

Opening the Path

Accessibility Work Advances on Hunter Branch Rail Trail

By Michelle Yost



The Hunter Branch Rail Trail. Photo by Britta Wareham

Just imagine it: walking or biking from the iconic Kaaterskill Falls all the way to Dolan's Lake in the Village of Hunter—without ever leaving the trail. That's the bold vision behind the Hunter Regional Trails (HRT) project, a dream that's steadily becoming reality.

Last July, we shared the big picture: a scenic, 11-mile multi-use trail connecting these two beloved destinations. This trail will wind its way through public and private lands, tracing much of the old railbed when possible. It's being developed in five phases under the care and leadership of the Hunter Area Trail Committee (HATC). And now, one year later, the trail is not only moving forward—it's gaining real momentum. Here is an update on one of the signature sections, the Hunter Branch Rail Trail!

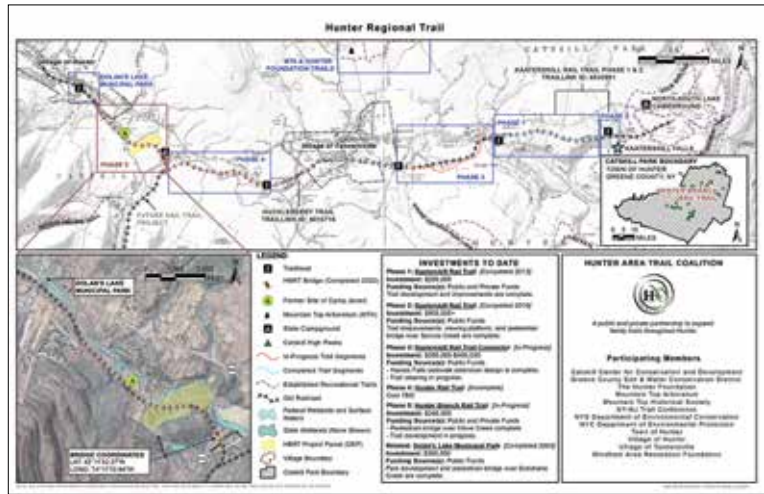
Accessible Trail Commemorates Historic Campers

Out on the western end of the 11-mile trail system, an inspiring story is taking shape. Phase 5, the Hunter Branch Rail Trail (HBRT), will be a fully accessible path designed to honor the legacy of Camp Jened—the historic summer camp that sparked a national movement for disability rights.

Located on Ski Bowl Road, a half mile from Hunter Mountain, Camp Jened is the focus of the academy award nomination documentary *Crip Camp: A Disability Revolution*. It tells the remarkable story of how campers, empowered by their experience at the free-spirit Camp Jened, organized protests in the 1970s across the country to fight for regulations that prevented discrimination against people with disabilities.

After the release of the documentary, the MTHS hosted a large community gathering to unveil an historic marker at the former camp site. The historic marker is on the HBRT (formerly the Hunter Branch railroad). Over a hundred people, including former campers and counselors, traveled near and far to honor the hard-fought efforts of those with disabilities who paved the way for national disability rights leading to the landmark bill in 1990, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The MTHS's initiative was the brainchild of Gary Slutzky and Linda Geary.

With the HBRT at the foot of the former camp that is now memorialized for its role in the national disabilities' movement, the trail committee's vision is to construct this trail to be accessible and inviting for all to use. After the opening in 2023 as a



Clockwise from top left: Gary Slutzky and guests at the dedication ceremony of the Camp Jened historic marker; the HBRT is 0.8 miles between Clove Road to the east and Ski Bowl Road at Camp Jened (currently Evergreen Mountain Construction) to the west; Randy Hoose at the bridge site, before construction; the Camp Jened Historic Marker.

natural trail, the plan now is to transform the Hunter Branch railbed into an ADA-compliant, cutting-edge trail, ensuring that people of all abilities can enjoy the beauty and history of the area. “Those folks accomplished so much in the ‘70s and ‘80s that resulted in overdue legislation that improved lives,” said Town of Hunter Supervisor Sean Mahoney, “we can absolutely build a trail that honors their legacy and serves everyone.”

With the design and permits already completed—thanks to a grant from Senator Michelle Hinchey—the only thing left is securing construction funding, which is approximately \$1 million. A Surface Transportation Block Grant (STBG) is being targeted to make it happen. The town and HATC are coordinating closely with the New York State Department of Transportation, Greene County, the design firm Creighton Manning, and the property owner, the NYC Department of Environmental Protection, to move this vision forward. “We know this has been on the HATC’s radar for a few years,” noted Tony Christian, project manager for Creighton Manning, “and the STBG is an ideal funding source to make the ADA trail vision happen. We have designed many ADA-compliant trails and it is very exciting for us to be part of this particular one, especially knowing the history of the camp to the groundbreaking ADA legislation.”

In order to meet the grant’s required local match for construction and enhance the trail with state-of-the-art technological

advancements, the HATC, through the Town of Hunter, is kicking off a fundraising campaign. A special committee comprised of people with disability justice experience will inform the next level innovations once the ADA-compliant trail is constructed. The HBRT will ultimately be a model inclusive rail trail and outdoor destination that welcomes everyone to experience this signature section of the Hunter Regional Trails.

To be part of this vision, please visit the HRT webpage at townofhunterny.gov/hunter-regional-trails. Tax-deduction donations can be made online and also by check to the Town of Hunter/HBRT project, PO Box 70, Tannersville, NY 12485. We invite you to share in making this vision a reality. Every gift helps and every gift matters!

Michelle Yost is the Watershed Assistance Program (WAP) Coordinator for the Greene Co. Soil and Water Conservation District. Serving the mountaintop communities of Greene County since 2002, the WAP is a resource for residents and municipalities in the NYC Watershed providing assistance with watershed issues and facilitating projects that benefit multiple watershed stakeholders. More information can be found at gscwcd.com, or by calling 518 589 6871.