

# A poor alternative

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By Tony Goodwin , Adirondack Recreational Trail Advocates

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In the debate over the best use of the Adirondack travel corridor from Remsen to Lake Placid, railroad advocates have repeatedly stated that we can have both a tourist train and a recreational trail on the 90-mile section between Old Forge and Lake Placid.

At first, the train advocates insisted there was enough room within the 100-foot-wide right of way to build a trail alongside the railroad - this despite the fact that the current unit management plan for the rail corridor states categorically that such a trail is not feasible. In reality, on this single-track corridor, such a project would be akin to building an entirely new road bed that would have to overcome the natural restraints of wetlands, lakes and rock cuts.

Finally faced with the fact that a parallel trail is not feasible, the train advocates have proposed an alternate plan.

## Article Photos



A woman walks west of Cumberland, Maryland on the Great Allegheny Passage Rail Trail, formerly the Western Maryland Railroad and now a tourist railroad and trail from Cumberland to Frostburg, Maryland. Rail advocates like Mark Kavouksoriam think the Remsen-Lake Placid Travel Corridor should be like this, with rails and trail side by side, but Tony Goodwin of Adirondack Recreational Trail Advocates says it's only possible on this Maryland railroad

because it was originally double-tracked, unlike the Adirondack one.  
(Photo courtesy of Tony Goodwin)

Promoted by the Trails and Rails Action Committee, this new approach would link up existing spur trails and roads away from the corridor to bypass the natural restraints. Jack Drury, a respected guide and wilderness educator, took on the job of mapping a trail system, using the rail bed where possible. When Jack first proposed this route last spring, I commended him for finally showing exactly what the rail supporters meant by an "alternate trail." Unfortunately, an analysis of his route determined that it was not in any way equivalent to a trail on the corridor. TRAC's recent refinements on Jack's original plan have not changed my opinion about the proposed alternate route.

I am personally familiar with most of the terrain that Jack mapped, having spent a fair amount of time looking for a feasible route for extending the long-distance Jackrabbit Ski Trail from Saranac Lake to Tupper Lake. I therefore feel qualified to note the following major problems with this alternate route.

The map shows a route of 32 miles between Tupper Lake and Saranac Lake, compared to 24 miles via the rail corridor, as proposed by Adirondack Recreational Trail Advocates. The route does avoid the largest wetlands and the Hoel Pond and Lake Colby causeways. However, a mile-by-mile analysis of this alternate route reveals a great many problems.

13 miles: Parallel trail, requiring much additional fill and an extension of all culverts and bridges to maintain proper drainage. TRAC's engineering drawings do show that elaborate cantilevered structures could avoid having to extend the culverts and bridges, but it does not appear that these engineering "solutions" would be any less expensive.

9 miles: Rough and sometimes steep existing trails that would have to be smoothed and widened to make them accessible by more than just the most skilled mountain bikers

5 miles: Private roads with no assurance that appropriate easements could be obtained - especially through the development east of Hoel Pond

4 miles: Busy, paved highways that have only limited shoulders for bicycles and would not provide an alternate route for snowmobiles in low-snow winters

1 mile: New trail would have to be constructed to the standard of the 9 miles of improved existing trails.

A quick glance at the "Index to Trail Sections" on TRAC's website would indicate that the trail route is no longer than the rail route. The distances given for the "off-corridor" are just for the distance where the off-corridor route leaves the corridor to where it rejoins the corridor. Surely deceptive - whether deliberate or not.

Additionally, TRAC does not provide any cost estimates, either for building the 13 miles of on-corridor parallel trail or for making enough improvements on the 10 miles of off-corridor trail to

easily accommodate mountain bikes. Even with a lot of work, these off-corridor trails would never be as wide, flat and smooth as the corridor would be without rails. (TRAC has conceded that the off-corridor segments would not be suitable for road bikes or even hybrid bikes, and could never be wide or straight enough for heavy snowmobile traffic or grooming.)

In short, this proposal creates a trail that is little different from existing Adirondack trails. As envisioned by ARTA, a trail on the corridor without tracks in place would be very different from all other Adirondack trails, thereby attracting a whole new group of trail users, just as other rail trails have done throughout the country

At its presentation to the Saranac Lake Area Chamber of Commerce, TRAC brushed off their alternative's limitation to mountain bikes by spreading the misinformation that the rail trail proposed by ARTA could only be used by mountain bikes. This is contrary to ARTA's intention that the rail trail have a stone dust surface.

My personal experience on the Island Line Trail in Vermont, the Air Line Trail in Connecticut, the Lehigh Gorge Trail in Pennsylvania, the Greenbrier River Trail in West Virginia and the Great Allegheny Passage in Maryland is that road bikes do just fine on a stone dust surface. And even if users were to be limited to mountain bikes, the flat, straight rail trail could be enjoyed by anyone who can ride a bike and not just the higher skilled riders who would be the only ones who could navigate the proposed off-corridor trail sections.

The inescapable conclusion: This "alternate route" would be suitable only for hikers and mountain bikers, and is therefore no alternative at all.

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