

Study: Laconia trail extension would boost tourism

By Bea Lewis Union Leader Correspondent Oct 16, 2019

Allan Beetle, president of the WOW Trail, presented the results of an economic study on the proposed regional rail-trail from Franklin to Weirs Beach to the Laconia City Council last week.

Bea Lewis/Union Leader Correspondent

LACONIA — An economic analysis shared with the city council last week found that a proposed 20-mile recreational trail in the railroad right-of-way between Franklin and Weirs Beach would boost the city's tourism industry and increase the quality of life for residents.

But in order to build it, proponents must overcome the Department of Transportation's opposition to tearing up the tracks and change existing state law. Present statutes dictate that rail takes precedence in corridors with train traffic.

This past August, the council agreed to commission a study to examine the pros and cons of extending the Winnisquam, Opechee, Winnepesaukee (WOW) Trail next to, or in place of, the railroad tracks along Paugus Bay.

The trail now stretches from the Belmont town line to the Lakeport section of Laconia, a distance of 2.5 miles. Proponents want to extend it another 4 miles to Weirs Beach, and then another 5 miles into Meredith.

According to the study completed by Alta Planning + Design of Cambridge, Mass., the trail would generate more than \$6 million annually in visitor spending and provide a safer option for pedestrians and bicyclists.

Removing the tracks would make the trail easier and cheaper to build, but that idea is opposed by abutters in the gated community of South Down Shores, by a freight train company and by a tourist train operator — all of whom use the corridor.

The state currently owns about 300 miles of abandoned railroad corridors, preserving them for future transportation use. Most of these are used as recreational trails under the management of the

Department of Natural and Cultural Resources' Bureau of Trails on the condition that the state can reclaim use for rail or other transportation uses if needed.

WOW Trail President Allan Beetle shared an executive summary of the study during Tuesday's council meeting that showed that a rail-to-trail alternative, as opposed to a rail-with-trail option, is likely to have a more positive impact on the regional and state economy over a 20-year period.

Removing the tracks and replacing them with a trail, the study found, would increase usage; reduce capital costs, as the need for new retaining walls and bridge structures would be limited; and have a benefit-cost ratio of 32:1 over 20 years, compared to an 8:1 benefit-cost ratio for the rail-with-trail alternative.

New England Southern Railroad, an existing freight operator on the line, makes eight deliveries a year and had revenue of \$17,750 in 2018, according to the study. Because of the freight usage of the line, Beetle told the council, the federal government may get involved if plans to rip up the tracks advance.

"The jury is still out on that," he told the council.

Removal of the tracks would isolate the Hobo Railroad, Beetle said, but other tourist trains that are not connected to a main line, such as the Cog Railway, continue to operate successfully.

Councilor David Bownes asked what the owner of the tourist train thought of the rail-to-trail proposal.

"They'll tell you that it will put them out of business," Beetle replied.

According to the study, passenger counts for the tourist train have declined 30% over the last four years. In 2018, the tourist train paid \$98,069 to the state as a percentage of ticket sales; it had paid \$101,015 in 2017 and \$97,514 in 2016.

State revenue generated by freight train use of the line was \$588 in 2018, \$769 in 2017 and \$783 in 2016, according to the study.

"The biggest obstacle in our opinion is the reluctance to change. Shouldn't economic and quality of life benefits be considered for Laconia?" Beetle said.

He told the council that it was time for a task force or commission to be formed to put the “spectacular property” to work for the community as both an economic engine and a source of pride for the city.

Mayor Ed Engler offered his opinion that without picking up the rails the prospects of the project ever being completed were “slim at best” as the cost was prohibitive.

“I don’t want to be discouraging, but those are the cold hard facts,” said Engler, whose second and final term as mayor is coming to a close.

Engler shared Beetle’s belief that tearing up the tracks and replacing them with a recreational trail would create an attraction unrivaled in the state because of the scenic route along the lake.

Ward 5 Councilor Bob Hamel said that for several years the Hobo Railroad has been invited into Laconia, but that it continues to operate only a local train between Meredith and Weirs Beach. The company owns the center portion of Laconia’s historic railroad station and “nothing happens there,” Hamel said.

If the railroad is not going to use that stretch of tracks, Hamel said, he would like to see it become part of the WOW Trail and would like to see what type of support the city could solicit from other area communities in working to change existing law.

Ward 1 Councilor Bruce Cheney said the state DOT’s Bureau of Rail & Transit has been “very firm” in its position of not giving up that line. He said he hopes the rail-with-trail option is still pursued.

“If we can’t get people to The Weirs, it’s not worth the investment,” Beetle responded.

Engler directed the city manager to put the issue on a future council agenda to see if there is interest in soliciting support from neighboring communities to try to change existing law.

“Remember the Patriots were down by 25 points in the third and went on to win,” Beetle said.
