

Rails to Trails: is this Springville's own golden tourism opportunity?

By: Lizz Schumer

Date: Thursday June 2, 2011

Springville is looking at rail lines to help stimulate the local economy and promote tourism in the area, not as a means of transportation for goods or people, but as a recreational area for outdoors enthusiasts both here and from afar. A group of people is working in conjunction with the Erie-Cattaraugus Rail Trail, Inc., a 503(c)(3) not-for-profit organization, to convert a section of the Buffalo-Pittsburgh Railway to a multi-use recreational trail. This project, when it succeeds, promises great things for Springville socially, economically and healthfully. "There has never been a Rails to Trails that has not had a positive impact on the communities through which it runs," said Kate Moody, executive director of the Springville Chamber of Commerce, referring to a national initiative to convert old rail beds to multi-use recreational trails. "This will give outdoors enthusiasts the chance to bike, run, hike and ride on the trail and they will spend money in our towns if they're here. They will purchase goods, support local business, have a drink or a snack or a meal in the area, and their money stays here." The project has been a long time in the making. In order to convert an old railway into a recreational trail, the railroad that owns the route in question must first file for abandonment. According to Anne Bergantz, president of the Erie-Cattaraugus Rail to Trail organization, in 2008, the railroad that uses the rails from Orchard Park through Springville filed for an abandonment and a public meeting was held at Sprague Brook Park to see if the communities surrounding the area might be interested in railbanking the route for a rail trail; in layman's terms, making it fit for walking, biking and use as a recreational area. The decision was first made three years ago that New York state and the railway would both be interested in converting the trail, but the parties in question can legally stall development indefinitely once they express interest. With budgetary

concerns at the state level and delays at the administrative or organizational level between the organizations involved, Mayor Bill Krebs of Springville knew the parties had to find a way to speed up the process. “Most abandoned lines sit abandoned until the transfer happens to the state. When that happens, the state would own all 27 miles. But we’re trying to be proactive,” Krebs said. “We want to make sure we can manage our own 2.4 miles. It’s an out-of-the-box way to think about it, but our residents want to use it, so we want to figure out how to make that happen.” Krebs, along with a group of interested Springville locals, formed the Pop Warner Steering Committee to investigate the benefits of opening the trail through Springville, to be called the Pop Warner Trail. They sent letters to residents to investigate area interests, held a public hearing to give locals a chance to voice their concerns, and passed a resolution outlining the benefits of opening a rail trail in Springville. The resolution covered a variety of benefits, from the economic stimulation of attracting tourism and related businesses, the beautification aspect and the public safety of cleaning up a trail that could invite trespassing and vandalism if left fallow. Moody, as a chamber representative, said the chamber foresees myriad positive economic benefits for the area. “In Springville, we’re uniquely positioned to receive tourism from people visiting the trail, as well as overflow from Canadians and others with residences in Ellicottville during the ski season,” she said. In a 2009 study done on three trails in similar-sized communities in Pennsylvania, the national Rails to Trails organization found that 60 percent of trail users are in the 45-65 age group. Another 20 percent are either 35-45 or older than 65. Between 80 and 90 percent of trail users spent money in the area, including both durable goods such as hiking or bicycling equipment and consumable goods, such as drinks and snacks. On average, that adds up to between \$4 million and \$5 million spent in the trail areas per year. “We can rally the community to create a hub for the trail,” said Moody. “New businesses could come to provide eateries, bed and breakfasts, restaurants and cafes, bicycle repair shops, antiques dealers - the sort of places the people who are using the trail would frequent. There is a direct correlation between the creation of a trail and revitalization of

tourism as an industry in an area, and we're perfectly poised to take advantage of that. For example: the Old Depot and Papa Jake's are right there; that would be the perfect spot." In order to speed up the process for Springville, Bergantz explained that a public-private partnership, similar to the ones in place in several parks in Western New York, are becoming more common. "In this case, Springville has some say in how the property is being maintained and the railroad has someone taking care of it," said Bergantz in reference to the Springville portion. "Each entity brings what they have to the table." Despite their excitement about the project, none of the entities involved wanted to ignore residents' possible concerns about the drawbacks of developing the trail. "The corridor exists whether we develop it or not. If it's a trail, the police have access, and it doesn't become a place where kids party. If it's overgrown and falling apart, it doesn't add property value. Well-maintained property is always a plus," Bergantz explained. Moody agreed. "It's a no-brainer. Teenagers aren't going to go have a beer blast where they know officials are checking up on them. Kids and teens who want to sneak around aren't going to do it on park property, they're going to do it where they think they're less likely to get caught." On the issue of liability, Moody wanted to make sure property owners knew they would not be responsible for injuries sustained off the trail on their property, unless they had specifically invited trail users to leave the trail. "Individuals who own property adjacent to the trail would only be liable for individuals injured on their property if they actually invite those people onto their property. If someone were to wander off the trail and onto your property of their own accord, that would be considered trespassing and you would not be in any way responsible," she explained. She also commented on the ease of access to the trail, not only for recreational users, but emergency vehicles, as well. "The rail bed is currently private property, and because it's not maintained, if someone does trespass and get injured, it's very hard for emergency vehicles to get to them. Once the trail is cleaned up and maintained, emergency vehicles will be able to respond much more easily," Moody said. As the process continues to move forward, Krebs added that the village hopes to gain control of the Springville portion of the railway so

the village can make decisions about maintenance, where to place gazebos, benches and other convenience features, who gets to use it, when it closes and how it is run, but the thinking does not stop there.

“We want Springville to be the first portion to open, and we’re looking at the next portion to be Springville to Cattaraugus Creek. The high-level bridge over the creek would bring tourist traffic,” Krebs explained. “It’s very realistic, given the history. Back in 1890-1910, the railroad ran excursion trains down from Buffalo and people would picnic there, then the trains would take them back to the city. The time is right to reinvigorate the area.” Bergantz referenced a project undertaken in the Hudson Valley in 2009, the Hudson Valley Bridge Project, in which a raised railway bridge over the Hudson River was restored and converted to a recreational trail. “It was a huge \$30 million project, but in October 2009, 40,000 people came to see it open. New York state predicted 150,000 local visitors and 110,000 non-local over the course of a year, but interest was way higher than expected,” Bergantz said. “In Springville, we could build a walkway over the Catt. Creek bridge, which could be a really spectacular thing, a really unique thing to attract visitors. This area has a lot of possibilities; it’s just a matter of making it happen.” Moody emphasized that the chamber is throwing its support behind the project from its beginnings in Springville right through the eventual extension from Orchard Park to West Valley. “The chamber has pledged support for the project, and we’re doing all we can to facilitate its success. There’s a really great, dedicated group of folks working on the committee, volunteering, meeting with the public and answering their questions. They’re really passionate, and the chamber supports this project 100 percent,” she said. Krebs emphasized the importance of capitalizing on recreational tourism, the largest, most economically viable option for reinvigorating the economy in Springville and the surrounding area. “We believe it’s very important to do whatever we can to update retail business and bring people into the area,” he said. “We have to take every opportunity we can to showcase the village, including utilizing our great natural recreational resources.”