

# Parks & Trails New York Review of U&D Rail with Trail Proposal



## I. The benefits of multi-use trails

Multi-use trails provide New Yorkers and tourists with safe, attractive places to engage in physical activity while enjoying our most celebrated natural, historical, and cultural resources. They also contribute greatly to a region's quality of life by improving the aesthetics of the surrounding landscape and enhancing the value of adjacent property. Countless trails across New York, and many more from around the country, have played a pivotal role in community revitalization. Community trails can be cornerstones of local economic development – from improving access to retail and commercial areas to becoming a community asset with which to attract employers.

With the growing popularity of bicycling and the lure of being the only long-distance multi-use trail within the Catskill Park, we believe the Ulster & Delaware (U&D) Rail Trail will be a significant draw for tourists.

- Bicycling is the third most common form of outdoor recreation in the U.S., according to a study by the Outdoor Foundation. More Americans bicycle than golf, ski and play tennis combined.
- According to the U.S. Travel Association, 27 million Americans have taken a bicycling vacation in the past five years and bicycling is the third most common vacation activity.

How much economic impact could the Catskill Mountain Rail Trail generate? In 2008, the NYS Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP) analyzed the economic impact of 14 multi-use trails throughout New York, including the Town of Hurley Rail Trail:

*“Reviewing the survey data collected on the Town of Hurley Rail Trail, it was found that about 10.5% of the trail users were non-local. Non-local users were found to spend more money in connection with their visits to the trail than local users. They averaged \$202.35/trail visit versus an expenditure of only \$5.19/trail visit for local users. Assuming a multiplier effect of 2.0, (typical for this type of spending in an area similar to where this trail is located, the economic impact would be about \$2 million which would support about 40 FTE (Full Time Equivalent) jobs within the community. Additional economic impact exists because of increased tax revenues to the local community. Currently, Ulster County has a sales tax rate of 8% of which 4% leaves the local area and goes to New York State.”* (Every Mile Counts: Economic analysis of 2008 New York Trail User Surveys - OPRHP)

More difficult to quantify, but no less important, are the benefits that the Catskill Mountain Rail Trail could provide for enhancing quality of life, improving mental and physical health, and addressing rising health care costs for local residents and Ulster County governments. New York State spent approximately \$9.9 billion on adult obesity-related health problems in 2012 and \$136.3 billion over the next 10 years. Eighty percent of this cost will be paid through local taxes, yet this cost is significantly preventable with increased physical activity. A close-to-home multi-

use trail serving as a safe, off-road alternative transportation corridor linking Kingston to the Catskill Mountains can provide free or low cost opportunities for all Ulster County residents, irrespective of age or fitness level, to walk or bike, increase their daily physical activity, and improve their health.

Conversion of the former U & D Railroad corridor to a multi-use trail would allow both residents and visitors to use the trail facility and enjoy its economic, community, and health benefits 365 days a year from sun-up to sun-down.

## **II. Prior Studies of the ROW**

Several studies have been undertaken on the U&D right-of-way. Commissioned by Ulster County Transportation Council (UCTC), Alta Planning + Design undertook a study of the 40-mile former U & D rail corridor from Kingston Point to Highmount and researched the opportunities, constraints, and costs of developing a rail with trail facility. The 2006 study did not present trail alternatives that involved the partial or complete removal of the tracks as the assumption was that the tracks had to remain.

Following the Alta study, UCTC's 2006 "*Year 2035 Long Range Transportation Plan*" concluded that topographical constraints would make the development of a dual use rail with trail facility not feasible.

*"The UCTC completed the Ulster and Delaware Railroad Corridor Rail + Trail Feasibility Study in 2006. The purpose of this Study was to assess the feasibility of the railroad corridor and trail coexisting within the corridor's right of way simultaneously. The study area included the entire 40-mile Ulster and Delaware Railroad Corridor in Ulster County (Kingston Point Park at the Hudson River to Highmount at the Ulster/ Delaware County line). The Study concludes that it is not feasible to operate both a trail and train together within the entire corridor due to right of way topography constraints." (emphasis added)*

In 2013, after the Ulster County Executive's announcement that the County would be examining the feasibility of converting portions of the U&D corridor into a rail trail, and not rail with trail, the Catskill Mountain Railroad (CMRR) released a self-published study evaluating eight miles of corridor from mile post 3, where the track crosses Albany Avenue in the City of Kingston, to mile post 11, one-mile west from where the track crosses Basin Rd. in West Hurley.

## **III. Definition of Rail with Trail**

It is important that all those with an interest in this corridor operation use the same definition of what constitute rail with trail.

The Federal Highway Administration defines "rail with trail" facilities as "shared use paths and other trails within or adjacent to active railroad and transit rights-of-way." A rail line and a trail nearby or routed on-road, even when the road has been designated as a bicycle route, does not

constitute a rail with trail facility. While previous studies and presentations of these options have used the term “rail with trail” the options presented in both the Alta study and CMRR study do not allow for the co-location of facilities, and thus we urge that when discussing the proposals “rail with trail” ceases to be used as a description and the term “rail and trail” be used instead.

#### **IV. Overall Analysis**

PTNY has examined and compared both the Alta and CMRR reports, section by section, bearing in mind the fundamental need to logistically and financially accommodate a rail line and a multi-use trail within the corridor.

By Alta’s estimation, the development of rail with trail would cost an estimated \$14.2 to \$19 million. Part of this estimate includes a portion of the Kingston Point trail, which will be developed separately. Thus the cost of that segment should be deducted from Alta’s estimate. Despite the removal of the Kingston Point to Midtown piece, we believe the cost to develop this trail will be well over \$19 million because of:

- Excavation and fill work to create a new trail bed in places the rail bed is not wide enough to accommodate both rail and trail
- Relocation and widening of several culverts
- Construction of several track crossings for the trail to switch back and forth from one side of the rail line to the other as space permits
- ROW acquisition costs within the City of Kingston
- Retrofit of rail bridges to accommodate cantilevered, or similarly constructed, bicycle accommodations
- Permitting and regulatory compliance for all this extra work.

#### **V. Section by Section Analysis**

##### **Albany Street, Kingston to I-87**

The CMRR study argues against a rail trail within the City of Kingston and cites the Alta report as substantiating the choice of a rail line rather than a trail in this Kingston section. However, in its report Alta did not evaluate one option over another because it was required to base the report on the premise that the rail line would remain. Furthermore, the bike corridors that the CMRR report references are actually on-road bike routes.

Kingston does have two multiple-use trails, the O&W to the west and the Wallkill to the south. These trails do not connect into the city, however. Both trails require users to navigate the existing street network to continue into the city, which many trail users might find uncomfortable. Kingston is working to develop these on-road connections through Complete Streets solutions.

## **I-87 to West Hurley**

CMRR presently does not operate any scenic trains on this section of track. Beginning at mile post 5.94 the line begins its ascent into the Catskill Mountains.

Previous studies have suggested the Esopus Bridge could be retrofit to accommodate rail with trail. However, the existing bridge over the Esopus Creek is not wide enough to accommodate both rail and trail without significant retrofit. The CMRR report says a passenger deck could be easily added to the side (or suspended underneath) the existing bridge but a detailed cost and engineering assessment has not been performed. Few examples exist in which a trail has been suspended under an active railway.

Both the Alta and CMRR reports conclude that this section is poorly suited for side by side rail with trail facilities. Page 36 of the Alta report:

*“From the tunnel under I-87 to West Hurley, the corridor would be a railroad-only section due to rock cuts, right-of-way constraints, and topography... thin-tired road bikes would be better served by improved paved shoulders along the adjacent Route 28 New York State bike route.”*

The CMRR report cites 30 areas that require excavation of rock cuts, expansion and relocation of culverts, or track crossings to accommodate rail with trail.

Neither report estimates the costs of track crossings, excavation and fill work, accommodations for persons with disabilities, and the relocation/expansion of culverts to create a side by side rail with trail. Installing brand-new trail where drainage, bridges, and embankments would need to be built from scratch would be cost prohibitive.

Moreover, routing the trail along Route 28 is not a preferable option. NYS bike routes were not necessarily designed for the recreational cyclist. Traffic volume, speed of travel, and topography of Rte. 28 will be deterrents to families, novice cyclists, seniors, and persons with disabilities.

## **West Hurley to Boiceville**

Both the Alta and CMRR studies discuss developing a separate facility in this section but do not estimate the cost. In addition, the Boiceville Bridge was washed away by floodwaters during tropical storm Irene, necessitating a new rail bridge that would be more expensive than a comparable bridge built to handle the significantly lighter trail traffic loads.

## **Boiceville to Phoenicia**

This is the only section of the CMRR, other than the 1.5-mile segment in Kingston, with active scenic rail operations. The County has not proposed to remove tracks in this area and is

amenable to continuing the tourist railroad in this section. Both Alta and CMRR studies conclude rail with trail is possible for this section.

### **Phoenicia to Highmount**

Alta's report does not detail the cost to develop a separate facility in this area. A crushed stone path laid between the tracks is suggested as a short-term option, but would not be optimal for multiple use.

## **VI. Conclusion**

In choosing to develop a rail with trail facility on the entire corridor, Ulster County would spend much more but receive much less. We believe rail with trail will be:

- prohibitively expensive and difficult to develop because of issues pertaining to limited corridor width, steep slopes, ROW acquisition, wetlands, drainage, bridges, and permitting;
- less likely to receive federal or state funding if the facility cannot be made fully accessible due to difficult terrain and steep slopes; and
- less attractive to visitors because of steep slopes and/or the need for on-road sections where no other options exist.

Rail with trail is more expensive, more difficult to construct, less likely to receive funds, and less likely to attract visitors. On the other hand, developing a multi-use trail would reap greater economic, health, and community benefits while at the same time costing far less to develop.

Therefore, PTNY strongly encourages the County to develop the former U&D rail bed primarily as a multi-use trail and only establish a rail with trail between Boiceville and Phoenicia where the railroad currently operates.

## **VII. Parks & Trails New York – Experience with Multi-Use Trails**

Parks & Trails New York is a statewide not-for-profit organization working to expand, protect, and promote a network of parks, trails, and open spaces throughout the state for the use and enjoyment by all. It is our mission to encourage New York State communities to develop a world-class network of multi-use trails that connect every area of the state. Under a contract from the NYS Department of Health's *Healthy Heart Program* we are currently providing technical support to New York State communities that are engaged in efforts to build new multi-use trails and increase usage of existing multi-use trails. Through this program, we are working closely with the Kingston Land Trust to build support and strong advocacy for the development and maintenance of several rail trails that will connect within and outside the City of Kingston.

Parks & Trails New York has decades of experience in developing multi-use trails. One of the organization's primary focus areas has been "Close the Gaps" an effort to complete the 36-mile off road Erie Canalway Trail. This trail, only 80% complete, has significant gaps in the central part of New York State – gaps where trail visitors have no option but to share the road with traffic. Communities without off-road trail do not reap the economic benefits of the Erie Canalway Trail. The off-road sections serve as a major deterrent to cross-state cyclists. Many Canalway trail users don't even bother to ride on the road, as they find it intimidating. The gaps in the Erie Canalway Trail system discourage families and novice cyclists from coming to New York and riding the full trail.