

NCPR  
November 23, 2011

## Railroad debate focuses on track removal

Railroad supporters and multi-use trail advocates in the Tri-Lakes continue to debate the best use of the Remsen-Lake Placid Travel Corridor. Trail advocates want to remove the tracks in favor of a trail for hikers, bikers, snowmobilers and skiers. Railroad supporters, meanwhile, say a tourist train can coexist with a parallel trail. As the debate continues to play out, some observers are asking about the process required to remove the tracks.

Audio:

<http://www.northcountrypublicradio.org/news/audio/111123cmraildebate.mp3?download>

The Remsen-Lake Placid Travel Corridor is a 34-mile stretch of railroad that connects Tupper Lake, Saranac Lake and Lake Placid. Its use is dictated by a 1996 unit management plan authored by the state departments of Environmental Conservation and Transportation.

The corridor's manager, Dawn Klemm of the DOT, says any effort to remove the rails would require a revision to the plan.

"This is a unique situation," she said. "It would all have to go back through the unit management plan before anything is changed."

Multi-use trail advocates argue that if taxpayers want to revise the management plan to remove the tracks, then policymakers should listen.

Klemm says it's not that simple. For one thing, DOT is short-staffed. Another problem, Klemm says, is that DEC just isn't ready to start revising plans.

(dawn2) "It would have to be done with the cooperation of DEC, and their first goal is to get unit management plans completed for areas that they don't have them done for yet," she said. "They want to get at least one management plan in process for everything they're looking at before they go back and readdress something that's already been done once."

Klemm says the DOT's Adirondack Park specialist is currently busy with other projects. In the short term, she says the state is not well positioned to take on a project of that magnitude.

But that doesn't mean a revision won't happen eventually.

(dawn3) "It (the UMP) when we have enough people that we can have staff to do that," she said. "When somebody tells me I have to do that, that's what I have to do. From my perspective right now, we are very happy with the way things are being run."

OK, but if a revision to the UMP is ordered, and if all sides agree to remove the tracks – then what?

Carl Knoch is manager of trail development for the National Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, an organization that has overseen railroad-to-recreational trail conversion projects nationwide.

In the case of the Remsen-Lake Placid corridor, he says the state would first need to determine that it no longer wanted to support rail use.

(carl1) “And then the state would salvage the rail,” Knoch said. “If they discontinue service from Tupper Lake to Lake Placid, they might as well pull the rail to Old Forge, because there’s no place to go. That’s the way it usually works.”

If this happens, some say stretches of the corridor would revert to Forest Preserve, barring motorized access to mountain bikers and snowmobilers.

In a Guest Commentary published by the Adirondack Daily Enterprise, Saranac Lake historian Phil Gallos said “powerful voices” like regional and national environmental groups would make that case.

John Sheehan of the Adirondack Council says his advocacy group would prefer the corridor to remain motorless between Horseshoe Lake and Beaver River – a swath of western Adirondack land that includes what the Council hopes will become the “Bob Marshall Wild Land Complex.”

(john1) “We do not object to the train using the rail corridor,” Sheehan said. “If the rails are not going to be used, our feeling is it should be a foot trail or some other non-mechanized travel way. The other sections of trail, we would have no objections to mixed recreational use.”

Sheehan says his organization would not argue for the elimination of snowmobiling between Tupper Lake and Lake Placid.

The DEC said in an email that any change in use would first be considered by DOT and then addressed in an amendment to the management plan. That amendment would be reviewed by the APA to make sure it’s consistent with the Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan.

And here’s the catch: The APA’s Keith McKeever says a revised plan that calls for rail removal could trigger a host of state land classification issues that would take years to sort out.

Any effort to remove the tracks would also need some political support.

Asked to comment on this story, state Senator Betty Little said she’s “continuing to listen to all sides.”

Assemblywoman Teresa Sayward also struck a centrist tone.

(teresa1) “I get concerned that our snowmobilers and some of the motorized vehicles would be left out of the picture,” she said. “I know some of the areas may be a little more sensitive than others, and I’m not sure how that would work. I would certainly want to make sure that if it were a recreational trail, it was truly that and everybody would have access to it.”

Assemblywoman Janet Duprey, however, knows exactly where she stands on the rails versus trails debate. She’s been a long-time supporter of Next Stop Tupper Lake, a grassroots group that built a replica of Tupper Lake’s demolished train station and is working to bring Scenic Railroad service there.