

December 21, 2022

## New partnership forged to save a rail line

*Open Space Institute, Revolution Rail work together in Tahawus line purchase*



A glimpse of the Tahawus rail line outside of Newcomb. Photo by Melissa Hart

### By Tim Rowland

The Revolution Rail Co. and Open Space Institute have entered into an agreement that in the long haul could create a recreational trail on the old Saratoga and North Creek Railway line that connects North Creek with the Town of Newcomb.

Meantime, the railroad will stay open for any freight-hauling opportunities that might materialize, although the line has been largely unused since the old Tahawus titanium mines closed in the early 1980s. The deal would also maintain the environmental integrity of the route and prohibit the stockpiling of freight cars, as briefly occurred several years ago to the chagrin of conservation groups.

Under the agreement, OSI has loaned RevRail, a North Creek rail-biking company, the \$2.7 million needed to purchase the line. If, after several years, no demand for freight services materializes, OSI will have the option to purchase the railroad and, with RevRail, negotiate with the U.S. Surface Transportation Board for the right to develop a dedicated, multi-use rail trail.

RevRail founder Rob Harte said his company will also explore recreational rail-biking and other recreational opportunities at the north end of the line in Newcomb. "It's gorgeous to go out over the track along the Opalescent River," said Harte, whose North Creek operations attracted nearly 50,000 customers last year, and employed 40 people, including seven full-time.

## Long road to current sale

RevRail was the ultimate winner in a bankruptcy court auction last spring, after no buyer was found for the defunct road. RevRail closed the purchase on Friday, Harte said.

The SNCR line penetrates 30 miles of back-country in the heart of the Adirondacks, and for years has carried more legal intrigue than it has freight. Town officials have hoped freight service would return, perhaps luring new industry in the process. Recreational and environmental advocates have seen this as a longshot, and believe the line, which hugs rivers and encompasses miles of Adirondack wilderness, can be the southern equivalent of the Lake Placid to Tupper Lake trail currently under construction.

OSI President and CEO Kim Elliman said the partnership with RevRail keeps a number of options open, including freight service, recreation or a combination of the two. The ground covered by the line “is pristine, storied WInslow Homer terrain, and some of the best scenery in the Adirondack Park” he said.

But Elliman said OSI is also sensitive to the economic needs of the community. “We are trying to preserve optionality for all uses,” he said. “We’re trying to be responsive to the local economy and the desires of the community.”

Prior to the bankruptcy auction, OSI had offered \$1.5 million for the road, but a judge ruled it was ineligible to bid because it was not a working freight hauler. But the general trail plan was supported in court papers by the New York Department of Environmental Conservation, which dismissed the idea that the line would ever be commercially viable in a traditional sense and argued that it should be declared abandoned.

An artifact of World War II, the Saratoga North Creek Railway was built by the federal

government to haul titanium from the historic mining town of Tahawus. Today, the town is home to the popular Upper Works trailhead accessing the High Peaks from the south. OSI has already invested heavily in the Tahawus area, saving land, refurbishing the Upper Works trailhead and preserving the story of the historic village of Adirondac.

When the mines closed, the railroad lost steam as well, although local leaders have hoped a viable railroad will seed new industry, as well.

The bankruptcy auction attracted two other bidders besides RevRail: a West Coast rail biking and scenic railroad company, and a New Mexico couple with a multiplicity of exotic ideas for the line, including astro-tourism and hauling out rare-earth minerals gleaned from old mine tailings. The couple won with a \$3.3 million bid but failed to pay a sufficient cash deposit as required by the trustee.

## An eye on commercial use

Through it all, local officials in Newcomb and Essex County have hoped the line could return to commercial viability. Essex County Supervisors Chair Shaun Gilliland acknowledged that it might not be in the cards, and if not, a rail trail is a suitable alternative.

“We’ve been through the paces trying to open it up and get commercial traffic going,” Gilliland said. “We’d still like to see if there’s anything out there, but we’ve done everything we can from the county’s point of view.”

If the new owners are able to work out an agreement with the Surface Transportation Board for creation of a trail, “we won’t get in the way,” he said.