

What were they thinking?

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By JIM McCULLEY , Adirondack Recreational Trail Advocates

In a stunning reversal, the town board of Harrietstown has voted for keeping the rails in place on the sadly underutilized travel corridor that runs through the Tri-Lakes area. In so doing, the board would also deny the opportunity to convert the Lake Placid-Tupper Lake section of the old rail line into what we need most in this part of the Adirondacks: a safe, separate, multi-use, year-round recreation trail connecting our communities.

The Harrietstown vote failed to recognize an opportunity that other local governments along the corridor have long embraced. The main reason given by the board for its change of heart (it had previously supported the rail-to-trail conversion) was the opening of a "rail bike" operation this past summer on a portion of the corridor west of Saranac Lake. This enterprise, known as Rail Explorers, enjoyed considerable success while giving a hint of the much greater demand for a good place to ride real bicycles. Another reason given for the board's decision was its desire to perpetuate the seasonal tourist train between Lake Placid and Saranac Lake.

Town Supervisor Mike Kilroy characterized the board's vote as a "win-win" move.

"Tourists, when they come here, need something to do," he told the Adirondack Daily Enterprise. The train and the rail bikes would presumably fill this need.

One wonders where Supervisor Mike Kilroy and his elected colleagues have been for the past 20 years? Haven't they noticed that the tourist train has done nothing to improve our quality of life? Have they not noticed that, despite millions of dollars of taxpayer support, the tourist train has done nothing to benefit our local economy, except perhaps for the sale of ice-cream cones near the Saranac Lake train station? Do they not understand what attracts tourists to the Adirondacks and keeps them coming back?

First and foremost, visitors come to enjoy the recreational delights provided by our lakes, woods, mountains, rivers, streams and wetlands. Visitors are also attracted by the friendly, small-town atmosphere of our villages - another rarity (along with our natural surroundings) in today's congested world.

According to its website, Rail Explorers has jacked up its prices for 2016, in what is expected to be its final year here before the tracks are removed and real bikes can be ridden on the corridor by young and old recreationists, AT NO CHARGE. By comparison, Rail Explorers last summer charged \$25 for one person to pedal one machine attached to the tracks and ridden, single-file in a tight grouping with other rail bikes, the 6 miles from Saranac Lake to Lake Clear. This summer, Rail Explorers has jumped the price to \$45.

Despite their virtual monopoly on a public resource that we all own, the rail bike and tourist train operators like to portray themselves as victims. The Adirondack Scenic Railroad has had two decades and millions of taxpayer dollars to prove itself as a solvent enterprise that benefits the regional economy. As noted, it has totally failed to do so.

The Rail Explorers began business last year fully aware that New York state is thinking seriously about replacing the tracks with 12-foot-wide, 34-mile trail joining Lake Placid, Saranac Lake and Tupper Lake. Yet these same entrepreneurs have been complaining that removal of the tracks, which would open the corridor to year-round public use, would spell the end of their rail bike business in this area.

Yes, it would. But the real victims of this monopoly are not the tourist train and the rail bikes. The real victims have been a large number of people - Tri-Lakes residents and visitors from all over - who have been deprived of free use of this public resource. The other victims are local businesses that stand to benefit from the influx of tourists who will be attracted to a recreational rail trail that could have at least the drawing power of another major attraction, Whiteface Mountain. However, the converted rail corridor would differ from the Whiteface ski area in that it would attract multiple users all year round.

Let us hope that this neglected, sporadically used travel corridor will finally be properly developed; that the tracks will be removed without further dithering by the state; that we will soon be able to ride our bikes anywhere we want, whenever we want, on the Tri-Lakes section of corridor; that instead of shelling out substantial money to pedal a machine on the tracks between Saranac Lake and Lake Clear, a family of four will be able to ride their own bikes on a well-surfaced corridor without having to pay for the privilege, at their own pace and as often as they like.

As a result, trail users will flow into the towns and villages along the way. Instead of paying to pedal a commercial vehicle on a corridor we all own, trail users can disperse that same amount of money collected by Rail Explorers (\$75 for two, \$125 for four) to the stores, restaurants, lodging places, bike shops and museums of Lake Placid, Ray Brook, Saranac Lake, Lake Clear and Tupper Lake.

Just how many people, young and old, will use the recreation trail? Tens of thousands annually is the most conservative projection, based on various studies and the experience of other rail trails. Hundreds of thousands of "user days" is more likely - including a fair share of local residents who will be able to use the trail on a daily basis, and not only for biking but walking, running, nature study, fishing and, in the snow season, cross-country skiing and much-improved snowmobiling.

The time has come for the state to break the existing monopoly on this wonderful public resource, capitalize on its vast potential as a tourist destination, and move ahead with trail construction in the spring of 2016.

Jim McCulley, of Lake Placid, is president of the Lake Placid Snowmobile Club and a member of the board of directors of Adirondack Recreational Trail