

Another rail trail success story

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By Dick Beamish , Adirondack Recreational Trail Advocates

What we could have here in the Adirondacks and the Tri-Lakes area was brought home to us when we visited South Carolina recently to ride our bikes on the Swamp Rabbit Trail. The Swamp Rabbit is a 20-mile-long recreation trail in a former railroad corridor, connecting the city of Greenville with the small town of Travelers Rest on the edge of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Rachel and I checked in at the Hampton Inn at Travelers Rest, a favorite with bicycle riders, in a room overlooking the trail. From our window we could see cyclists passing by, and we also noticed, in the lobby and later in the breakfast room, a number of unusually tall, lean, long-legged guests. These folks, it turned out, were professional distance runners from Boone, North Carolina, recent college graduates who were spending three weeks here in training. The Swamp Rabbit Trail, the perfect place to run, is what drew them to Travelers Rest.

That first afternoon we biked on the trail into the village, a place the size of Saranac Lake where travelers used to stop before continuing west across the mountains. Like many rural towns, Travelers Rest had experienced a long economic decline, but the town seemed on the upswing.



People ride bikes on the Swamp Rabbit Trail in Greenville County, South Carolina.

(Photo courtesy of Greenville County Parks, Recreation and Tourism Department)

We were struck by the impact of the Swamp Rabbit Trail. We rode past businesses with names like Swamp Rabbit Storage and Swamp Rabbit Brew & Taproom, with a bike rack out front. In fact, bike racks were everywhere. We pedaled past the Caboose Express, a vestige of the Swamp Rabbit train that once operated here, which serves as a refreshment parlor. There was the Whistle Stop Cafe and even a medical facility labeled Trailhead Dentistry. We stopped at an extensive bike shop and outdoor outfitting store, whose manager told us that this year he plans to expand his bike-rental business to 40 bicycles a day.

North of Travelers Rest we came to a sign that said, "End of the trail for now." A woman walking her dog told us of plans to extend the trail all the way to North Carolina.

Next day, biking toward Greenville, we encountered the usual eclectic mix of rail trail users. There were families with small kids with training wheels on their bicycles, exercise walkers with a seriousness of purpose, more casual walkers chatting and laughing, gung-ho cyclers in colorful garb intent on a rigorous workout, sightseeing cyclists like ourselves, dog walkers and parents jogging with baby strollers - all ages and sizes, in all stages of physical fitness, out for some fresh air and exercise.

Here and there we saw signs promoting a real-estate subdivision. One sign said, "Like running on the Swamp Rabbit Trail? You'll love living on it!" This confirmed what we'd noticed elsewhere. Because they are considered a prime recreational amenity, these rail-to-trail conversions can be a big selling point for real estate.

Soon we were passing by Furman University, so we cut off to bike around this beautiful campus with a lake in the middle. The name Furman U. rang a bell with us. In doing our pre-trip research, we'd seen a study by Furman's Health Sciences Department tracking the usage of the Swamp Rabbit Trail. Released in January, the study determined that there were more than 500,000 visits to the trail in 2014, a significant increase over the previous year.

Most users were cyclists. Some 25 percent of last year's visits were from tourists like ourselves. The other trail users were residents from surrounding communities. The study calculated that visitors from afar spent a total \$6.7 million here last year.

Back on the trail, we continued to see signs with the symbol of a rabbit and the formal name, "Greenville Health System Swamp Rabbit Trail." Our research had revealed that the hospital-medical center for Greenville County has been a major sponsor of this rail-to-trail conversion, having contributed \$1 million to help get it going. Why should a medical enterprise support such a project? One reason is pretty clear - i.e., the public relations value of being identified with the county's most popular recreational asset.

The other reason is also obvious when you consider the health benefits of a running, walking, biking trail used regularly by thousands of local citizens. With our national epidemic of obesity and its related diseases, what could be better for public health than encouraging regular exercise in a safe, peaceful, picturesque setting?

A few miles on, the trail led into downtown Greenville. What a great way to arrive in this thriving, historic city center! The trail threads through a gorgeous downtown park surrounding the falls of the Reedy River, a waterway we'd been following since Travelers Rest.

As we toured around town, it appeared that the revitalization of Greenville has been aided and abetted by the Swamp Rabbit Trail, though many other factors are involved. At the other end of this recreationway, however, the Swamp Rabbit has played a decisive role in the rebirth of Travelers Rest.

We have much to learn from this success story.

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