

Editorial: Clear choice in the 'dacks

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THE ISSUE:

The state mulls whether to keep an old Adirondack rail line or develop a trail.

THE STAKES:

Which option better serves the park's purpose — and human needs?

As New York weighs whether to restore a rail line in the Adirondacks or tear it up and develop a trail for hiking and biking, the cost really is not the issue. The heart of the matter is what the Adirondack Park is really about.

It is about watching the scenery go by for a little while from the comfort of a train? Or is it about enabling people to engage directly with one of America's great forever-wild places?

We appreciate a scenic train ride, and believe that rail is an important form of transit for America's future, one neglected by shortsighted planners for decades. But surely a more hands-on experience is what New York had in mind when it decided more than a century ago to preserve the 6.1-million-acre treasure that is the Adirondack Park. It's the trail, not the rail, that best fits that vision.

The state is currently reviewing possible revisions to what's known as the Unit Management Plan for the Remsen-Lake Placid Travel Corridor. It's a roughly 78-mile stretch that features an old rail line, about 44 miles of which are too decrepit to use. The question is whether to fully rehabilitate the rail line or abandon it in favor of a "rail trail" for hikers and cyclists.

Advocates on each side say their alternative would be more economically feasible and beneficial for the region, although the latest numbers from the [Department of Transportation](#) suggest the costs are fairly similar — about \$21 million for the trail, about \$18 million for the rail. Trail advocates say the cost estimate for their option is overstated and that sale of scrap rails could largely cover it. But even if DOT's figures hold, the difference is negligible over the long term.

Developing both options in an effort to compromise really isn't a solution. Some sections of the route can't accommodate both ideas. Nor does it make sense to split the difference and try to be all things to all people, with a little rail here and a little trail there. In terms of tourism, Lake Placid and Utica really are the entry points for one option or the other. So the question that's left is which one is the better choice.

It is hard to muster a strong argument for rail that appeals to more than train buffs. Although use of the rail line has been growing, the projected numbers for trail use are far greater. And while scenic rail has proved popular in some U.S. parks, the operative word is *scenic*. The views along this route, while pleasant, aren't exactly breathtaking.

The route is, on the other hand, a hiking and biking dream — quiet, remote, and flat. And biking or walking are activities that more residents can also enjoy far more regularly than rail.

With the initial public comment period closed and state officials working on a draft plan to present in the spring, they should bear in mind that this forever wild preserve wasn't created to simply look at, like a photograph or painting, but to experience. Surely today this purpose is as relevant as ever for a plugged-in populace, forever vowing to get off the couch, into shape and away from it all.