

Debate Rages Over Plan To Park DOT-111 Cars In Adirondacks

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DOT-111 rail cars passing through Plattsburgh. PAT BRADLEY/WAMC

The Saratoga North Creek Railway is raising the ire of environmental and conservationists over a plan to store empty railcars on its central Adirondack tracks.

The rail line is working on a plan to store as many as 500 DOT-111 railcars at the Sanford Lake branch tracks in Tahawus in the central Adirondacks. Saratoga North Creek Railway President and CEO Ed Ellis could not be reached for comment, but at the July 28th meeting of the Warren County Board of Supervisors Public Works Committee meeting he explained the plan. "We're looking for a revenue stream that's gonna make the railroad sustainable for the long term. So we're expecting that cars will probably come into storage sometime in the next few weeks or couple months and we think that they'll probably stay there for at least a year. [How many cars do you think you're gonna be able to get?] I don't know. I think we could easily get three, four, five hundred cars."

The committee passed a resolution supporting the railroad's efforts to generate revenue by transporting empty tank cars along Warren County's tracks to Tahawus for storage. Lake Luzerne Supervisor Eugene Merlino chairs the Public Works Committee. He declined to be recorded because the matter has

not been resolved by the full board. He did explain that after the committee approved the resolution, it went to the full county board of supervisors where it was tabled and sent back to his committee for further study. At issue is whether Warren County would have any legal ability to stop the rail company from crossing tracks in the county to travel into another county. The tank cars would be stored in Essex County.

The idea has prompted several environmental groups to ask the governor to intervene and stop the plan.

Adirondack Council President Willie Janeway says the cars will be parked in the High Peaks next to the Hudson River, and the route crosses public lands that are protected under the state constitution's Forever Wild clause. "We're very worried about the security at that site, about draining oil activity. We suggest that that implies a state jurisdiction in terms of that type of activity and that the federal preemption should not apply there. We should not be storing hazardous waste, essentially establishing a junkyard, in the middle of America's greatest park."

Ellis told Warren County officials only residual material remains in the tankers. "In terms of the amount of residue that's in them there might be after a while after the film drips down in the bottom of the car there might be a few gallons. We do inspect them when they come in to make sure they're really empty. [How secure are they?] We're not storing them in towns. We're storing them up by the mine or sidings there. So you'd have to hike in two and a half miles to find one. And because we've made sure that they're empty before they go up there I think that the danger level is virtually non-existent."

Adirondack Wild also believes the plan violates the Forever Wild clause of the state constitution. In its letter to Governor Cuomo the group states that storing the DOT-111 tank cars would disfigure the Adirondack landscape. Partner Dave Gibson says there are too many ambiguities in the railway's plan. "You have an unspecified amount of oil in these cars. We don't know, based on what he told Warren County, where the cars would be inspected, who would inspect them and how long the cars would remain on the tracks. So given all those uncertainties this proposal or this action, because the company says they don't need any permission, poses a significant threat to human health and safety and is also a very severe eyesore and junkyard for old oil cars in the heart of the Adirondacks. We don't think that's right. The governor should pay attention. I think his agencies have the legal authority to subject this activity to their jurisdiction."

The Warren County Public Works committee meeting to review the proposal is pending. The county board will meet on Sept. 18th.