

Green Groups Differ On Rail-Trail Proposal

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Two environmental groups disagree on whether a state proposal to remove 34 miles of train tracks between Tupper Lake and Lake Placid complies with the Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan.

In a news release last week, the Adirondack Council praised the proposal, calling it “a good compromise” that protects natural resources and addresses the economic and cultural needs of the region.

Adirondack Wild: Friends of the Forest Preserve, however, contends that the proposal violates the State Land Master Plan. The proposal would amend the corridor’s unit management plan (UMP) from 1996.

“We disagree with the Final Draft’s conclusion that you have the legal authority to tear up the tracks and create an all-recreational corridor between Lake Placid and Tupper Lake,” Adirondack Wild wrote in a letter to the Adirondack Park Agency.

The APA must determine whether the proposal conforms to the master plan. It is now weighing public comments on that question and could take up the matter at its next meeting, in February.

After **Error! Hyperlink reference not valid.**, the state Department of Environmental Conservation and state Department of Transportation this fall finalized a plan for dividing the state-owned railroad corridor into a rail segment and a trail segment.

It calls for rehabilitating 45 miles of tracks – now in disuse – between Big Moose and Tupper Lake. This would enable tourist trains to travel 107 miles from Utica to Tupper. This would be one of the longest tourist-train excursions in the nation, and some question whether such a train would be economically viable.

The more controversial part of the proposal calls for replacing the tracks between Tupper Lake and Lake Placid with a recreational trail that would be used by skiers and snowmobilers in winter and by bicyclists and hikers in other seasons.

Pulling up the tracks would force Adirondack Scenic Railroad to cease running a tourist train between Saranac Lake and Lake Placid. It also would force Rail Explorers USA – which runs pedal-powered excursions on six miles of track – to relocate to another part of the corridor or to a different rail line. Rail Explorers opened this summer in Saranac Lake and says it served almost 15,000 customers before shutting for the season in October.

Train boosters and trail advocates disagree on whether replacing the tracks with a recreational trail would help or hurt the regional economy.

Adirondack Wild's objections to the plan are legal, not economic.

The state-owned corridor runs 119 miles from Remsen (north of Utica) to Lake Placid. In the State Land Master Plan, it is designated a Travel Corridor. The master plan defines a Travel Corridor as "that strip of land constituting the roadbed and right-of-way for state and interstate highways in the Adirondack Park, the Remsen to Lake Placid railroad right-of-way, and those state lands immediately adjacent to and visible from these facilities."

Adirondack Wild contends that the definition of the corridor as a *railroad* right-of-way means that if the tracks are pulled up, the corridor will cease to be a Travel Corridor. The group's letter, written by David Gibson and Dan Plumley, includes the following quote from the 1996 unit management plan: "the description of the travel corridor classification in the APSLMP refers to the railroad right-of-way in terms of a mass transit situation similar to roads and highways rather than a recreational facility."

If the tracks are pulled up, Gibson and Plumley argue, the corridor would revert to other Forest Preserve classifications – namely, Wilderness, Wild Forest, or Canoe, depending on the specific location. Two of the primary recreational activities envisioned for the corridor, snowmobiling and bicycling, are not permitted in Wilderness and Canoe Areas.

Thus, Adirondack Wild says the proposal cannot be implemented unless the State Land Master Plan is amended.

The Adirondack Council, however, says the proposal does conform to the master plan. Willie Janeway, the council's executive director, said the proposal "protects the integrity of the Travel Corridor classification and provides positive outcomes for both the rail and recreational trail proponents, and local communities."

In an article in the January-February issue of the *Adirondack Explorer*, Robert Davies, DEC's director of the Division of Lands and Forests, said the Travel Corridor will remain under the jurisdiction of DOT and its classification will not change under the proposal – though DEC will manage the trail segment. Davies also said tracks could be laid down again if a need for rail service

between Tupper Lake and Lake Placid ever materializes.

Adirondack Wild raised several other objections to the state proposal, among them that DEC and DOT failed to adequately study the environmental impacts of replacing the tracks with a recreational trail that will “invite faster snowmobiling and other mechanized sports which could degrade natural resources.” Adirondack Wild also questions plans to establish new snowmobile trails that would weave in and out of the corridor between Big Moose and Tupper Lake.

“In the [proposal’s] efforts to bend over backwards to facilitate wider, faster snowmobiling ... it contributes unnecessarily to erosion of the integrity and wild character immediately adjoining several key wilderness or primitive area locations,” Adirondack Wild says in the letter.

Adirondack Wild also contends that the state agencies failed to investigate all the alternatives to pulling up tracks and creating a trail. “One that was not explored,” Gibson and Plumley wrote, “is the feasibility of a new narrow gauge, electric rail line side by side with a recreational trail, making dual use between Lake Placid and Tupper Lake possible.”

In an email to the *Almanack*, Gibson said such a train could be used for tourist excursions and for mass transit.

Asked if Adirondack Wild would support the removal of tracks if all the proper legal steps were taken, Gibson replied: “Adirondack Wild does not oppose an all-recreational corridor from Tupper to Placid, per se, assuming the following actions were taken: the 1996 UMP and 2015 UMP amendment are harmonized with respect to the SLMP’s definitions and descriptions; a new EIS [environmental impact statement] is prepared; public hearings are held inside and outside of the Park; and public comment analyzed and addressed as required by the SLMP amendment process.”

The Park’s other two major environmental groups – Protect the Adirondacks and the Adirondack Mountain Club – have not taken a stance in the rail-trail debate.

ADK Executive Director Neil Woodworth said the club’s conservation and trails committees deadlocked on the issue. “We are in the unusual position of not having a position,” he remarked.