

Rail trails and public health

November 9, 2015, As submitted by Dick Beamish , Adirondack Recreational Trail Advocates

It was time to check out the brand-new Lamoille Valley Rail Trail in Vermont, in anticipation of having our very own rail trail in the Tri-Lakes area. Two sections of the LVRT were officially opened in September, and when completed, the trail will run 93 miles across northern Vermont, from St. Johnsbury to Swanton near Lake Champlain and the Canadian border.

In case there are a few readers who haven't yet been exposed to the Great Adirondack Rail Corridor Debate, here's some backstory: After five years of contention, the fate of the Remsen-Lake Placid rail bed will soon be decided by the state Adirondack Park Agency. It's expected that the APA will give final approval to the following compromise put forth earlier this year by the state Department of Environmental Conservation and Department of Transportation:

1. Replace the tracks between Lake Placid and Tupper Lake with a multi-purpose recreation trail.

Article Photos



A mother jogs behind a baby stroller she's pushing on the Lamoille Valley Rail Trail.
(Photo provided by the Lamoille Valley Rail Trail/Northeastern Vermont Regional Hospital)

2. Extend the tourist train from Utica beyond Big Moose to Tupper Lake.

With visions of rail trails dancing in our heads, Rachel and I loaded up our bike rack and drove over to St. Johnsbury on the eastern edge of Vermont. Our intent was to try out the first, 17-mile stretch of what will eventually be the longest rail-to-trail conversion in New England.

We spent the night in St. Johnsbury, a lovely, historic town on a hill above the Passumpsic River, then headed out next morning after breakfast at Anthony's Diner. Though this initial section of trail had opened only a few weeks earlier, word had already gotten out: At the trailhead we saw out-of-state and as well as Vermont license plates.

As we pedaled along the new trail, we were struck by the quality of the engineering and especially by the surfacing of the trail. Where there had once been tracks and ties, there was now a firm pathway consisting of about 8 inches of ballast topped by 2 inches of crushed stone. Later we learned that the top layer is an aggregate called Staymat, a formula devised at a nearby Vermont quarry but transferrable to quarries elsewhere. This was good news, as we will need this kind of hard-packed surfacing on the Adirondack Rail Trail to accommodate the thinner-tired road bikes along with hybrids and mountain bikes.

Also of interest were the references on the rail-trail map to the Northeastern Vermont Regional Hospital in St. Johnsbury. This institution, it seems, has been a big supporter of the trail. Later I spoke with Laural Ruggles, their vice president for marketing and community health.

"How come your hospital supports the trail?" I asked. "What's in it for you?"

"A whole lot," Laural said. "We want to improve the health of people in the community, not just treat them when they're sick. The idea is to keep them well and - as weird as it sounds - out of the hospital."

She said the rail trail complements their mission.

"It provides a safe place to be physically active, to avoid or reduce overweight, which has become a huge national health problem," she told me. "This kind of exercise is also a good for the heart and lungs. Along the trail you see a lot of people smiling, which suggests that biking, walking and jogging is good for mental health as well.

"Because there's no traffic to worry about, you can go out on the trail with a 5-year-old. You see whole families, people pushing strollers, people riding old bikes they've had in their garage for years because they were afraid of going out on the road with the cars and the steep hills."

Laural sometimes commutes by bike to the hospital from her home in Danville, 15 miles away. But she mostly uses the trail on weekends.

I mentioned the popular, 20-mile-long rail trail in South Carolina that Rachel and I biked on last winter. It is formally known as the Greenville Health System Swamp Rabbit Trail. Some research revealed that the Greenville hospital and health care network put up the initial \$1 million to start the trail and help market it.

"They got it right," said Laural. "Rail trails are a great way to improve public health."

Dick Beamish, a resident of Saranac Lake, is founder of the Adirondack Explorer magazine and a board member of Adirondack Recreational Trail Adv