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Adirondack tracks- Do they stay or go

2 sides debate whether removing rails in middle section makes sense

By Brian Nearing

ALBANY — A debate over miles of decaying railroad tracks in the heart of the Adirondacks has spawned dueling studies, with advocates of removing the tracks for a recreational trail releasing a report Wednesday that claims the project could pay for itself and draw tens of thousands of new visitors.

This report came several months after supporters of rebuilding tracks between Old Forge and Saranac Lake near the High Peaks to again allow train service released their own study that touted its financial benefits.

At one end of the dispute is the not-for-profit volunteer Adirondack Railway Preservation Society, which for the last two decades has had a \$1-a-year state permit to run tourist trains for 141 miles between Lake Placid and Utica.

Tracks at either end of the line have been slowly repaired to be in good enough shape to run trains, but 80 miles of track in the middle still need tens of millions of dollars in repairs.

On Wednesday, the trail-supporting Adirondack Recreational Trail Advocates released a report by Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, which projected that turning the rail bed into a trail for snowmobilers, bikers, and hikers could draw more than 240,000 overnight visitors annually, and could be paid for by selling the salvaged rails and ties.

This is the third study on the rail line to come out within the last year. In March, railway supporters issued a report sponsored by the North Country Chamber of Commerce that claimed the railroad and repair of the flawed tracks would draw 7,000 new overnight visitors annually and support hundreds of jobs.

In 2011, a report issued by Adirondack Action, a nonpartisan think tank, painted a different picture of the tourist impact for either option, estimating the rail trail would draw about 43,000 visitors and the fully restored train line about 8,400 visitors.

Estimates of what it could cost to repair the tracks — which have not been in regular use for some four decades — vary widely. The state Transportation Department, which controls the line, has estimated \$43 million, but it appears unlikely the state will have that money for the foreseeable future.

The report from North Country Chamber of Commerce, which was done by Stone Consulting, estimated it could cost \$16.5 million to fix the entire 80-mile stretch. The ADK Action report estimated it could cost \$10.6 million to fix just 34 miles between Saranac Lake and Tupper Lake.

In contrast, it could cost a maximum of about \$5.3 million to pull up rails and build a trail the entire distance, and most, if not all, of that could be covered by selling the rails and ties for salvage, the Rails-to-Trails report found.

Lee Keet, an ARTA board member, said the reports all conclude the trail project would draw more visitors than an expanded rail line. "This is an order of magnitude difference on cost and visitors, It is game over," he said. "Where is the money going to come from to fix the rails? We don't think our plan will need any state money."

Kate Fish, executive director of the Adirondack North Country Association, which endorsed the pro-rail Stone report, said both the state and federal governments are investing in rehabilitating rail lines.

The state recently awarded \$9.2 million to repair a line near Watertown, she said, and the federal government has earmarked \$100 million for rural rail line repairs. She also said removing rails would be legally complicated, since the line is on the National Register of Historic Places and is part of a state unit management plan that controls the entire 141-mile line as a single entity.

"When you talk with DOT and the state, removing the rails is not on their radar screen," said Fish.

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