
National Park Service

Rivers, Trails & Conservation Assistance Program

Roosevelt-Vanderbilt National Historic Sites



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10 May 2013

Mr. Michael Hein, Ulster County Executive
6th Floor County Office Building
244 Fair Street
Kingston, NY 12401

Subject: Trail-related perspectives regarding Ulster County's U&D corridor

Dear Mr. Hein:

At the request of Kingston Land Trust and the City of Kingston, and in collaboration with other public agencies and community groups, the Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program (RTCA) is currently helping with planning for the potential linear park and trail system centered in and around the City of Kingston. In that role, we have been asked to provide information that may help inform discussion of trail-related proposals for Ulster County's Ulster & Delaware corridor.

About NPS-RTCA:

The Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program (RTCA) is the community assistance arm of the National Park Service. The staff of RTCA provides short-term technical assistance to states, localities and not-for-profit groups to help establish and protect river, trail and greenway systems which lie outside the boundaries of the National Park system.

In the last 25 years, RTCA has helped dozens of communities establish many kinds of trails in New York State, such as the Zim Smith Trail in Saratoga County, the Bronx River Greenway, the 50-mile Genesee Valley Greenway and the 350-mile Erie Canalway Trail, to name a few. Our staff also served on the design committee of Walkway Over the Hudson.

Summary of Findings:

A more comprehensive set of background and planning notes is attached as a separate document. Some observations are the following:

We recognize the benefits of the Catskill Mountain Railroad (CMRR) overall, notably the Mt. Tremper section that has been operational for many years. While other parties may describe and analyze the benefits and costs of railroad operations per se, the comments below and in the attached notes are confined to the subject of trails and rails-with-trails.

The overall challenge is to evaluate trail-related costs and benefits in an area where there is currently no trail operating. A segmented corridor strategy for the U&D corridor, along the lines proposed by Ulster County, is probably the easiest to evaluate, since the trail construction costs, as well as the probable economic and social benefits, can be relatively easily imagined or estimated from comparable trail projects in New York State and elsewhere.

For example, it is relatively clear that focusing a trail-only option on key sections of the corridor, notably along the Ashokan Reservoir, could enable creation of an especially scenic and popular, destination-quality rail-trail. It is similarly easy to envision that a trail-only option within the City of Kingston could enable creation of a popular urban linear park that would link residential neighborhoods and commercial areas through the main axis of the city.

The evaluation of rail-with-trail proposals is more problematic, since there are few truly comparable examples. The co-located “rail-with-trail” option as proposed by CMRR is different from typical rail-with-trail construction, in which one track of a two-tracked corridor is economically converted for trail use. Instead, the CMRR proposal is more accurately described as rail-*plus*-trail construction, where a new trail is built almost entirely from scratch, independent of the existing railroad grade, but constrained by the width and topography of the single-track corridor.

The distinction between a more typical rail-*with*-trail and rail-*plus*-trail is important. Building this new trail grade will require new and specialized engineering and construction methods, along with extensive additional fill, drainage and other construction materials that are not required in more typical rail-*with*-trail construction.

There are design challenges as well. The rail-*plus*-trail alternative requires a trail design that is characterized by frequent turns and railroad crossings, combined with many sections of steeper grades to avoid narrow railroad cuts, as well as likely diversions of the trail route onto the shoulder of Route 28. These complicating design features are trade-offs that can affect the integrity, quality, safety and overall appeal of the trail experience, potentially compromising its perception or appeal as a trail that is suitable for trail users of all ages and abilities, and a destination-quality trail.

Costs of rail-to-trail conversions vary widely, but generally range from \$100,000 to \$300,000 per mile when the trail is built atop an existing railroad grade. The cost of new trail construction parallel to an existing railroad grade has been recently shown to be considerably higher, closer to \$2 million per mile.

The magnitude of economic benefits generated by a trail varies greatly. Destination-quality rail trails provide significant economic benefits to their host communities, on the order of \$1.5 to \$5 million per year. Trails that serve mainly local neighborhoods, are shorter, or that offer less-appealing trail experiences provide lower levels of trail-related economic benefits.

The terminology of “rail-with-trail” sounds appealing as a proposal, and most people instinctively gravitate toward the principle of sharing. If the entire U&D corridor were historically double-tracked, a true rail-with-trail system might be realistic. However, the well-documented constraints of the U&D corridor would require the most expensive type of trail construction to make that

happen. While rail-plus-trail may be technically possible, the risk is creating a trail that is less bicycle/ pedestrian-friendly, and less of a destination-quality attraction, at a potentially far greater cost.

Although the majority of the U&D corridor is not within the original scope of trail-related assistance requested of RTCA by Kingston Land Trust and the City of Kingston, we nevertheless appreciate its importance to the City of Kingston, to Ulster County, and to the Hudson River Valley and Catskills region as a whole. Your interest in trails and their benefits is greatly appreciated. Please let us know if we can be of additional assistance.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Karl Beard', written in a cursive style.

Karl Beard
NY Projects Director - Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance

Enclosure: Background / Planning notes for Catskill Mountain Rail Trail concept

Cc: Terry Bernardo, Ulster County Legislature Chairman
Dennis Doyle, Ulster County Planning Director