

OPINION

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How can everyone benefit from trails?



Point of View

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town Trails Committee began making mountain bike trails to link with the multi-use trails at Blueberry Hill. The 4600-mile North Country Scenic Trail contacted CATS to cooperate on making an off-road route through Crown Point to the Champlain Bridge. There's been progress creating the Adirondack Hut-to-Hut Trail System linking all the towns in the Park. Plus, there is the Adirondack Coast Wine Trail and even a Yoga Trail.

These actions drew the attention of the Regional Office of Sustainable Tourism and inspired the idea that led to the first "Adirondack Harvest Festival" last September when over 1500 people came to the Essex County Fairgrounds to shop at the farmers' market, hike on CATS Trails, listen to music, and attend farming demonstrations.

Then, in January, Governor Cuomo announced the goal of completing the Empire State Trail by 2020. This 750-mile trail includes a bike route from the Champlain Canalway to Ticonderoga and continuing along Route 22 through Port Henry, Westport, Essex, and Willsboro on its way to the Canadian border. This creates amazing opportunities to greatly expand the trail networks, increase outdoor recreation and boost local businesses. CATS and other local groups will advise this and the other efforts to ensure the routes connect with local hiking/biking trails and communities.

All of this poses extraordinary challenges. Visitors will return if they are satisfied. That means de-

livering quality products and excellent customer service; providing food, lodging, transportation, and other amenities; having people start new businesses and operate existing ones; and having our communities and business organizations adopt a regional and cooperative approach to attaining shared goals.

These opportunities create a "cart and horse" situation as in "What comes first—the travelers or the businesses?" That's why biking and driving on the Cuisine Trail are so important: They are better able than hikers to get to the next town if something is lacking. As the number of travelers increase, there will be more trails and businesses for visitors and year-round residents to enjoy. Thinking on an even larger scale, it moves us closer to the day when people will come here to "Hike the Lake / Bike the Lake on Town-to-Town Trails around Lake Champlain." As all this is taking place, it makes it so everyone benefits.

You can benefit by coming to the 2017 "CATS Grand Hike to the Essex Inn" is on May 13 followed by a Block Party featuring Zip City Blues Band, restorative yoga with Lake Champlain Yoga & Wellness, local food, and a children's art table. Details are at ChamplainAreaTrails.com.

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The Champlain Valley was the last part added to the Adirondack Park. It has little public land and, until recently, few hiking trails. This limited the economic benefits of outdoor recreation because people bypassed the valley on their way to trails in the High Peaks. But, that is changing.

What led to the change? First, land conservation organizations and the state purchased key properties like Split Rock Wild Forest, Coon Mountain, and Black Kettle Farm. This expanded public access to the outdoors. Next, new "local-food" farms started up attracting young people and reviving the farm community.

Then in 2008, Champlain Area Trails (CATS) began making trails to link communities, connect people with nature, and promote economic vitality. This led to CATS holding its first town-to-town hike in 2013 followed by annual Grand Hikes with over 250 hikers.

Meanwhile, other trails started happening. A Cheese Tour connects local cheese-making farms. The proposed Cuisine Trail, between Ticonderoga and Keeseville, highlighting local food was submitted for formal state designation. The Elizabeth-