

ULSTER COUNTY RAIL TRAIL PROJECT ANNOUNCEMENT

Michael P. Hein
Ulster County Executive

Today has the potential to become a remarkable, historic and even transformational day for the people of Ulster County. As I stand here with Commissioner Carter Strickland of the NYC DEP, I believe that the opportunity exists to accomplish something extraordinary for both the citizens of Ulster County and all the citizens of New York for generations to come.

It is precisely because of the extremely positive nature of today's announcement that we are once again reminded of how complex the relationship is between the people of Ulster County and the government of New York City. On one hand, our proximity to one of the greatest cities on the planet is undoubtedly a positive underlying economic engine for many sectors of our local economy. In fact, Ulster County's location near New York's world renowned financial, cultural, medical and educational centers provides our citizens with countless amazing resources.

However, on the other hand we must also collectively acknowledge the longstanding, very public, and very pointed areas of disagreements between the New York City DEP and we the people of Ulster County. In those areas, my administration continues to aggressively advocate for change. As leaders it is our responsibility to not only understand this unique dynamic, but also to identify those valuable moments in which the best interests of the people of Ulster County are in complete alignment with the best interests of the people of New York City. It is in those moments, that it is incumbent upon both governments to set aside our respective disagreements and instead work together for the betterment of our constituents.

Right now is exactly one of those moments; and so, as vocal as we are when we disagree on important matters like the "FAD" and the "Consent Order," I must also recognize and acknowledge Commissioner Strickland and his entire team for making today's event possible.

So with that, I am pleased to announce a historic multi-million dollar "Agreement in Principle" between the County of Ulster and the City of New York to develop a rail trail adjacent to the Ashokan Reservoir on DEP property.

Although I am sure Commissioner Strickland will elaborate, it is important to note before we begin that the dollars provided by DEP on this project can only be used for building this trail. The action we are taking today will help the people of Ulster County take yet another major step towards creating a one of a kind “world class” tourism destination; an extraordinary rail-trail that connects the breathtaking Ashokan Reservoir with the wildly popular “Walkway Over the Hudson” and beyond. It is part of a segmented plan with a rail-trail stretching from Kingston to the Ashokan and enhanced railroad operations to the west.

This segmented plan is designed to strengthen the railroad experience in western Ulster County and also help in the creation of the largest interconnected rail trail system in the State of New York; with easy access for over 22 million people through Metro North as well as our three New York State Thruway exits.

Even more important to me, as the County Executive of Ulster County, it will have enormous positive impacts on recreational opportunities for the people of Ulster County. It will also positively impact public health and quality of life issues for the people of Ulster County as well.

Last but definitely not least, it will provide an unprecedented boost to our \$475 million dollar tourism sector and in turn help property taxpayers right here in Ulster County.

Today’s agreement represents an important step and covers multiple existing areas.

- First, the NYC DEP is committing \$2.5 million to help complete a rail trail along the entire North Shore of the Ashokan Reservoir. It is worth noting that this will represent for the first time in over a hundred years, that the people of Ulster County, and all the people of New York, will have unimpeded access to the breathtaking views along the entire 11-mile North Shore of the Ashokan Reservoir.
- On top of its \$2.5 million dollar commitment, the DEP has also agreed to advocate for additional funding to further enhance this project.
- As part of this agreement, the DEP will design, construct and maintain multiple public access points referred to as “trailheads.” These “trailheads” will include greatly enhanced public parking, sanitary facilities, information kiosks and other amenities jointly agreed upon by the

County and the DEP. We should note, this work is above and beyond the \$2.5 million dollar commitment.

- The DEP has also agreed to consider additional entry points to the “rail-trail” for bikes and pedestrians that will not require extra parking or other related facilities.
- To further enhance this initiative and to also greatly improve the linkage of both the North and South shores of the Ashokan, the DEP has agreed to add a separate lane for walking and biking by widening the dividing weir bridge that separates the east and west basin during the upcoming reconstruction project.
- And in what represents a much appreciated and significant shift in DEP policy at the Ashokan, the 11 miles of rail trail and trailheads will become available for the public to enjoy from dusk to dawn, throughout the entire year without permit or fee; making it a fantastic four season destination. Unfortunately, right now the fact is anyone utilizing this amazing corridor without a fishing permit and pole faces the unpleasant reality of being ticketed.
- Under this plan, the entire rail trail will become available for walking, running, biking, cross country skiing, snow shoeing and other non-motorized uses, as well as dogs on leashes.
- And though the surfacing of the rail-trail is yet to be determined, both the DEP and the County are extremely sensitive to the importance of full access for everyone. So accommodations for motorized devices for persons with disabilities will clearly be designed into this project.
- I am also pleased to report that the rail trail will be made available for special events, like fundraising walks and runs. It is my great hope that this will help community organizations raise valuable dollars for a wide range of worthy charitable causes.
- Since public access to the Ashokan reservoir lands has the potential to provide significant economic, public health and quality of life benefits, benefits that can only be realized if all New Yorkers are made aware of this amazing new treasure, there will be a coordinated, multi-faceted, joint marketing effort to promote the rail-trail to millions of potential tourists throughout the metro New York area, as well as right here in Ulster County. We will promote

this location and develop interpretive signage and other critical information related to the unique history of the Ashokan Reservoir, the Catskill Park and the Ulster & Delaware Railroad.

You see, I firmly believe that the people of Ulster County deserve the best of both worlds, and with this segmented rail-trail plan we can all have the best of both worlds. The people of Ulster County deserve a world class interconnected rail trail system and all the positives that go with it; and, the people of Ulster County also deserve a well-maintained, historic railroad based attraction that seamlessly connects to the “rail-trail” west of the Ashokan. In fact, with this segmented plan visitors and residents alike will have the unique opportunity to celebrate our County’s rich railroad history on a concentrated and greatly enhanced railroad experience.

So I look forward to identifying responsible partners, both public and private, to help make this plan a reality. In fact, with the major advertising efforts we just outlined, combined with a world class rail-trail system, there will ultimately be more ridership opportunities for any rail operator than they have ever seen before. Most importantly, it is the people of Ulster County that can ultimately have what they have long deserved; and that is the best of both worlds.

In furtherance of this cause the DEP has provided a letter clearly detailing their support for the segmented rail-trail plan, with enhanced railroad to the west and a “trail only” option along the Ashokan reservoir.

Additionally, I am pleased to announce the environmental “watch dog” group Riverkeeper completely agrees; they are supporting this rail-trail initiative because it will provide a much-needed additional environmentally sensitive economic development driver for the watershed communities in and around Ulster County. Even longtime Legislator Wayne Harris, the former ranking member of Ulster County’s Railroad Advisory Board as well as a passionate supporter of railroad history, now strongly supports the segmented “rail-trail” concept; seeing it as the perfect practical solution to ensure that railroads and rail-trails can not only co-exist, but also thrive.

In fact, this thoughtful plan has been attracting enthusiastic support at many levels. The \$2.5 million dollars from the DEP can now be combined with the \$2 million dollars previously dedicated by Governor Cuomo in this years’ New York State budget. This \$4.5 million dollar total added to the ground swell of support from community groups and private philanthropic organizations has made now the perfect time to begin. This concept is already supported by existing Ulster County Legislative

policies and my Administration looks forward to working with the incoming County Legislature to formalize an inter-municipal agreement that maximizes the success of this plan for years to come.

Although it is our expectation that because of planning, design and construction, this project will take between 2 and 3 years to complete; the fact remains, the sooner we begin, the sooner this amazing resource will become available for the people of Ulster County and for all New Yorkers to enjoy.

So ladies and gentlemen, today the people of Ulster County take a major step towards a brighter future:

- With \$2.5 million dollars more to build the rail-trail and DEP's commitment to help identify additional sources;
- We move forward with valuable "trailheads" for enhanced public parking and other amenities to improve the visitor experience;
- We move forward with multiple access points and 4 season usage for everyone, including those with mobility challenges;
- An added bike lane on the dividing weir bridge to improve safety;
- access for charitable events; and
- an unprecedented marketing effort to help strengthen our economy.

We move forward with a project that truly has the potential to transform.

Yes, in those areas that the DEP and Ulster County disagree, we will continue to have conflict until we have change; but I am also proud to say that today is proof positive that it is possible for our respective governments to find important common ground and in the end, deliver results for our citizens.

As I stand here with Commissioner Strickland I believe, just like countless others do, that we have a unique opportunity, a once in a lifetime opportunity, to do something extraordinary here; not just for the people of Ulster County today, but for the people of Ulster County and for all New Yorkers for generations to come.