

Dear Custodians of the Adirondack Railroad rail corridor,

A year ago, I walked into a crowded internet café, and the place made strong impressions. First, it was mobbed. I searched for a seat, and about the time I was ready to give up, I found two.

Second impression: people were having a great time. Conversations were blaring all around me, both face-to-face and via cell phones. The staccato tapping of keyboards and tablet computers gave a rhythm to the place. I saw lots of smiles and heard laughter in all directions.

Third: a whole lot of coffee was going down. To me, a coffee lover, the place smelled divine, and I made ready to go grab a cup of my own.

Fourth: soon every seat within view was filled, including the one next to me. It was occupied by a well-dressed businessman from Milan, Italy. After a brief chat with me, he promptly opened his laptop computer (set up on his lap, of all places) and went to work on a spread sheet. Meanwhile, the little dog that he had been smuggled into the establishment settled down on my feet for a nap. There it lay, quietly snoring and farting. I had to laugh.

Fifth: my window seat afforded a view of live streaming. The upstate New York countryside was flying by. This was possible because the internet café was in fact a car on an Amtrak train, bound from Saratoga to Manhattan.

I mention all this as a preamble to my assertion that railroads could have a bright future in the Adirondack Mountains, one that moves people from the big eastern cities and towns to mountain resort villages with only a fraction of the carbon footprint of our current auto-dominated model.

There are those who would like to destroy the Adirondack Railroad. They want to rip up and sell off its tracks and turn the corridor (built for rail transport in the 19th century at great expense including of life and limb) into a bicycle and snowmobile path in a region already abounding in opportunities for cyclists and snowmobilers.

Anti-rail agitators would have us believe that rail transport is dead in America, and that any train to travel the Old Forge to Lake Placid corridor in the future would resemble the sad old failing trains of the 1960s and 1970s. They use a straw man style of argument, holding up the outdated, worn-out trains of the mid-20th century as what the future might hold if rail service was restored. Then they knock them down with a mighty swift sword of withering criticisms. These, while seemingly fair on the surface, bear no relation to the real argument for trains, trains that might run the corridor in the 21st century in sleek, fuel-efficient, gourmet-coffee-scented, wi-fi wired fashion.

The anti-rail faction also make rosy claims that the salvaging of scrap iron from the rails in place today will pay for a bicycle and snowmobile path cost-free to the taxpayer.

Concerns about additional costs including repairs to viaducts, maintenance, law enforcement, sanitary facilities, and the vast parking lots that would need to be built to accommodate all the recreational trail's riders are brushed aside. Also brushed aside are the environmental costs of developing parking infrastructure and the environmental costs of taking automobile traffic in the Adirondacks as it stands today and, if their dreams come true, dramatically increasing it.

My vision: not a regression to nineteenth century rail, nor to mid-twentieth century failing rail, nor to the days of building the Northway in an era of cheap automotive fuel and flooding roads with carbon-spewing cars, but a step forward into a new rail era. In this future, point-to-point rail from major cities and population centers will bring travelers to revitalized Adirondack villages. To these villages 21st century rail would bring not vast asphalt parking lots to hold the cars of trail riders, but bustling hotels, restaurants, taxi services, and local car rental services to give our guests a good time and move them around in comfort. All with a much lower carbon footprint than at present.

A pipe dream, or a real possibility? One doesn't have to look farther than the daily newspaper for evidence of which way the wind is blowing. Snowmobile sales and registrations are sharply down. Rail ridership is sharply up. Young people are acquiring driver's licenses and buying cars at a rate lower every years. Increasingly, young professionals are settling in cities and moving from place to place with public transport. They care about the environment. They care about the future.

In the summer of 2013, a New York Times story told of a newly built railroad in North Carolina, connecting Charlotte to the hinterlands. It was expected to take 12 years to reach full ridership. Full ridership was achieved in one month.

Can we do it? Will we do it? We certainly can. In order to make it happen, all of us must make sure a highly vocal, highly organized, well-funded minority does not succeed in destroying a public transportation system, albeit one in need of serious rehabilitation and modernization, in order to create a 1960s-style attraction demanding the creation of mammoth parking infrastructure and the attraction of hordes of automobiles beyond those already spewing their way here on crowded highways.

Let's be bold. Let's do the right thing. Let's make an Adirondack Railway journey one of the great, legendary trips of the world. Let's think out of the box, ignore the naysayers, and be proud of what we've done.

Thank you.

All best wishes,

Ed Kanze

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