

Ulster & Delaware Corridor Advisory Committee

DATE & TIME: January 23, 2025 at 4:30PM
LOCATION: Legislative Chambers, 6th Floor, County Office Building, Kingston
PRESIDING OFFICER: Chair Collins
LEGISLATIVE STAFF: Michael Tierney, Legislative Support Specialist
MEMBERS PRESENT: Legislators Kovacs, Litts, Nolan, Sperry, Uchitelle
MEMBERS ABSENT: Legislator McCollough
QUORUM PRESENT: Yes
OTHER ATTENDEES: Legislator Manna Jo Greene, Legislator Eric Stewart, Legislator Aaron Levine, Deputy Executive Amanda LaValle, Planning Director Dennis Doyle, Tourism Director Lisa Berger, Helen Chase, Steve Rice, Karl Beard, Nick Mercurio, Kevin Smith, Patty Goodwin, Annie Bergelin, Ralph Durham, Maryanne Resnick, Keisha Hoerner, Lee Kalisin, Mary McNamara, Stewart Auchincloss, Susan Auchincloss, Ernie Hunt

Chair Collins called the meeting to order at 4:30 PM.

Motion No. 1: **Motion to Adopt the minutes of the October 24, 2024**
Motion Made By: Legislator Nolan
Motion Seconded By: Legislator Sperry

Voting in Favor: Legislators Collins, Kovacs, Litts, Sperry and Uchitelle
Voting Against: None
Votes in Favor: 5
Votes Against: 0
Disposition: **Minutes Approved**

Chair Collins gave the floor to Lisa Berger, Director of Tourism and Economic Development to give a presentation regarding the impact of tourism of our rail trail system, as well as the Catskill Mountain Railroad. Lisa shared data showing Ulster County's \$1 billion in tourism revenue in 2023 and more than \$575 million in accommodations, with the Empire State Train accounting for 59% of visitation. The Catskill Mountain Railroad saw a 10% ridership increase, with visitors from NY, NJ, CT, PA and MA.

Director Berger defines a tourist according to the US Commerce Department and explains the data sources used for the presentation. She discussed the various rail corridors, including the Empire State Trail, the Catskill Mountain Railroad, and the Ashokan Rail Trail.

Director Berger also highlighted the importance of mobile visitors' data and the limitations of geofencing in certain locations.

Director Berger presented the top 10 visited places in Ulster County, emphasizing the Empire State Trail's significant contribution to visitation.

Director Berger also shared data on Catskill Mountain Railroad's ridership growth and the origins of their visitors.

Legislator Nolan wanted Lisa to talk a little bit about the \$1 billion in tourism revenue and its significance. Lisa responded by saying that in 2023 the county brought in \$1 billion in visitor spending and more than \$575 million in accommodation, so that is a reflection of the fact that the message has continually been not just to come here, but to stay here. She believes being a four-season destination is very helpful. She also shared another important note about the dollar figure is that we rank third in the 12 county Hudson Valley Catskill region behind Westchester County and Orange County in terms of visitor spending and the Orange County has two of the biggest attractions in the state which are Woodbury Commons and Legoland. So being recognized is important.

Legislator Nolan inquired about the possibility of geofencing Rail Explorers, and Lisa confirms they are geofenced and provided additional data. She stated it's important to remember that they have 30,000 people and their weather dependent attraction, and some of the state parks and the library over the Hudson and some of the biggest drivers bring in literally between 400,600 people a year and it's important to the tourism economy.

Kevin Smith from the audience asked about the geofencing of the Woodstock trailhead and the differences in visitor behavior at different trailheads. Lisa provided insight into the average length of stay and visitors at the Woodstock trailhead.

Kevin Smith also inquired about trends in outdoor active tourism and its growth in Ulster County. Lisa discussed the trends in active tourism, slow tourism, and nostalgia, emphasizing their importance for 2025.

Legislator Nolan asked about the county's return on investment in tourism and the economic benefits of trails. Director Berger explained the average daily visitor spending and the importance of overnight visitation.

Legislator Stewart asked Director Berger if she had figures on the amount that the county gets for each dollar spent on tourism, meaning investing in trail networks. Director Berger stated it is difficult to quantify because there is an industry standard idea that the average day visitor spends between \$50 and \$68 and then the overnight visitor spends about \$125 and that's why overnight visitor is sought and the County is always looking to grow visitation and grow market share that may otherwise be missed.

Megan Carey from the public spoke and thanked Lisa Berger for the information she shared with them and emphasized the importance of the Catskill Mountain Railroad for families and people with disabilities.

Chair Collins introduced materials to the committee for review that have been provided by the public and submitted to the Legislature, including the CMRR operating results and the PRAP proposal.

Legislator Nolan raised concerns about air quality complaints and the need for respectful communication with the Catskill Mountain Railroad.

Legislator Uchitelle emphasizes the importance of following the legislative process and the role of other entities, such as the City of Kingston, in decision-making.

Legislator Stewart suggested involving other municipalities in the decision-making process.

Legislator Nolan recommended additional information gathering and expert opinions to inform the committee's recommendations.

Kevin Smith a member of the public and the Chair of the Trails Advisory Committee asked Lisa if you can geofence the Ashokan but only the Woodstock Trailhead. Lisa provided insights into the average length of stay and visitor behavior at the Woodstock Trailhead.

Kevin Smith emphasized the importance of traffic safety and safe transportation in the committee's decisions.

Helen Chase a member of the public wrote a letter and shared it with Chair Collins, she was in the support of the railroad's extension and discussed the need for the air quality sensors and a clear definition of trail standards.

Chair Collins suggested to the committee members before the next meeting to read the reports from the Professor Sheldon and have him attend the meeting.

Adjournment

Motion By: Legislator Litts

Seconded By: Legislator Sperry

TIME: 5:39 PM

Respectfully Submitted By: Lizvett Noriega, Legislative Administrative Assistant

Minutes Approved: January 30, 2025