



Adirondack Recreational Trail Advocates  
P.O. Box 1081  
Saranac Lake, NY 12983

June 10, 2021

The Honorable Andrew M. Cuomo, Governor  
NYS State Capitol Building  
Albany, NY 12224

**Re: Use and misuse of the 90-mile travel corridor through the Adirondacks**

Dear Governor Cuomo,

This letter is to express both heartfelt thanks and a growing concern about two related state projects now underway in the Adirondacks.

We thank you for initiating a statewide recreational trail system and, specifically, what promises to be one of your administration's finest accomplishments for the Adirondack Park -- the conversion of the northern portion of an old railroad line into the 34-mile Adirondack Rail Trail. Present and future generations of outdoor enthusiasts, people of all ages and physical abilities, will be able to enjoy this wonderful recreational resource including bicyclers, hikers, joggers, strollers, snowmobilers and nature lovers of every stripe.

For more than a decade, Adirondack Recreational Trail Advocates has called for the creation of this year-round, multi-use trail connecting Lake Placid, Saranac Lake and Tupper Lake. To judge by the success of other rail-trails around the country, the economic, recreational and health benefits, for residents and visitors alike, will be substantial.

We are concerned, however, by the pace of this rail-to-trail conversion, and by the priority the state has given to the extension of a tourist-train farther down the corridor. Your administration announced last fall that the trail will not be completed for the Tri-Lakes Area until the end of 2024, though the conversion could be accomplished far sooner, with its myriad benefits conferred much more quickly. At the same time, the state announced that a 45-mile extension of the faltering tourist train from Big Moose to Tupper Lake, on the southern portion of the corridor, will be completed by the end of 2021—three years ahead of the rail-trail. This delay represents a lost economic and recreational opportunity and a disservice to Adirondack residents and visitors.

Beyond the crucial matter of timing, we are also concerned about the misuse of an extraordinary public resource (the one-of-a-kind travel corridor through the Adirondacks) and a waste of taxpayer money.

The state's plan for the travel corridor marries the rail-to-trail conversion in the north with a restoration of rail service in the south that will, in theory, allow trains to resume operation from Utica all the way to Tupper Lake. The idea behind this ostensible compromise, providing a rail-trail in the north and extended train service in the south, was to provide maximum economic and recreational benefits to the hard-pressed communities along the way. Though the compromise was well-intentioned, the result could be an embarrassment for your administration and a lost opportunity for the public.

### **Rail-trail vs. "ghost train"**

The Adirondack Rail Trail will add a new recreational dimension to the Adirondack Park and will also generate an estimated \$20 million a year in tourist revenues, according to a study by the Rails to Trails Conservancy, the organization that supports a national rail-to-trail movement, which has grown to some 2,100 trails covering 24,215 miles. Its study suggests that a delay of four years in completing the Adirondack Rail Trail amounts to a lost-opportunity cost of \$80 million for Adirondack communities, or \$400,000 for every week that this project is prolonged.

Meanwhile, at a cost of more than \$30 million, the state is plunging ahead to create the longest tourist train in the country, a trip of 120 miles from Utica in central New York to Tupper Lake in the northern Adirondacks. With a regulated top speed of 30 mph, a round-trip will take about nine hours. Yet before committing to this long-distance venture, the state never required an independent marketing study to gauge the demand for such a service. Basic questions were never asked, such as: How much incremental or repeat business would this extended service attract? How many potential customers would take this long, slow trip even once, especially with children in tow?

Then there is the question of who will operate such a service? The current licensee, Adirondack Railway Preservation Society, is functionally bankrupt and burdened with a long history of failure. ARPS' liabilities have exceeded assets in every year for which its tax filings are available, the last being 2017, and the company's tax returns have not been made available since then. Currently, ARPS is conducting an online fund drive, desperately seeking contributions to buy the rolling stock it needs to operate the line.

In sum, this ambitious project is going forward without a proper analysis of projected ridership or any serious consideration of the economic implications of extending, and annually maintaining, the nation's longest tourist train operation.

There is also the impact this project will have on snowmobiling, the single biggest economic driver for many hard-pressed communities. With the rails in place, snowmobiles

require up to two feet of snow to operate safely. With the rails removed, much less snow is required for a smooth ride, the snowmobile season would be greatly extended and the economic benefits magnified on a snowmobile corridor that links north to Montreal and west through Tug Hill. With global warming and diminishing snowfall, the need for rail removal will become increasingly urgent.

### **A long history of wishful thinking**

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Adirondack railroad was constructed through the state's northern wilderness by William Seward Webb. He finished this challenging task in 18 months—compared to the four years the state ostensibly needs to convert one-quarter of the corridor into a trail!

In 1965 passenger service ended from Utica to Lake Placid and freight service ceased in 1972. The state acquired the 121-mile rail corridor from Remsen (just south of Old Forge) to Lake Placid in 1974 and funded restoration of the line in time for the 1980 Winter Olympics in Lake Placid. The train ran only a few times, arriving hours behind schedule, before it went out of business.

In 2000, the Adirondack Railroad Preservation Society persuaded the state to restore train service on the 9-mile stretch between Lake Placid and Saranac Lake. This excursion train operated sporadically for the next 15 years, never attracting enough riders to produce the hoped-for economic benefits for the communities along the line.

In 2009, the train operators went before the town board of North Elba (home to Lake Placid) seeking support for more state funding to extend train service another 25 miles to Tupper Lake. This longer trip, they argued, would increase ridership sufficiently to make their business viable. Town supervisor Roby Politi characterized their government-backed business as a “boondoggle,” and the board expressed preference for a trail in place of the rail.

In 2015, train service was terminated in favor of a year-round, multi-use trail. The state acknowledged that the best use of taxpayer money was to convert the Lake Placid-Saranac Lake-Tupper Lake section of the travel corridor into what could become one of the country's premiere rail trails. Supporting this move were more than 400 local businesses and eight municipalities along this part of the corridor.

But farther south on the rail bed, wishful thinking continued. In 2013, the train operators persuaded the state to fund a 10-mile extension of the little-used excursion train from Old Forge to Big Moose.. This multi-million-dollar extension would, ARPS predicted, produce 46 new jobs and other economic benefits. Four years later, the railroad was running only 10 to 12 trains a year to Big Moose, with no sign of new jobs or anything else that would justify the taxpayer investment.

In 2015, wishful thinking prevailed again when ARPS persuaded the state to extend the train another 45 miles from Big Moose to Tupper Lake. This was all they needed, the train

operators claimed in a now-familiar refrain, to make the under-used railroad a popular success. The cost of this extension is now estimated at over \$30 million, not including the annual cost to taxpayers of maintaining the line.

### **Some answers are needed**

Meanwhile, important questions remain unanswered:

--Why was no serious financial analysis or marketing study undertaken before the state committed to extending an excursion train with a poor track record another 45 miles from Big Moose to Tupper Lake?

--Why is the extension being rushed to completion by the end of this year while the rail-to-trail conversion will not be completed until the end of 2024—at an estimated cost, in lost revenue to local communities, of \$20 million a year?

--Why is the state dealing with a train operator (ARPS) that has been functionally bankrupt for years and whose auditors have questioned “the organization’s ability to continue as a going concern”?

--ARPS’s liabilities have exceeded assets in every year for which its tax filings are available, and no tax returns have been available since then. What is the company trying to hide?

--Why has the state Department of Transportation consistently championed a poorly patronized tourist train over more beneficial uses of the corridor that will, based on comparable rail-trails elsewhere, attract hundreds of thousands of users year-round as it enriches the quality of life for Adirondack residents.

### **Recommendations**

The state can avoid embarrassment and make full use of this one-of-a-kind travel corridor by:

--Accelerating construction of the Adirondack Rail Trail between Lake Placid and Tupper Lake by earmarking the requisite funding and lining up a general contractor to complete the rail-trail by the end of 2022.

--Delaying rail restoration north of Big Moose until an adequate economic and environmental analysis can be completed, including realistic projections of ridership.

--Not spending more taxpayer money (in the unlikely event of a favorable economic analysis) until a competent, financially stable operator has been selected, as called for in the state’s unit management plan for the travel corridor.

--Establishing a management organization that can bring the relevant municipalities together to coordinate the operation and promotion of the Adirondack Rail Trail—an essential step for successful rail trails elsewhere.

The railroad served an important purpose in the early decades of the Adirondack Park. The corridor through which it travelled could provide even greater benefits to Adirondack residents and visitors in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and beyond.

Thank you for your help at this critical juncture in realizing the full potential of a truly remarkable (yet long underutilized) public resource.

Sincerely,



Joe Mercurio, President, for the board:



Hope Frenette  
Tupper Lake



Maureen Peroza  
Tupper Lake



Jack Delehanty  
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Chris Keniston  
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Tony Goodwin  
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- Supervisor Mike Kilroy, Town of Harrietstown, 39 Main Street, Saranac Lake, NY 12983
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- Robin Dropkin, Parks & Trails New York, 33 Elk Street, Albany NY 12207, [rdropkin@ptny.org](mailto:rdropkin@ptny.org)
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- Peter Bauer, Protect the Adirondacks, PO Box 48, North Creek, NY 12853
- David Gibson, Adirondack Wild, PO Box 9247, Niskayuna New York 12309
- Senator Daniel G. Stec, 5 Warren Street Suite 3, Glens Falls, NY 12801
- Michael Barrett, Adirondack Mountain Club, 814 Goggins Road, Lake George, NY 12845
- Leah Golby, President, New York Bicycling Coalition, P.O. Box 8868, Albany, New York 12208
- Assemblyman Robert Smullen, 5659 State Route 5, Suites 1-3 Herkimer, NY 13350