

Hamlets to huts: an idea worth exploring

In the near future, if hikers on the Northville-Placid Trail choose, they can stop in the Town of Long Lake via a new spur trail that comes out at the top of Mount Sabattis, offering a rare mountaintop view on the NPT journey that looks out over the town and lake. They can pick up mailed-ahead supplies from the post office directly below, grab a bite to eat in town, and even get a room for the night with a hot shower.

The partially completed trail (the town has built its part, and the state will complete the last mile linking with the NPT this summer) marks one of the first efforts of the Adirondack Hamlets to Huts organization (AHH) as it begins to implement an Adirondack Park-wide hut-to-hut model, based on successful systems in other parts of the United States and world.

In March, the Adirondack Community-based Trails and Lodging System (ACTLS) released its final report laying out fifty-nine conceptual routes linking communities through self-powered outdoor adventures. The report, paid for with a New York State Department of State grant, will inform the work of AHH as it begins creating the routes.

And this month (May 8-13) a test run is planned for the first of the routes, the North Creek-Indian Lake Circuit. It's a five-night, four-day journey that traverses three peaks and concludes with a fifteen-mile whitewater rafting trip from Indian Lake to North River through the Hudson River Gorge. The group will stay and eat in North Creek, at Garnet Hill Lodge, Cabins at Chimney Mountain, and Binders Cabins at Indian Lake. Square Eddy Expeditions will lead the raft trip.

Few of the fifty-nine routes come without challenges. There is work to be done talking with towns and villages, state agencies, and private landowners to make any of these a reality. Environmental groups share valid concerns about placement of trails and lodging. And rumblings last summer of a proposal from the governor to erect yurts or other temporary lodging on state land, seemingly in violation of Article 14 of the state constitution, apparently to help the North Hudson-Newcomb Traverse in the ACTLS report, didn't help matters. To Joe Dadey, AHH's executive director, these are all puzzles to be figured out.

But for those who truly believe in helping the local Adirondack economy, the Hamlets to Huts idea is worth pursuing:

- If nothing else, the exercise pushes local governments, state agencies, businesses, tourism agencies, environmental groups, and private landowners to come together to really think through sustainability questions facing the Park.

- If successful, it could inspire a number of



PHOTO BY MIKE LYNCH

A new spur trail from the Northville-Placid Trail into the Town of Long Lake is set to be completed this summer. It will allow NPT travelers to leave the trail for a bite to eat or a hot shower and bring business to the town.

Adirondack entrepreneurs, because the program will need shuttle services (or Uber drivers), new and existing lodging, food, and guide services—and perhaps other needs as the program grows and lessons are learned.

- It will send more patrons to existing businesses. Economic studies of systems in New Hampshire and Washington showed the systems adding \$17.4 million and \$12.9 million, respectively, to local economies.

- And it will spread recreation traffic to interesting hiking outside of the High Peaks.

- Lastly, it can make the Adirondacks available to tourists looking for a less-rugged experience.

The key to the success of the program, Dadey believes, is creating a good experience that will ensure repeat visitors, much like the Cranberry Fifty or the Saranac Six. Users will sign up for their trip through a still-to-be-created reservation system that will allow them to choose lodging from an affiliate network of differently priced options, but a shared standard of quality. Among the lodging options will be a small number maintained by AHH on private or easement lands, not Forest Preserve, when lodging doesn't already exist, the way Adirondack Mountain Club runs lodging and camping at Heart Lake and the Johns Brook valley.

So where do things stand? The North Creek-Indian Lake Circuit, the test run, is the

closest to completion, though two additional trails need to be built and there is a need for lodging in Indian Lake. The spur trail linking the Northville-Placid Trail to the Town of Long Lake is expected to be completed this summer.

From there, Dadey said they will follow the priorities in the ACTLS report, but then step back to also look at the plan geographically, making sure to spread the impact to all parts of the Park. AHH is working to raise a mix of public and private funds to keep efforts moving.

In five to ten years, Dadey hopes to have different routes in different parts of the Park and a few information centers (AHH has its office and information center at 47 Main Street in Saranac Lake).

And, politically, Dadey is taking serious concerns over siting of trails and lodging proposed on private holdings surrounded by state land or near trailheads and the need to review the system as a whole under the State Environmental Quality Review Act and not one route at a time. We agree, these are all challenges to be solved.

But we hope they can be, and the Hamlets to Huts idea can connect communities in the Park and in doing so create business and opportunities for economic growth.

— Tracy Ormsbee, Publisher