

It's past due

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By Scott Thompson , Adirondack Recreational Trail Advocates |

The Remsen-Lake Placid Travel Corridor Unit Management Plan amendment process has been in committee for over six months now and past the deadline for the promised proposals, and still, you would think it is the Manhattan Project for the cloak over what the state is considering: rail or trail? (So much for open government.)

As a business family for five generations and through four rail companies on the corridor, we have been advocating for the conversion to a trail since the passenger service was overshadowed by the snowmobile trade in the 1960s, and very publicly with ACT (Adirondack Corridor Trail) in 2006 and now with ARTA (Adirondack Recreational Trail Advocates), channeling enough interest to get the state to review and hopefully amend the UMP for the corridor. With over a dozen elected local government bodies resolving to remove the rails in favor of a year-round recreational trail, proof of a more favorable economic climate, proof of net salvage gains, and proof that the continuing viability of the tourist rail activity in question, the "track" should be clear. But here's the thing: Who asked?

If we trust the value of the corridor to the scenic rail operation, we give a potentially year-round asset to a 60- to 90-day operation costing taxpayers millions in the maintenance of one specific activity, forgoing other, more popular attractions. Structures and public support are declining for lack of interest; we need to diversify uses of the corridor for it to thrive and contribute to the Adirondacks as a destination. If scenic rail was a standout attraction, you would expect it to be operating now rather than waiting until July. We need more reasons to come, not more ways to get here (and I say that from a roadless destination).

Article Photos



Crumbling railroad ties like these, on the causeway over Stillwater Reservoir at Beaver River (mile marker 78.5), are typical on the Remsen-Lake Placid Travel Corridor between Big Moose and Saranac Lake. (Provided photo — Scott Thompson)

With enough public pressure, the state held "listening

sessions" which did open the UMP; however, the state drew a dubious conclusion based on erroneous information: that the rail trail might be a better option from Tupper to Lake Placid but that rail service enhancement might be a better option from Tupper to Old Forge.

The hospitality industry would disagree. Snowmobiling on the corridor would undoubtedly increase exponentially (see the state Department of Transportation's 2014 traffic count for Big Moose and Sabattis), and while Tupper Lake to Lake Placid would probably see the most bicycle traffic, the rest of the corridor would also benefit greatly.

Restaurants, lodging and retailers know this. So do the towns, villages and county governments, but does the state really ask? Hopefully, when the proposals for UMP modification are announced, as promised before summer, more realistic scenarios will be included and traditional public hearings will be well attended.

New York should listen to business: The Saratoga-North Creek scenic rail operation shows over \$1 million per year in losses. The Adirondack Scenic Railroad is over 20 years behind in its projected economic effect, and if the rails remain from Big Moose to Tupper Lake, there is not enough tourist infrastructure for a successful rail operation even if there were no roads. Without modernization, the Adirondacks and its population will fade into history as the tourist destination that was.

So, New York, why don't you ask?

Scott Thompson owns, runs and lives at the Norridgewock Lodge in Beaver River and is an ARTA board member.