study to determine whether there is really a demand for such a service?

Interested parties should attend and speak out at the state's final public meeting on this issue at the Tupper Lake Middle-High School at 7 p.m. on July 8. Or you can submit your thoughts on this subject before July 27 by emailing adirondackpark@dec.ny.gov

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