RAIL WITH TRAIL

This document makes the case for repair and maintenance of the Catskill Mountain Railroad from Kingston to Phoenicia, for adding trails adjacent to the track, making Kingston, NY the hub for rail and trail activities and for cooperative operation and marketing of facilities and amenities to all potential users.
RAIL VS. TRAIL
Since 2006, there has been a debate about converting some or all of the Ulster and Delaware Corridor from train to trail. This debate culminated with a plan by the Ulster County Executive to scrap all but 6 miles of railroad and convert it into a trail. The CMRR has stated that it backs Rail with Trail so that the benefits of rail and trail can both be realized. Who is right? Why should the railroad stay, and what will be the cost to the County if it is removed and converted to a trail?

The CMRR’s Esopus Scenic Train brings in about 90% of its ridership from outside of the County. The CMRR’s Kingston train attracts about 44% from outside the County. Overall the CMRR’s ridership is 80% from outside the County and only 20% from inside the County. The purpose of the train is primarily to serve as a tourism destination designed to bring people from outside the county into Ulster County. Its role as an amenity to Ulster County citizens is a second priority except in Kingston.

The NY/NJ Trail Conference Study done in June 2013 (NYNJTC Study) predicts only 23% of users of the trail will come from outside Ulster County. The trail’s primary purpose will be as an amenity to the citizens of the county, and its predicted role as a tourism draw second.

BUILT-IN CONFLICT
You can see why there is such a conflict about rail vs. trail in Ulster County. The train is used primarily by tourists from outside Ulster County and the trail will be used primarily by County residents. What economic benefits does the train currently bring, and what will be the price of their loss? The CMRR currently estimates its economic impact at $1.3 million per year, creating 19 jobs, and over $44,000 in sales taxes to the County (for details, see separate Economic Impact: Present and Future report). The CMRR expects to increase this impact even more when our scenic trains reach the vistas of the Ashokan Reservoir (upon disbursement of the FEMA funding currently withheld by the Ulster County Executive) and when we can run large events such as Polar Express and Day Out With Thomas in Kingston (slated for 2014).

The NYNJTC Study is highly dependent on the “23%” number to justify its predicted $3.1 million impact on the County, with 44 jobs, 140,000 users (32,000 from out of the County), and $112,000 in Ulster County sales taxes. The report only attributes economic impact to the 23% of users from outside the County, and none to its use by Ulster County residents. It is interesting to note that the study assumes that 77% of the trail users, or 108,000 will be from within Ulster County. That represents almost 60% of Ulster County’s population of 183,000.

It seems hard to justify dismantling the railroad for the economic benefits of a trail that might produce only double the economic value. Usage numbers for that trail are highly predicated on access to the Ashokan Reservoir, when no agreement has been worked out with the NYC DEP for trail use, and the use of railbanking to force access to the reservoir after removing the railroad is a method whose chance of success seems dubious at best.
DUAL BENEFITS OF A COMBINED CORRIDOR

The obvious solution to the problem is Rail with Trail. It provides for an amenity to the County that can be used by local citizens, while still allowing the tourist draw to the County that a scenic railroad brings.

The Ulster County Executive has suggested that the 6 miles of track running from Boiceville to Phoenicia be preserved to maintain most of the existing economic impact of the railroad. But without a path for revenue growth, which would need to include Kingston and the Ashokan reservoir, this six mile run will never generate enough revenue to pay the existing volunteer train operating crews, who essentially subsidize the economic impact of the train on Ulster County with their free time.

Rail Trail advocates have stated over and over that it is not feasible for trail and rail to be mixed on the U&D corridor. The CMRR produced a study in February 2013 stating otherwise which was rejected by the Ulster County Executive and the leadership of the trail community without serious review.

To break the logjam, the CMRR has focused on the Kingston segment of a proposed rail with trail detailed at the end of this report. It is a segment that the 2006 Alta report recommended for rail with trail. The plan involves moving the CMRR’s Cornell Street facility to Westbrook Lane allowing nearly complete trail access east of there (tracks would be embedded in asphalt for occasional use). We think this Kingston plan is the best blueprint and starting place for rail with trail throughout the entire corridor.

The CMRR believes that the best way to move forward is to start with areas where rail with trail are feasible, such is in Kingston, so that trail construction can begin immediately without elimination of the railroad. Much of the corridor is ready to allow construction of Rail-With-Trail. A few challenges exist, but they are not insurmountable. In areas we will be unlikely to be operating in the next five years, we support building the trail adjacent to the tracks where possible and burying the tracks where it is not. This would allow full implementation of the trail plan while preserving CMRR’s ability to operate and expand.

There are over 140 rails with trails across the United States, with more being created every year. One of the closest cases is the Beacon Line in Beacon, NY – where one of the proposal options is to have a rail with trail through the city of Beacon on an out of service line (which Metro North plans to bring back into service). Many other railroads have successful rail with trail partnerships, most notable the Western Maryland Scenic Railroad in Maryland (40,000 passengers) and the Cuyahoga Valley Scenic Railroad in Ohio (210,000 passengers). They offer the best of both worlds and both have bicycle “ferry” services for bikers to load their bikes and ride to any of the station stops and ride back if they do not want to ride the entire length of the trail. Cuyahoga had 22,000 bikers use this offering last year. This is one of many programs we would like to implement because of the steep grade and other constraints between Kingston and the West Hurley sections. The White Pass and Yukon Railroad and the Grand Canyon Railroad are in the process of offering this service. One of the objects is to develop bicycle usage in the corridor without adding additional automobile traffic.

MOVING FORWARD

In order to end the conflict on the rail vs. trail debate, the CMRR believes the best place to start is Kingston, where, with the proposed changes suggested by the CMRR to its existing track and facilities, there is plenty of room for rail with trail. There is $2 million in State Money available to move this plan forward if we can agree. As indicated in this document and the CMRR’s Rail-With-Trail Co-Location Study, the CMRR has made a serious proposal and wants to move forward. We are waiting for the County and the trail Community to respond in a serious manner. Let’s get started working together.
IS IT FEASIBLE TO BUILD RAIL WITH TRAIL?

Much of the current conflict between the CMRR and the Ulster County Executive rests within the city limits of Kingston. The issue of vacating Kingston is the primary reason the Ulster County Executive is attempting to terminate our lease. According to Mike Hein, his technical experts say that rail-with-trail is not feasible within the city of Kingston, and therefore the CMRR must vacate Kingston, even with several years still left on our lease.

This simply is not true. This report should make it clear to anyone that rail-with-trail is feasible within the city limits of Kingston. This was also clearly stated in the ALTA report done in 2006, on page 34, Albany Avenue to O&W Rail Trail, 1.5 miles:

“From Albany Street west through Kingston Plaza, the U&D line would become a rail-with-trail to Washington Street. The tracks would remain in place parallel to a paved shared-use path in this section. At Washington Street, a new at-grade crossing would begin a connector trail along the U&D to connect with the O&W Rail Trail along Route 209. This important ‘missing link’ can be accomplished with current available funding, and will serve as a hub of the County’s growing shared use path system. Active rail service would likely begin at Washington Street, with good access from I-87 and adequate parking for rail and trail use.”

The ALTA report clearly states that rail-with-trail is feasible in Kingston west of Albany Avenue. However, the Alta report did not review the section from Cornell Street to Albany Avenue. To accommodate rail-with-trail in this section of the railroad, the CMRR makes the following proposals:

- Move our existing restoration, repair, and maintenance operations at the Cornell Street facility to Westbrook Lane where a permanent all-weather facility will be built. This will allow trail construction west of Cornell Street adjacent to or on top of existing railroad tracks.

- Build a new main train/trail terminal in Kingston west of Washington Avenue, as recommended in the Alta Report. This will also serve the Route 28 bicycle trail and be close to the Trailways bus station.

- Allow the rails between Albany Avenue and Elmendorf Street to have asphalt installed to the top of the rail to allow joint train/trail use.

- Move most of the CMRR’s operations to Washington Avenue in Kingston, with only occasional movements east to our Westbrook facility. Rails east of the Westbrook facility to CSX would be maintained only for special trains and the ability to bring in new equipment by rail.

In conclusion, within the City of Kingston, we fully agree with the ALTA report that there is sufficient room for rail and trail to exist side by side in this section of the corridor and look forward to working with the City of Kingston and Ulster County towards the implementation of the trail alongside the railroad in Kingston.

The attached drawings outline in detail how rail and trail are compatible within the city limits of Kingston. There are no “technical” reasons for the railroad not to stay in Kingston, only political ones.


EQUIPMENT RESTORATION
CMRR owns a large collection of vintage rolling stock. As our ridership grows, volunteers restore this equipment to increase our capacity. Our restoration efforts will be accelerated once we have an all-weather facility.

EQUIPMENT REPAIR
Without a shop facility, all repairs and maintenance must occur in the open air.

EQUIPMENT MAINTENANCE
To keep everything running well, we must perform preventive service to our equipment.

NEW SHOP FACILITIES
To facilitate the need for trail connectivity through the Cornell Street area, CMRR has applied for site plan approval from the City of Kingston to build an equipment repair, restoration, and storage facility elsewhere along the railroad. Our proposed location is in the vicinity of Kingston Plaza near the baseball field. This would allow us to open up the right-of-way for trail construction through the city. The facility would include an enclosed repair shop, which would greatly improve our equipment restoration efforts.
NEW PASSENGER STATION
The Catskill Mountain Railroad plans to build a station in Kingston, which would serve as our main passenger terminal. As suggested in the 2006 Alta Planning corridor study, a new passenger station and trailhead facility could be constructed along Washington Avenue to board passengers heading uphill to enjoy the recreational opportunities of the proposed trail network. This would provide public amenities, such as restrooms and sheltered waiting areas for both rail and trail visitors. In addition, the facility would include office and meeting space for both the railroad and the non-profit entities responsible for the trail network.

KINGSTON PLAZA STOP
Train passengers will still be able to visit the Kingston Plaza, but at a location selected by plaza management and with consideration of neighboring property owners. We wish to continue this partnership in order to encourage riders to patronize the plaza businesses, and to assist Kingston CitiBus and UCAT riders in reaching the U&D corridor.
This shows our proposed location for a station at Washington Avenue in Kingston. The plan calls for parallel trail construction along the former O&W right-of-way.
Catskill Mountain Railroad proposes constructing an indoor restoration, maintenance, and repair facility in the vicinity of Westbrook Lane to allow us to vacate the Cornell Street Yard. The width of the right-of-way is sufficient to allow a parallel multi-use trail.
A path connecting the rail trail to the Broadway/Albany Avenue intersection would enhance foot traffic to Kingston Plaza and encourage trail users to patronize mid-town businesses.

By moving our operations from Cornell Street, CMRR would be limiting its use of the narrow corridor and tunnels under Albany Avenue and Elmendorf Street.

Occasional ferry moves would require tracks to remain in place, however, where necessary the trail may be paved on top of the tracks level with the railhead allowing shared use of the underpasses and cut between Elmendorf Street and Albany Avenue.
The restoration, maintenance, and repair operations would be removed from the Cornell Street Yard and the fence will be relocated or removed altogether. The main line and industrial siding would remain, leaving sufficient room for the rail trail and allowing use of the municipal parking lot as a trailhead.