

Florida by bike

August 29, 2015, as submitted to the Adirondack Daily Enterprise

To the editor:

Over the past few years, many letters have appeared in support of converting the rail corridor connecting Saranac Lake, Lake Placid and Tupper Lake into a trail for bike riding and other outdoor activities. I'd like to add another "rail trail" to that list, one which has interesting similarities to what has been proposed for the Tri-Lakes. It's one of many such trails that my husband and I visited last winter.

It's called the Withlacoochee State Trail and extends 46 miles in central Florida from Citrus Springs in the north to Dade City in the south. For much of its length, the trail parallels the Withlacoochee River, a favorite paddling stream. We stayed about halfway along the trail in Inverness at the Central Motel, a pleasant, inexpensive lodging place that caters to bike riders like us.

We spent one day pedaling south on the trail and another day exploring the northern section. The route was mostly rural - through the "real Florida" we had been looking for. It was a great way to be sightseeing, with friendly people and little communities along the way with bike shops, restaurants, etc.

Just south of Inverness is the Fort Cooper State Park, where we cut off the Withlacoochee Trail to ride and walk on 5 miles of nature trails. Along the way we learned about local wildlife and regional history, including the Seminole Wars and Seminole culture.

Later, some research with the Florida Department of Environmental Protection revealed that of its 39 state parks surveyed, the Withlacoochee Trail (described as a "linear park") had the most visitors and greatest economic benefits. The "annual attendance" was estimated at 405,632. The "direct economic impact" was \$30,139,500, based on an average per-person/day expenditure (by non-local visitors) of \$99.91. It was estimated that the trail supported 422 jobs and generated over \$2 million in state sales tax revenue.

It's nice to think that someday soon we won't have to go to Florida, Vermont, Maine, Massachusetts, Virginia, Michigan or Pennsylvania to ride our bicycles on a superb rail trail. It appears that we may soon have such a trail in our own backyard, one we can enjoy on a daily basis during much of the year.

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