

Town of Johnsburg Newsletter

Supervisor's Report

Reviewing Railroad Matters Amid Recession (The Real Deal About Trains & Newspapers)

Short Takes

Sled Easement

The National Grid Company has delayed execution of the annual snowmobile easement for the North Creek power lines to the dismay of local clubs and enthusiasts. Supervisor Goodspeed has corresponded with the company to strongly request reconsideration..

Landfill Break in

Police are actively investigating a recent break in to the Town landfill building. If you have any information, please contact Town Hall.

Work Place Violence Policy

The Johnsburg Town Board recently passed a workplace violence policy statement which seeks to eliminate violence and injuries in the work place.

Reckless Driving

Police are actively investigating a series of incidents in Ski Bowl Park, the Town Hall Parking lot and several other areas. If you have any information, please contact Town Hall

2010 marks the final contract year for operation of the County owned rail line by the Upper Hudson River Railroad. The conclusion of the contract causes a review not just of the formal, legal status of the County's rail operation, but also of the train's existence and future against the back drop of difficult economic times.

For some, the train has become the poster child of bad government; careless spending run amuck for a project that government should not be involved in.

For others, the train is a highly valued countywide infrastructure that has had decent success on the north end of the line and whose future is virtually limitless.

Regardless of where any one citizen stands on the train issue, it is critical that accurate information about the status of the project be disseminated. It is also important for citizens to understand precisely where the Johnsburg Supervisor stands on the matter and what the future holds.

To review briefly, the line came into existence about a dozen years ago after a series of federal and state grant awards made a renewed operation viable. Separately and prior to that time a not-for-profit group had already successfully saved and in turn restored the North Creek Train Station where Teddy Roosevelt learned he had become President of the United States.

After a legal selection process, award for operations of the line went to the Upper Hudson River Railroad, whose President is John Riegel. A tourist excursion began on the line while efforts were being made to not only complete the line south from Riparius through Warren County, but also from the county borders through Corinth and connect with the main CP Rail Station in Saratoga Springs.

Over the years the tourist line has proved moderately successful, drawing in some years more than 24,000 tourists to North Creek and employing more than a dozen workers. Track renovations have been challenging and have taken longer than anticipated.

Warren County acquired the 40 mile line in 1997 at a cost of \$561,725. and since that time has spent about \$600,000 in line improvements, station work and infrastructure. Total state and federal grant funds equal just over \$10 million. The County does not subsidize the operation but rather receives a payment back of \$1 for each ticket sold to be placed in a segregated fund for infrastructure repair. In fact, the County does not anticipate spending any money on the operation.

The operation became highly controversial as a result of several event occurring simultaneously. First and foremost, the current economic crisis overtook first the private then the public sector. As that crisis moved to the state level, New York State continued to mandate various county programs but refused to fund them. A prior county surplus had been previously depleted and the county's financial situation became precarious with an 8+ million dollar shortfall in the 2009 budget.

As the financial crisis was unfolding and hitting home, gubernatorial administration changed. An anticipated Pataki administration commitment of \$2 million was eliminated

(Railroad Matters, continued on back page)

(Railroad, continued)

by the Spitzer Administration leaving Warren County to decide how to build a station in Thurman and Hadley/Luzerne that those dollars were slated for. If the county elected to build the two stations it didn't have enough funding to complete the two as designed. If the county built just one to spec then it would be in breach of the grant contract and forced to refund the federal dollars.

The compromise proposal agreed on was controversial but in reality the only viable option. Warren County agreed to build two functional platforms which could later be expanded. This saved us from having to repay grant funds and kept us moving forward in a less than perfect fashion.

Because federal dollars were used on the platform, prevailing wage requirements together with some cost overruns made the projects appear grossly under built and over paid.

In the midst of all this, the Post Star's editorial board called for elimination of the entire project. The editorial board's frustration was both understandable and irresponsible. Elimination of the project would likely require an immediate \$7 million refund to the federal government, lose the tourist train, lay waste to infrastructure and improvements and perpetuate the economic decline of so many small towns on the line looking for help.

In the summer of 2009 the Post Star carried repeated stories about a track wash out south of Riparius, causing \$150,000 worth of damage. Various stories about the washout and expense of the rail way ultimately linked in many people's minds a looming budget crisis and the railroad. When the county found a way to fix the wash out in house for about \$8000.00 the story was never covered.

Over the last several months an experienced reporter for the daily paper has come to cover county meetings. His articles are more detailed and rooted in a fundamental understanding of how government functions and how sometimes, it doesn't.

At a recent series of meetings I have explained to supervisors that the rail operation is an important economic factor for Johnsbury and for tourism generally. At one meeting I even went so far as to suggest that the Town's interests are so significant that it might look to take steps on its own to perpetuate operations. The next thing I knew I received a half dozen calls, comments and letters from people upset by my comments. Unfortunately, the balance of my thoughts were not printed. I have always maintained that there might be a way for a municipality to facilitate operations of the train without it costing the municipalities a cent. Simply put, award a contract that permits the operator to retain all profits but passes all track and infrastructure liability to the contractor and away from the municipality.

So where are we today?

As I have often said, it is dangerous to look at complicated issues like the county rail line in absolutes or black and white terms. There is a lot more gray out there than the Post Star cares to investigate. The current operation brings tourists, creates jobs and could no doubt be improved. The history of the line has been one of starts and stops coupled with non-objective press coverage and government rules that make things even messier.

Long term, big picture ideas from rail professionals are only just coming to the forefront. Freight coupled with passenger service may render the operation profitable and changing industrial pressures may make it actually sought after. Successful analogous operations are now occurring in other markets. The model could work here.

All in all, the jury is still out on the precise future of the train line but facts are always more helpful to jurors than opinions not based in reality.

Animal Control Officer

The Town Board recently re-appointed the current animal control officer with new requirements for reporting to the Town Board and record keeping requirements to detail calls received, time of response and action taken. Responses are to be made within 24 hours.

Consider Camping

Several citizens have asked the Town to reconsider its approach to camping, including the prohibition of camping at Ski Bowl Park during White Water Derby weekend. More info to follow.

The Right Track?

On Jan. 28 a number of citizens attended a public information session sponsored by a group interested in converting train rails in North River, Hamilton and Essex Counties to a bike trail system. In discussions after the presentation, some residents in North River expressed concern over the effect of the project on their homes while others expressed great support. Various options for the proposal were discussed and meetings will be continuing.

County Structure

In upcoming weeks, Warren County Supervisors will begin consideration of a restructuring of the top of county government. Presently the County functions with a Clerk of the Board only after the recent elimination of the Commissioner of Administrative Services position. The County has left the commissioner position unfilled and will begin to discuss movement to a county administrator position which has been used successfully in other counties.

North Creek Art Walk

On May 20 the first North Creek Art Walk will commence at 5 pm. Over a dozen businesses expressed interest in participating in a monthly art walk which will occur every third Thursday from 5 to 7 pm through Sept. Each participating establishment will host a different artist and offer a small reception to visitors.

Michelle San Antonio, Director of the Depot Museum has spearheaded this project after participating in other town's art walks. This is a great event to encourage people to meet up with friends and family after work and walk through businesses downtown. It also provides great exposure to the artists. If you would like more info on how to participate as an artist or business, call Michelle at 251-5842.