

**REMARKS BY R. G. HEST
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TO
SCOPING HEARINGS ON REVIEW OF THE UMP FOR THE
REMSSEN - LAKE PLACID TRAVEL CORRIDOR**

I speak today for a volunteer group of residents and visitors who believe that the premise put forward as trails OR rails is not the solution. We believe the best option for our region is investment in both trails AND rails.

We call ourselves TRAC - Trails with Rails Action Committee -- and our group brings experience and expertise in economic development, trail design and construction, historic preservation, rail operations, management and, government agency operations. We have been working together since early 2013 to measure and design a system of trails that can co-exist with rail operations in the Tupper Lake to Saranac Lake segment of the Remsen - Lake Placid travel corridor.

We believe that the UMP recommendation to pursue Alternative 6 made in 1996 is worthy of actually being implemented and we stand ready to continue to work with NYS DEC and DOT staff to create the win-win solution of trails with rails. We define win-win as:

- **preserving the rails** to save train service and ensure that the Remsen-Lake Placid Travel Corridor serves a growing role in public recreation and regional / community economic development, and
- **promoting trail development** within and alongside the railroad corridor to connect communities and enhance access to natural areas throughout the region, and
- **encouraging investments** in the rail and trail infrastructure to enable more active use for transportation in support of Adirondack communities.

This scoping hearing process provides our group with the opportunity to share an extensive amount of research that has taken place. Some of the work began prior to the public hearings conducted in the fall of 2013. The effort has intensified since then.

An unintended consequence of the intense public relations campaign carried out by those who want the rails removed is that many residents and visitors have been galvanized to take a real hard look at what has and has not been done since 1996 and how to ensure that the original UMP recommendation gets fully implemented. Alternative 6 was arrived at after extensive public consultations in our region; the operating railroad has made tremendous progress improving

service and rebuilding the right of way that is owned by NYS. Funds from NYS and from the Federal government have reimbursed the railroad after the fact for these improvements to track structures. NYS has however not yet fulfilled its obligations to invest in and expand the trail networks as mandated in Alternative 6.

So, TRAC volunteers have worked with boots on the ground to identify and develop trail solutions that work within the travel corridor as well as in the areas alongside - this work helps NYS DEC to fulfill the requirements that Alternative 6 prescribed. We have worked with staff resources at the APA and have heeded advice on trail construction and materials from NYS DEC field representatives who are preparing a Unit Management Plan for state-owned lands traversed by the Tupper to Lake Placid segment of the corridor.

In addition to identifying trail potential, the analysis includes preparation of an inventory of the numerous natural and constructed amenities that would be of interest to travelers using rail transportation to access nearby communities as well as the recreation resources of the region - paddlers, bikers, hikers, XC skiers, snowshoers and, shoppers of all ages and conditions.

During the course of these two days of outreach meetings you will have a chance to talk with the members of TRAC who have walked the corridor, making notes of track conditions, identifying where trails are feasible within the corridor, creating designs of engineered structures where they are needed and identifying where existing NYS DEC authorized and existing trails can be used alongside the travel corridor. The trail system provides a continuous route with a wide variety of views and experiences that is cost effective. It can and should be constructed at the same time that the rail infrastructure is rehabilitated.

In addition to the trail system, our group has created maps that identify the natural and built amenities accessible by residents and visitors using the rehabilitated rail infrastructure from Tupper Lake to Saranac Lake.

Some have said the rail system in this segment of the corridor has not been used and brings no economic benefit. For those who may not have sufficient knowledge of this mode of transport, it is a first and foremost an economic system, an asset that supports other economic activity. It is front-end capital intensive; the infrastructure investment, once in place, lasts literally for decades. The proof is easily visible when travelling the corridor: the bridge and trestle abutments, and the rail itself, were all built and installed well over 75

years ago. Certainly the ties are in poor condition and need to be replaced as well as the ballast improved to current standards. The current rail infrastructure condition can be remedied cost effectively in conjunction with an enhanced trail system and will be built and available to users in a shorter time frame than rail removal and construction of a so called “rail-trail” in its place.

What is remarkable and noteworthy is that the current scenic rail operator has carried over 1.4 million passengers since the beginning of its lease. In any business, a 30-day-renewal operating lease creates almost impossible operating conditions. In railroading, a business that requires long-term investments in infrastructure and rolling stock, survival with such a short-term lease is to be applauded. The Adirondack Scenic Railroad, to give credit where it is due, has not only survived it has grown its operations and provided memorable experiences for all its paying customers. We believe a long-term lease of a minimum 10 years is critical to the financial viability of whatever organization provides rail transport operations in the travel corridor. Terminating the rail line at Tupper Lake would create a similar negative business environment as the 30-day lease of the past 18 years.

There are many who question why New York State would contemplate removing the rail system that connects the three population centers of the northern Adirondack region where almost a third of the permanent residents live; we certainly are members of this large group. Adirondack Architectural Heritage (AARCH), a member of the TRAC group, recently awarded the Adirondack Rail Preservation Society its long-term stewardship award; what irony if this New York State and National Register designated historic asset were to be removed.

The community of Tupper Lake and the organization Next Stop Tupper Lake (NSTL) has been working to build out a network of walking and biking trails also suitable for use by snow sport enthusiasts including xc skiers, snowmobilers and snowshoers within that community. Saranac Lake has adopted a NYS funded Bike and Pedestrian trail network, a large portion of which is within the existing travel corridor in that community. When coupled with the plan for a parallel trail within the corridor, already engineered between Saranac Lake and Lake Placid, the potential already exists to cost-effectively create the win-win that will preserve the rail system, invest in new trails, enhance existing DEC trails and provide present and future economic and recreational opportunities for residents and visitors of all ages, interests and physical conditions.

Those of us working in TRAC respectively recommend that these issues be included as part of the analysis in the scoping effort:

- ✓ the difference between ‘trail only’ and ‘trails with rail’ not ‘trail vs rail’
- ✓ the loss of rail excursion potential on the TL to LP segment, leading to impacts associated with excluding aged and disabled from access to natural areas,
- ✓ quantify the irretrievable resources (physical, financial, historic, economic) lost upon rail removal
- ✓ the loss of xc ski access with no alternate winter connecting trail, big issue in villages of Saranac Lake and Tupper Lake as well as natural areas.
- ✓ the increase in construction costs due to 5 to 7 year delay in procedural aspects, rail removal and hazardous material disposal,
- ✓ identify the natural resource disturbance, (e.g. habitat) associated with NOT having rail system available for trail construction and maintenance (including the need for new roads for heavy equipment) and
- ✓ a distinct and separate analysis of corridor trail use by hikers, mountain and cross-bikers, snowmobilers and xc skiers and snowshoers associated with intra-village travel, NOT the same as travel to natural areas.

The volunteers of TRAC remain ready and able to continue work in collaboration with NYS DEC and DOT agency staff to make the win-win option a reality.

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