

Let's build a world-class recreational trail here

*Lake Placid to Old Forge
 [First stop: Tupper Lake]*



Adirondack Recreational Trail Advocates (ARTA) is dedicated to converting the 90-mile railroad line that connects Old Forge and Lake Placid into a world-class recreational trail for snowmobiling in the winter and bicycling, hiking, running, strolling, birding and handicapped use during the warmer months. This historic railroad bed has been largely unused since service ended in 1972.

For eleven years, a tourist train has been operated by the Adirondack Railroad Preservation Society on the nine miles of track between Lake Placid and Saranac Lake. The justification for spending taxpayer money on restoring train service was based on the economic benefits the tourist train would provide to communities in the Tri-Lakes region. Yet the train has had no measurable effect on the local economy.

ARTA foresees far greater public benefits—economic, recreational, health and fitness, cultural—from converting the railroad bed into a long-distance, multi-use trail. Following are frequently heard arguments favoring the tourist train and ARTA's responses.



Claim: We should continue to support the train because it attracts tourists and stimulates business.

The Adirondack Scenic Railroad claims annual ridership of 14,000 in its peak year (2010). This number pales beside the potential use of the corridor as a year-round recreational trail. Since 2000, when it began running between Lake Placid and Saranac Lake, the tourist train has 1) provided no noticeable economic benefits and 2) continues to prevent other recreational uses of the line. Yet it continues to receive taxpayer support based on the premise that it stimulates business.

Claim: If we extend the train ride from Saranac Lake to Tupper Lake, the train will achieve its potential. More people will ride it and the regional economy will benefit.

A 2010 study by Camoin Associates projected a 75% increase in riders by extending train service an additional 25 miles to Tupper Lake. If a ridership of 14,000 in its best year has not helped our economy, what can be expected with more riders taking a much longer trip to Tupper Lake?

Claim: There's no assurance that a recreation trail would be more successful than the tourist train.

Wrong. There's every reason to believe that a multi-use trail will attract many more users than a tourist train and provide significant economic benefits. The Great Adirondack Recreation Trail will be a major tourist destination in itself, while the tourist train is an incidental activity, something a visitor might do as a rainy-day alternative. The type of outdoor-loving recreationists attracted by the trail, the length of their

stay, and their tendency to repeat the experience will spark the regional economy. For example, 27 million Americans ride bicycles, and many families incorporate biking into their vacation plans. In the Adirondacks, Fish Creek and Rollins Pond campgrounds alone attract nearly 200,000 campers each year, most of whom bring bicycles. The campgrounds will connect easily with the railroad bed, offering campers a short bike ride to Tupper Lake or a longer (but still easy) ride to Saranac Lake.

Claim: That's all speculation. Where's the hard evidence that rail trails are such a big deal?

The national Rails to Trails Conservancy, which has promoted the conversion of 30,000 miles of rails to trails, has plenty of evidence that rail trails attract large numbers of recreationists and stimulate local economies. For example, the Pine Creek Trail, which runs 63 miles through the "Grand Canyon of Pennsylvania" between Jersey Shore and Wellesboro, last year had 138,000 users and generated about \$4 million in sales. The 32-mile Elroy-Sparta Trail in Wisconsin draws some 60,000 users who spend about \$2 million a year. The Heritage Rail Trail, which runs 20 miles between York, Pennsylvania and the Maryland state line, attracts 350,000 visitors annually who leave behind \$3.6 million. And so on.

Claim: We should keep the train and build a separate trail and make everyone happy.

From Saranac Lake west this is a logistical, economic, and regulatory impossibility. Yet, in order to operate between Lake Placid and Saranac Lake, the Adirondack Scenic Railroad requires that the tracks be kept in place over the entire length of the line so the rolling stock can be moved to Utica in the fall and back to Lake Placid in the spring. As long as the train continues operating between Lake Placid and Saranac Lake, it requires that the tracks be kept in place for this twice-a-year passage. Thus does a nine-mile tourist train monopolize the 80 miles of corridor between Saranac Lake and Old Forge!

Claim: The town of North Elba has the money to build an adjoining trail from Lake Placid to Saranac Lake. It would be foolish not to push ahead with the project.

Instead of being squandered on a costly and unnecessary trail, these public funds should be used wisely. The projected expenditure for a separate, six-mile trail from Lake Placid to Ray Brook is \$4.4 million. For this amount, the entire 34 miles of rail bed from Lake Placid to Tupper Lake could be converted into a recreation trail.

Question: What about the movement to continue the tourist train 25 miles from Saranac to Tupper and also build a separate trail alongside it?

Extending the tourist train to Tupper Lake would be a major expense for questionable economic benefits. As for building a separate trail beside the tracks from Saranac Lake to Tupper Lake, forget it. Even if environmental regulations were dispensed with, widening the rail corridor from 8 to 20 feet to accommodate a separate trail would require dumping tons of fill into lakes and wetlands. This scheme is a physical, financial and regulatory impossibility.

Question: What will become of economically-stressed Tupper Lake without the excursion train linking it to Placid and Saranac?

What will make Tupper a tourist destination is not an extended tourist train but a popular bikeway connecting the village to the rest of the Tri-Lakes area--along with Tupper's emergence as a hub for snowmobilers on a greatly improved trail that links Tupper Lake with Old Forge in the south and with hundreds of miles of other snowmobile trails to the north.

Claim: The rail corridor is on the National Register of Historic Places, which prevents removal of the tracks.
Not so. Historic registrations are frequently changed to improve the level of protection. What is historic about the corridor is that it was used for transportation and played a key role in opening up the Adirondacks for lumbering, mining, health care and tourism. A safe, scenic, long-distance recreation trail would continue this tradition and interpret the region's history for hundreds of thousands of trail users. The train stations could serve as rest stops, information centers, cafes, bike shops and museums.

Claim: The state Department of Transportation (DOT) owns the line and would never agree to removing the tracks.

This travel corridor is state property, owned by the people of New York State. It is managed by the DOT and leased to the Adirondack Scenic Railroad. This one-year lease can be renewed or terminated as appropriate. If the public clearly prefers a recreational trail, the corridor will be used for this public purpose.

Claim: If the tracks are removed, the corridor will become part of the Forest Preserve and snowmobiles will be banned.

Wrong. The travel corridor will continue under its own unit management plan (UMP). The classification of adjoining land will not affect the status of the corridor, with or without rails. This is a form of "rail banking." If it ever becomes necessary to restore rail service, the corridor will be available for this purpose.

Claim: Changing the UMP for the travel corridor could take forever because the state has so many other Unit Management Plans it must tend to first.

The UMP can be changed promptly if given a high priority. The current UMP has been in effect since 1995. The use of the corridor by the tourist trains was always provisional. The Plan contains a recreational-use option in the event the train fails to deliver economic benefits. After an eleven-year trial period, it is evident that the train has cost taxpayers more than anticipated and has not produced the benefits originally envisioned. It's now time for the state to re-evaluate the economics of rail operations and then implement the next most desirable option listed in the UMP: the full recreational use of the corridor without the rails.

Claim: The train enables handicapped people to enjoy the beauty of the Adirondacks.

Far better than a nine-mile train ride, the Great Adirondack Recreation Trail will provide those with impaired mobility a perfect pathway for enjoying the outdoors easily, safely and independently. The level trail will be well suited for electric or self-powered wheelchairs, hand-propelled bicycles, etc., and ideal for families with very young and very old members.

Claim: There are thousands of miles of hiking, biking, skiing and snowmobile trails in the Adirondacks, but only one tourist train.

An excursion train runs at the southern end of the line, and another now operates between Saratoga Springs and North Creek. But there are no easy, peaceful, smoothly surfaced, long-distance recreational trails in the Adirondack Park that connect communities, traverse wild and scenic areas, and are suitable for people of every age and physical ability. The Great Adirondack Recreation Trail would fulfill this need.

Claim: If the rail line becomes a recreational trail, all-terrain vehicles (ATVs) will mess it up.

Almost all of the 30,000 miles of rail-trails in this country prohibit the use of ATVs, as do most trails on state lands of the Adirondacks. ARTA will press for similar restrictions on the converted corridor.

Claim: When gas reaches \$10 a gallon or when we run out of gas altogether, we will need trains to get to and from the Adirondacks.

High-speed train service between major population centers must be a national priority, but attempting to restore freight and passenger service between Utica and Lake Placid is like trying to solve a 21st century problem with a 19th century solution. Americans will never abandon their automobiles, which will someday be getting 100 miles-per-gallon or be powered by cleaner alternative fuels. However, if we ever did need to restore train travel to Lake Placid, the rail bed would still be there in perfect condition for laying a new, improved rail line for speedier train service.

Question: How can we make the Great Adirondack Recreation Trail a reality?

By making sure that public opinion and common sense will prevail. ARTA is conducting further studies and analyses of the costs and benefits of a recreational trail; making its voice heard through reasoned debate; and taking its case to our elected representatives at every level.

Join us by going to www.TheARTA.org and clicking the sign-up icon.