



ULSTER COUNTY LEGISLATIVE NEWS

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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County Executive's Tourism Railroad Support – A Step In the Right Direction

(KINGSTON, NY) Ulster County Legislator David Donaldson, Vice Chairman of Legislature and Chairman of the Rail Road Advisory Committee said his hopes were buoyed by County Executive Mike Hein's announcement yesterday that he supports leaving the tracks in place between Kingston Plaza and Hurley Mountain Road. The plan previously advocated by the County Executive, detailed in Resolution No. 275 passed on August 19, 2014, called for the removal of the tracks from Kingston to Phoenicia and replaced with a 14-foot wide trail. Legislators Donaldson along with Legislators Manna Jo Greene, Carl Belfiglio, and Mary Wawro voted against Resolution 275 and have been advocating for a Rail with Trail approach.

Donaldson said the plan Hein announced on Monday was a step in the right direction but needs to go further – 5 miles further.

County Executive Mike Hein's announcement on Monday offered a plan that would accommodate both tourism railroad operations and recreational trail development in the City of Kingston. The plan would include an additional section of the County-owned Ulster and Delaware ("U&D") Railroad corridor in Kingston in a future request for proposal ("RFP") for tourism railroad operations.

"No one can argue with success," Donaldson said referring to the event trains run by Catskill Mountain Rail Road (CMRR). CMRR expects to sell approximately 30,000 tickets this year for event trains leaving the Kingston Plaza, generating over 3 million dollars in business and added tax receipts. "Since over 70% of the riders came from out of the area, these railroad events put the City of Kingston and Ulster County on the map for thousands of tourists," said Donaldson.

Donaldson said, "Feedback from these events showed the number one complaint was the ride was too short. The train ride could be longer and ultimately could take passengers to within walking distance of the Ashokan at the Glenford Dyke – a distance of approximately 5 miles beyond Hurley Mountain Road."

CMRR reports to the Railroad Advisory Committee indicate tourist train attractions are growing in popularity around the world, but that there are no two-mile tourist railroads that are successful. Donaldson said, "The ability of the railroad to connect to the main line in Kingston is a vital component to the County's plans to market this asset to any rail road operation when the contract with CMRR expires in 2016."

"I believe in the adage 'If you build it they will come'," said Legislator Carl Belfiglio, an outspoken advocate for developing this County asset into a world-class year round tourist attraction. "This 28 mile corridor is something the taxpayers of Ulster County already own. The county should be marketing this asset worldwide, through our Office of Economic Development"

"The extraordinary success of the Thomas the Tank Engine, Peanuts' Great Pumpkin, and Polar Express events proved what an economic benefit these events will be to Downtown Kingston and the entire

County, “ Donaldson said. “I want the City of Kingston to see the benefits of the tourism that the Ashokan Reservoir trail plans will attract as well.” Donaldson said, “The train will encourage people to start that experience in Kingston. Otherwise out of town tourists will skip Kingston altogether and drive straight to the trail head at the Reservoir.”

Donaldson noted, “The train can run sightseers to simply enjoy the beautiful view or drop off hikers, bikers and cross county skiers at a trail head that continues across the reservoir. This can be a year round benefit to uptown Kingston and the entire County.”

Donaldson pointed out the benefits to Ulster County residents as well. “People of Ulster County no longer need to travel hundreds of miles and get hotels to be able to bring their children and grandchildren on rides like Thomas the Tank or the Polar Express. Instead they can spend that money right here,” Donaldson said.

Legislator Manna Jo Greene (D) – Rosendale, agrees with Donaldson that this season's CMRR events demonstrated significant economic benefit and the potential for future economic development for Kingston and the County. “I believe the best possible solution will come from people working together,” she said. “If the groups who support the trail and the groups who support the railroad can work together and find ways to share the corridor, we can we can create the best possible solution for this rail corridor and the future of Ulster County.”

“Once the railroad tracks are ripped out, there is no way to get them back,” Legislator Mary Wawro said. “It would be a loss of a tremendous public asset.”

“While I’m pleased with this turn of events,” Wawro continued. “It will take years to get the rail with trail to Hurley Mountain Road from Kingston. In the meantime, we should at least try to continue to allow the railroad to expand to see what its ultimate potential can be. The renovation of the railroad from Kingston to Hurley Mountain Road has not cost the County a dime so far.”

Donaldson pointed to the recent rail with trail project completed in the City of Kingston and commended Kingston’s Mayor Gallo and Common Council for not ripping up the rails at Kingston Point. “The City of Kingston along with dozens of other municipalities across the country, recognized the proven benefits of rail with trail,” Donaldson said. “I’m sure when people start to enjoy the rail with a six-foot wide trail along the Rondout Creek, they will want to see more opportunities like that developed in Ulster County. People will be able to ride the rails and/or walk the trail, a win-win for all.”

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[Photos attached from the Kingston Point Rail with Trail Project]







