

Saving the Remsen to Lake Placid Railroad

Background and History

The New York Central Railroad, Adirondack Division, corridor is an historic resource of great importance. This 118-mile railroad, completed in 1891, made it possible for the interior of the western and central Adirondacks to be more widely settled and to prosper economically. The entire corridor was listed on the State and National Registers of Historic Places in 1993.



Passenger service ended in 1965, freight service ended in 1972, and New York State purchased the abandoned line in 1975. Passenger trains ran again along the entire line for a short time beginning in 1977 and it brought athletes and spectators to Lake Placid for the 1980 Winter Olympics. In 1992 a volunteer nonprofit organization, the Adirondack Railway Preservation Society, came together to create the Adirondack Scenic Railroad (ASR) and they began operating a short, four-mile tourist train at the southern end of the line. Its success and the potential development of the rail corridor for transportation was supported by a 1996 NYS Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) unit management plan. Federal and state funding was provided to rehabilitate the southern corridor and a section of the northern corridor. Working closely with state agencies, ASR began running trains between Utica and Big Moose Lake, and then opened another section at the northern end, from Lake Placid to Saranac Lake. Today, total ridership has increased to 100,000 people annually.

ASR's current plans call for improving the entire 118-mile corridor with the goal of connecting passenger rail transportation from New York, Philadelphia, and other major northeastern cities into the Adirondacks.

The Threat



Beginning in 2011, bowing to pressure from a group of well-funded "rails to trails" advocates, New York State reopened its previous decision to support the use and expansion of the corridor for rail transportation. The DEC has since created a new plan that calls for shutting down the railroad's northern section and removing 34 miles of track between Lake Placid and Tupper Lake. The rail line there would be replaced by a multi-use recreational trail (walking, bicycling, snowmobiling, cross-country skiing). This will end the northern operations of the Adirondack Scenic Railroad and the economic benefits it now brings to the area. The final DEC proposal will go before the Adirondack Park Agency for review this fall.

The removal of the tracks would forever diminish the integrity of the National Register-listed corridor, in itself a great loss. The New York Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation, stated (in 2011) that the "removal of the railroad tracks from the historic right-of-way would be considered an *Adverse Impact* . . . and would diminish those qualities which made the railroad State and National Register of Historic Places eligible." NYSDEC, in developing this plan, has not followed its own regulatory processes or met its regulatory obligations under the State Historic Preservation Act, which would require the Department to explore "prudent and feasible alternatives" to a proposed adverse action, in this case, the removal of the tracks.

AARCH also believes that DEC has not met its *federal* regulatory obligations under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (NHPA) or under Section 4f of the US Transportation Act of 1966 both of which carry more stringent obligations. There is a need for federal oversight here because of past, current, and likely future federal involvement with the development, maintenance, and management of this corridor.

There is no public evidence that these important reviews and consultations have taken place prior to DEC finalizing this plan. AARCH, the leading historic preservation organization in the Adirondack region, has not been asked to participate in discussions about the historic rail corridor despite raising our concerns many times with various state agencies.

The Opportunity

Our primary goal is to ensure the preservation of the entire National Register-listed historic rail corridor by **continuing its original function** as an active railroad. This presents the best opportunity to preserve the historic buildings, connect people with the rich history of the railroad, and support the significant economic impact of the railroad to several communities along its route.

AARCH also supports keeping the tracks in place for other reasons, including that a healthy transportation infrastructure for the Adirondack region should include **good rail access**; that the potential for **further developing excursion rail experiences** for visitors within the region has not yet been fully realized; and that a **robust recreational trail system** is completely compatible with the existence of the railroad.

This is a rare circumstance where saving an historic resource means making no change to the status quo. Keep the existing (1996) management plan in place; let the Adirondack Scenic Railroad and its partners continue to make progress in rehabilitating other sections of the corridor and opening new excursion and transportation opportunities there; and let communities build upon these improvements by creating amenities around the revitalized corridor.