

A time to come together

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Democracy works. It isn't always pretty, but it affords citizens the opportunity to fully argue a point, after which, hopefully, the majority rules and benefits accrue. The spirit of compromise that lies at the heart of our cherished democratic process does not happen in most places in this world, and we should be grateful that it can happen here.

Such has been the case with the rails-versus-trails debate. Over the last five years, both sides have pressed their case vigorously with their best arguments. The public was served in the process.

The rail-trail debate commenced in 2010 when a diverse group of citizens questioned the established wisdom proclaiming that local railroads had a place in our future that trumped any use of the long-abandoned or, at best, sadly underused rail corridor. These rail-to-trail advocates commissioned studies, solicited citizen and business input, held rallies and sought the opinions of elected officials across the Adirondacks.

In response, the train advocates exhorted their followers to action, pointing out the grand history of this rail corridor and predicting a future like the past, where regular train service would once again unite communities and open up the area to myriad visitors, who would travel by auto and connecting trains to Utica to access the vast wilderness between there and Lake Placid.

Both sides marshalled statistics to bolster their claims. The rail-to-trail contingent posited that at least 56,000 new visitors, and maybe as many as a half-million, would flock to the region annually to enjoy the new recreation trail. To the chagrin of the rail restoration advocates, a lot of folks bought this argument, including the boards of key towns, villages and counties where the corridor passed through. In addition, more than 13,000 citizens and 400 regional businesses also called for converting the corridor into a recreational trail.

The rail advocates countered with their own study suggesting that the restoration of rail service through the Adirondacks was indeed possible, and at a seemingly affordable cost. They maintained that restoring rail service would not only attract more than 8,000 new visitors each year but provide needed infrastructure for the rest of the 21st century and beyond. This would bring untold benefits to the region such as overnight luxury trains rolling into the Adirondacks from New York City via Utica (as in bygone days).

Responding to pressure from both sides, the state departments of Environmental Conservation and Transportation conducted multiple hearings and their own cost-benefit analysis for each approach. The state dismissed trail advocates' projections that a recreation trail would attract up to a half-million visitors annually. It instead estimated that some 70,000 people would use a reduced version of a recreation trail to be constructed by the state on the corridor between Lake Placid and Tupper Lake. For the rail supporters, the state offered to extend the scenic railroad ride from Utica all the way to Tupper Lake, making it the longest tourist train excursion in the

nation. It was a compromise in the five-year-long debate from which, theoretically, each side could tactfully withdraw. Neither side, however, saw it that way, and have been arguing ever since.

Well, folks, I think it is safe to say that the debate, for the moment, is pretty much over. Revisions to the state's management plan governing use of the rail corridor will soon go to the Adirondack Park Agency for final approval. There is little to suggest that the state's "compromise" plan will not stand. Yes, we can run more ads, write more op-ed pieces, collect more petitions and stage more rallies. But there is no reason to believe that the APA will override the recommendations of the two agencies responsible for this decision.

Bottom line: It looks like Adirondack Recreational Trail Advocates and the general public will be getting a recreation trail from Lake Placid to Tupper Lake, as called for by the municipalities along the way. The railroad, meanwhile, may get an extension to its operation north from Big Moose to Tupper Lake, more than half of what the train people had requested. As always in hotly contested encounters of this kind, there are winners, and there are losers.

So let us applaud our time-tested democratic process. Individuals on both sides of the rail-trail debate sought something that stood to improve the economies and lives of the citizens of our towns and villages. It is now time for everyone to come together and move on.

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