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Bike path's potential is huge, but state support is scant

Guest Perspective | Hans Huessy Nov 7, 2019

Vermont's elected representatives are ignoring a relatively inexpensive project that could have huge economic impact and significant health benefits for northern Vermont.

The Lamoille Valley Rail Trail, once its full 95 miles are completed, could be the crown jewel of the Vermont state park system, attracting bikers from all over the world.

Unfortunately, the rail trail is only one-third complete and its progress has come to a virtual standstill.

At the current rate of progress, it will take 15 years to complete the trail (and could take longer as, with each year, existing infrastructure, such as bridge piers, deteriorate further, driving up costs).

This is the case despite the fact that the federal government will match any money spent by the state and/or charitable donations on a four-to-one basis, meaning the state would have to raise only \$3 million of the project's remaining \$15 million cost.

This is the equivalent of one roundabout a year over three years (to date, all state funding has come out of the Trans budget).

Every politician asked about the Lamoille Valley Rail Trail, including the governor, claims to enthusiastically support the project and I am not aware of a single state representative or state senator who opposes it. Yet, when it comes time to put their money where their mouth is, their enthusiasm evaporates.

Of the \$8 million spent on the Lamoille Valley Rail Trail to date, the state has contributed a paltry \$75,000 and has committed only \$50,000 to the project for 2020.

This reluctance to fund the project is even harder to understand when there is ample evidence that the rail trail will have a huge economic impact on an economically challenged part of the state.



An almost perfect case study of what completion of the rail trail could mean to Vermont is located just to the north of us in Quebec.

The Petit Train du Nord is a 110-mile rail trail. The Petit Train runs from St. Jerome, located an hour west of Montreal, to Mount Laurier. People travel from all over the world to ride the Petit Train, spending anywhere from two to five days riding from one end to the other.

If you have never had a multi-day off-road riding experience, I highly recommend that you explore the Petit Train. It is wonderful — you ride through long sections of beautiful forests, pass by numerous lakes and rivers, and ride through the resort town of Mont Tremblant. All along the route are B&Bs, inns and restaurants that cater to riders.

That said, and having ridden both the Petit Train and the open sections of the Lamoille Valley Rail Trail, the Lamoille rail trail is at least as scenic as the Petit Train and will attract many riders who, having ridden the Petit Train and enjoyed the experience, will be looking for another, similar adventure.

The Petit Train is operated by a nonprofit that oversees the trail's maintenance and repairs. The Petit Train estimates it attracts 1 million users a year and generates \$15 million in revenues. The user breakdown is 45 percent local users, 30 percent persons who live more than 30 miles from the trail but do not stay overnight, and 25 percent tourists who spend at least one night in the area.

An obvious initial reaction is that Vermont cannot aspire to this level of use, as the Lamoille Valley Rail Trail is not located near a major urban center like Montreal. However, Swanton, the northern trailhead of the rail trail, is only 60 miles from downtown Montreal, the same distance as St. Jerome, the southern trailhead of the Petit Train, and Swanton is probably easier to get to.

An example of the type of business the Lamoille Valley Rail Trail could support is the Petit Train shuttle service. That service takes you, your bike and your luggage from St. Jerome to Mount Laurier, and then delivers your luggage to the inn or B&B where you will stay the first night (and then on to your next stop the following day). This allows you to ride the Petit Train south to your car without carrying any luggage.

The shuttle service served 4,500 riders last year (many riders carry their own gear or make their own arrangements) and generated over half a million dollars in shuttle fees during a four-month period of operation. Quebec has a thriving bike culture and there is every reason to believe that a completed Lamoille Valley Rail Trail would attract tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of Quebec bike enthusiasts.

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This economic impact assessment is entirely consistent with a local economic impact study done on the Burlington bike path and Colchester Causeway in 2010, using 2008 user data. That study estimated there were 100,000 users annually and they generated between \$1 million \$2.5 million in revenue.

The causeway trail is a significant tourist attraction, but not necessarily a stand-alone destination as for most visitors, it occupies half a day at most, as opposed to the four or five days one would spend riding a completed Lamoille Valley Rail Trail. The causeway study is based on 10-year-old data and it is very likely that the number of users has increased over the intervening years, as evidenced by the fact that the bike ferry reported 14,000 riders this year, and only a small percentage of causeway riders take the ferry.

According to VAST's best estimate, the Lamoille Valley Rail Trail already attracts 100,000 users annually. Completing the rail trail would project Vermont into the forefront of northeastern bike destinations, and allow for cross-promotion of the Burlington bike path and causeway, the Missisquoi Valley Rail Trail from St. Albans to Richford, the Beebe Spur along the shores of Lake Memphremagog, and the Delaware and Hudson Rail Trail from Castleton to Rupert.

When one adds in the Kingdom Trails and the new mountain biking facility being constructed in Poultney, Vermont will have an unrivalled collection of riding experiences.

The added attraction of the rail trail experience is that it can be enjoyed by all ages and all levels of fitness, especially with the advent of the e-bike. The rail trails are wide and relatively flat, with no steep hills to climb. Because there is no traffic, families can safely ride the trails with young children. Senior citizens can also enjoy the trail. Riders do not need to be in peak physical condition to ride 20 to 30 miles a day on an e-bike.

Many riders who would never dream of riding along Vermont's roads, many of which have no — or almost no — shoulder, feel much more comfortable riding a rail trail, especially the Lamoille Valley Rail Trail, as road crossings are few and far between.

While the Lamoille Valley Rail Trail will run from Swanton to St. Johnsbury, riders will be able to get on the trail from Richford and St. Albans via the Missisquoi Valley rail trail, and from Burlington via the Burlington bike path, Causeway and Alburg recreation trail.

Many riders will likely opt to fly into Burlington and spend day one riding north across the Causeway, through the islands, and then traveling a short distance on Route 78 into Swanton where they will spend the night before starting the first leg of the Lamoille Valley Rail Trail. Riders embarking on such a trip will ride through about 20 Vermont towns, making many stops along the way.

The Lamoille Valley Rail Trail got an initial infusion of approximately \$6 million as a result of Sen. Bernie Sanders' efforts in 2006 and those funds were sufficient to build the first 35 miles of trail. With additional charitable donations, grants, and meaningful state funding, along with the federal matching funds, the remaining 60 miles could be completed in five years or less.

Several towns along the Lamoille Valley Rail Trail have successfully obtained grants to construct the trail in their communities (Hardwick and Swanton, for example), but the major cost drivers for the project are the numerous major bridges that need to be reconstructed, projects that are well beyond the capabilities and resources of the towns.

The state has entrusted the construction and maintenance of the Lamoille Valley Rail Trail to the Vermont Association of Snow Travelers, a nonprofit quasi-state entity that has shown it is more than capable of performing these tasks. Unfortunately, the state for several years also expected VAST to raise the \$3 million necessary to complete the trail, something for which VAST was not equipped. VAST has no fundraising capabilities and does not actively solicit donations for any purpose.

In addition, because many potential Lamoille Valley Rail Trail donors are less than enthusiastic about snowmobiles, VAST had a very difficult time raising funds. Donors also objected to funding what they perceived to be a state park, as the state owns the underlying right-of-way. (In Quebec, the rail trails are considered "linear" parks).

Despite these difficulties, over the 10-plus years that VAST has been responsible for the Lamoille Valley Rail Trail, it raised approximately \$800,000 in grants and donations, in addition to spending over \$3 million of its own resources in its efforts to move the project forward, but its most recent capital campaign fell far short of its \$3 million goal. So while VAST, which maintains close to 5,000 miles of trails in Vermont, including many shared trail sections with the Long Trail and the Catamount XC trail, is a great choice for the construction and maintenance of the Lamoille Valley Rail Trail, it was very shortsighted on the state's part to expect VAST to raise the requisite charitable donations.

Just to be clear, even though the Lamoille Valley Rail Trail is being constructed and maintained by VAST, it is not primarily a snowmobile trail. Summer use is three times the level of winter use. In addition, snowmobilers can already use 90 percent of the Lamoille Valley Rail Trail because they do not require a finished riding surface, as bikers and pedestrians do; they only need snow. Accordingly, the driving factor in the cost of completing the Lamoille Valley Rail Trail is making the trail suitable for bikers and pedestrians, not snowmobilers.

I last rode the Lamoille Valley Rail Trail on a beautiful October day and encountered at least a hundred people on the trail, including walkers, bikers, and people on horseback. When I pulled into Lost Nation Brewery, which abuts the trail, I counted close to 30 bikes parked outside. I saw families with children of all ages and many groups that included at least three generations. I saw e-bikers and convalescents, birders and photographers, all out enjoying this wonderful recreational asset.

The completion of the Lamoille Valley Rail Trail would open up similar opportunities for residents of many other small northern Vermont communities that lack any meaningful recreational facilities. It would also support local bike shops and bike rentals, and provide a steady stream of customers for B&Bs, convenience stores, bars and restaurants.

It is truly disappointing that a project with such significant potential financial and public health benefits languishes for want of political support. It is time for our elected representatives to pay more than lip service to the Lamoille Valley Rail Trail and expend the necessary political capital to complete the trail within the next five years.

Hans G. Huessy is a lawyer for VAST, the organization that manages the Lamoille Valley Rail Trail, and the Vermont Trail Alliance (a consortium of entities that build and operate recreational trails, including the Green Mountain Club, Catamount Trail, Vermont Mountain Bike Association, VAST

and others). He is on the Lamoille Valley Rail Trail committee, but this opinion is his own.