

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

For over 30 years, the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP) has worked to develop a statewide trail system to serve the diverse interests of the recreating public. Along the way, the general public has come to appreciate components of the trail network as alternate ways to travel to and from home, work, school and social functions. These multi-use, multi-purpose trails have become community features valued for adding positively to the quality of life of residents and aiding in expanding transportation options.

The proposed Black Diamond Trail will expand trail and alternate transportation opportunities for residents and visitors of Tompkins County, New York. The following sections provide a background on the trail project and the process OPRHP followed to complete the plan that will guide construction, operation and maintenance of the Black Diamond Trail.

BACKGROUND

During the early 1970s, the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP) stepped up trail planning and development efforts, in part, to take advantage of the availability of a number of recently abandoned railroad corridors. In the Finger Lakes State Parks Region several potential trail projects were explored.

In Tompkins County, Finger Lakes regional staff identified, in partnership with the City of Ithaca and Town of Ithaca, a preferred corridor for an off-road trail that would link together the two existing state parks—Robert H. Treman and Buttermilk Falls—with the newly, under construction Allan H. Treman State Marine Park and the City of Ithaca’s Cass Park. The property recommended for the trail was surveyed and appraised. Lacking funds for land acquisition, progress on the trail project stalled.

Interest in the Tompkins County trail resurfaced in the early 1980s. Once again, the City and Town of Ithaca joined with the Finger Lakes Region to initiate a trail project. The three entities entered into a tripartite agreement to develop a multi-use

recreational and public works corridor. It was envisioned that the combined project would secure lands for future municipal water and sewer line upgrades while allowing the piggy-backing of a multi-purpose, off-road trail link to state, city and town recreational facilities. Several key parcels of land for the corridor between Allan H. Treman/Cass Park and Buttermilk Falls were secured by the City of Ithaca and OPRHP, with assistance from the Town of Ithaca.

Following the signing of the three-way agreement, discussions began within OPRHP to expand the scope of the trail project to include a trail link to the fourth major state park facility in the county, Taughannock Falls. The decision was made to expand the scope of the master plan for the multi-purpose off-road trail project to link the four major state park facilities in Tompkins County—Robert H. Treman, Buttermilk Falls, Allan H. Treman and Taughannock Falls.

Through the mid to late 1980s potential trail corridors for the expanded trail project were identified, goals and objectives developed, public

input solicited and natural and cultural resources sensitivity studies initiated. The lack of funding for corridor acquisition and trail construction continued to plague the progress of the project and the planning effort was once again suspended.

In the early 1990s, federal- and state-level policy and funding initiatives developed that would help move the trail project forward. In 1991, the Federal government passed landmark legislation, with funding, to support the transportation infrastructure in the country. The Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act, ISTEA, provided a source of funding for alternate transportation modes, including pedestrian and bicycle.

The Ithaca-Tompkins County Transportation Council (ITCTC), the local metropolitan transportation planning office for the City of Ithaca urban area, saw the State Parks' trail project as a valued component for the Tompkins County area's multi-modal system. The ITCTC director contacted the Finger Lakes State Parks Region to encourage the agency to apply for federal funding. The Finger Lakes Region's application for ISTEA funding to complete the trail master plan, acquire trail corridor and start construction was successful. The Region was awarded \$572,000.

In 1990, New York State governmental leaders responded to citizens' growing concerns that the State lacked a clear direction and plan to preserve and protect important natural and cultural resources. By 1992, the State's first Open Space Conservation Plan (OSP) was completed. The Finger Lakes Region's trail project, called the Cayuga Inlet Trail at the time, was identified in the plan as a priority land acquisition project. Funding to implement land acquisition projects identified in the OSP came from two sources—the 1993 Environmental Protection Fund and the 1996 Clean Water/Clean Air Bond Act.

With the three funding sources available, the Finger Lakes Region returned to work on trail planning and land acquisition. The land acquisition component was progressed under the ISTEA and Open Space Plan funding processes. Several properties in the corridor identified and studied in

earlier planning efforts were acquired from willing sellers with 1996 Bond Act funds. ISTEA funds paid for property appraisals.

The longest stretch of trail corridor was secured by OPRHP in December 1999. New York State Electric & Gas Corporation (NYSEG) initiated a gas pipeline and storage facility project in 1995 for their plant facilities located along the west shore of Seneca Lake. The gas line was slated to pass through Watkins Glen State Park, a Finger Lakes Region park facility. To mitigate the impact of the gas line through the park, NYSEG and OPRHP, working through the Public Service Commission and the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, reached an agreement to have NYSEG contribute to the Region's recreational resources through a land exchange. NYSEG agreed to transfer ownership, by easement and deed, to OPRHP the portion of abandoned Lehigh Valley Railroad line between the City of Ithaca and the Village of Trumansburg for the Tompkins County trail for the right to install the gas pipeline through Watkins Glen State Park.

After securing the former rail corridor from NYSEG, Finger Lakes regional staff discussed changing the name of the trail project to reflect the expanded length of the trail. In recognition of the trail's association with the area's railroad history, the Region settled on the name Black Diamond. "Black Diamond" was the name given to the sleek locomotive that hauled rail cars through the territory. The Lehigh Valley Railroad operated the rail line during the heyday of railroad operations. The logo developed for OPRHP's multi-use recreational trail, illustrated below, was patterned after the Lehigh Valley Railroad logo.



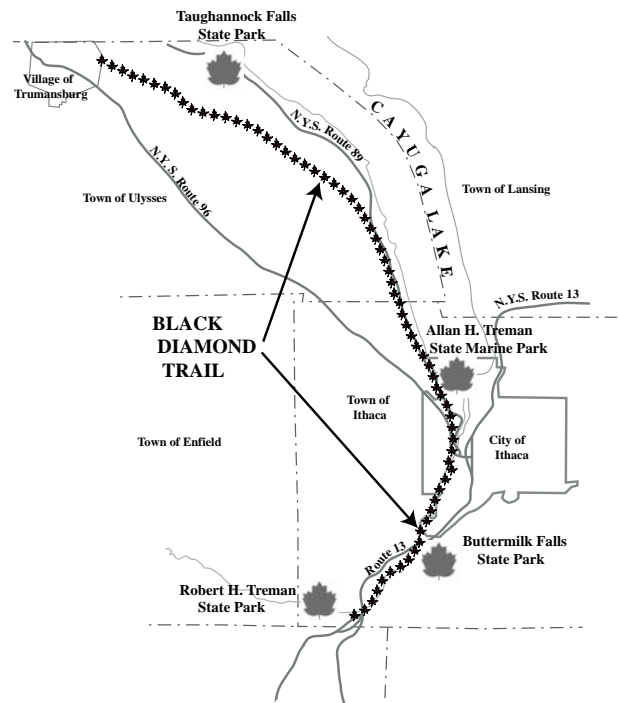
Proposed Black Diamond Trail Logo

The significant progress made through the 1990s in securing corridor for the trail encouraged OPRHP to return to the master plan efforts in 2000. The Finger Lakes Region hired consultants to prepare a draft master plan and environmental impact statement. Consultants completed additional site analysis of the generally-defined trail corridors, assessed existing infrastructure and recommended a preferred corridor and trail development and management plan. The recommendations form the basis for the proposed master plan presented in Chapter V. of this document.

Parallel to initiating the master plan process, OPRHP entered into a partnership with the National Park Service’s Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program and the Parks and Trails New York Association to develop a public outreach program for the Black Diamond Trail as it moved forward through the planning and design phases. The partnership resulted in the design and publication of a newsletter and two volunteer corridor-clearing work days. The organizations also participated in public informational meetings.

The trail proposal, covered in this plan, consists of the construction, operation and maintenance of a 15-mile multi-use, multi-purpose trail that will utilize abandoned rail corridor and stream-valley bottomland. The trail will connect the four major state park facilities—Robert H. Treman, Buttermilk Falls, Allan H. Treman and Taughannock Falls—and numerous other natural and cultural resources important to the Tompkins County community.

The trail’s main goal is to provide an off-road, accessible facility for walkers, joggers, bicyclists, and other trail users. In the urban area, the trail will be paved to accommodate skaters and skateboarders. As an all-season facility, the trail will be a resource for x-country skiers and snowshoers. While primarily planned for non-motorized uses, winter use by snowmobiles will be considered on segments where pass-through and connection trail links can be accommodated to support state-recognized snowmobile trails systems. All-train vehicle and other off-road vehicle use will not be allowed.



Proposed Route of the Black Diamond Trail

THE PLANNING PROCESS

State Park facility management and master plans provide valuable information to support OPRHP’s decisions for capital investments and land acquisitions. In general, a master plan presents information to guide the development, operation and maintenance of the facility. Master plans are prepared:

- ◆ if there is a significant change in the existing development plan, e.g. the introduction of a new recreational activity in a park where that activity was not available in the past;
- ◆ for parks or sites without a master plan or for parks or sites that have an outdated master plan;
- ◆ when more than one project is proposed for the facility that would create significant changes to recreational activities or would have significant impacts on the environment of the park; or
- ◆ for undeveloped parks and new acquisitions.

As a new acquisition and an undeveloped facility, the fourth condition applies to the Black Diamond Trail, initiating the preparation of this plan.

In addition to OPRHP's mission and policies, master plan preparation is guided by New York's State Environmental Quality Review Act (SEQR). Development, operation and maintenance alternatives are evaluated following SEQR to identify how plan implementation could impact the natural and cultural resources within the project area over the short and long term, directly or indirectly and cumulatively. SEQR guides the analysis of a project to ensure that "a suitable balance of social, economic, and environmental factors be incorporated into the planning and decision-making processes of state, regional and local agencies..." (6 NYCRR Part 617, 617.1(d))

An important component of the SEQR process is gathering public input. Over the course of several years, the proposed multi-purpose trail has been the subject of two public information and scoping sessions, one-on-one meetings with adjacent property owners and meetings with public and private interest groups. The public meetings, one held in 1989 and the other in 2001, provided valuable input to identify the issues on which to focus the environmental impact analysis. The meetings with adjacent property owners were held to identify site specific issues related to the trail's construction and operation. This information was valuable in refining design elements for the trail.

Figure 1-1 on page 5 illustrates the steps that OPRHP will follow to prepare and adopt the trail master plan.

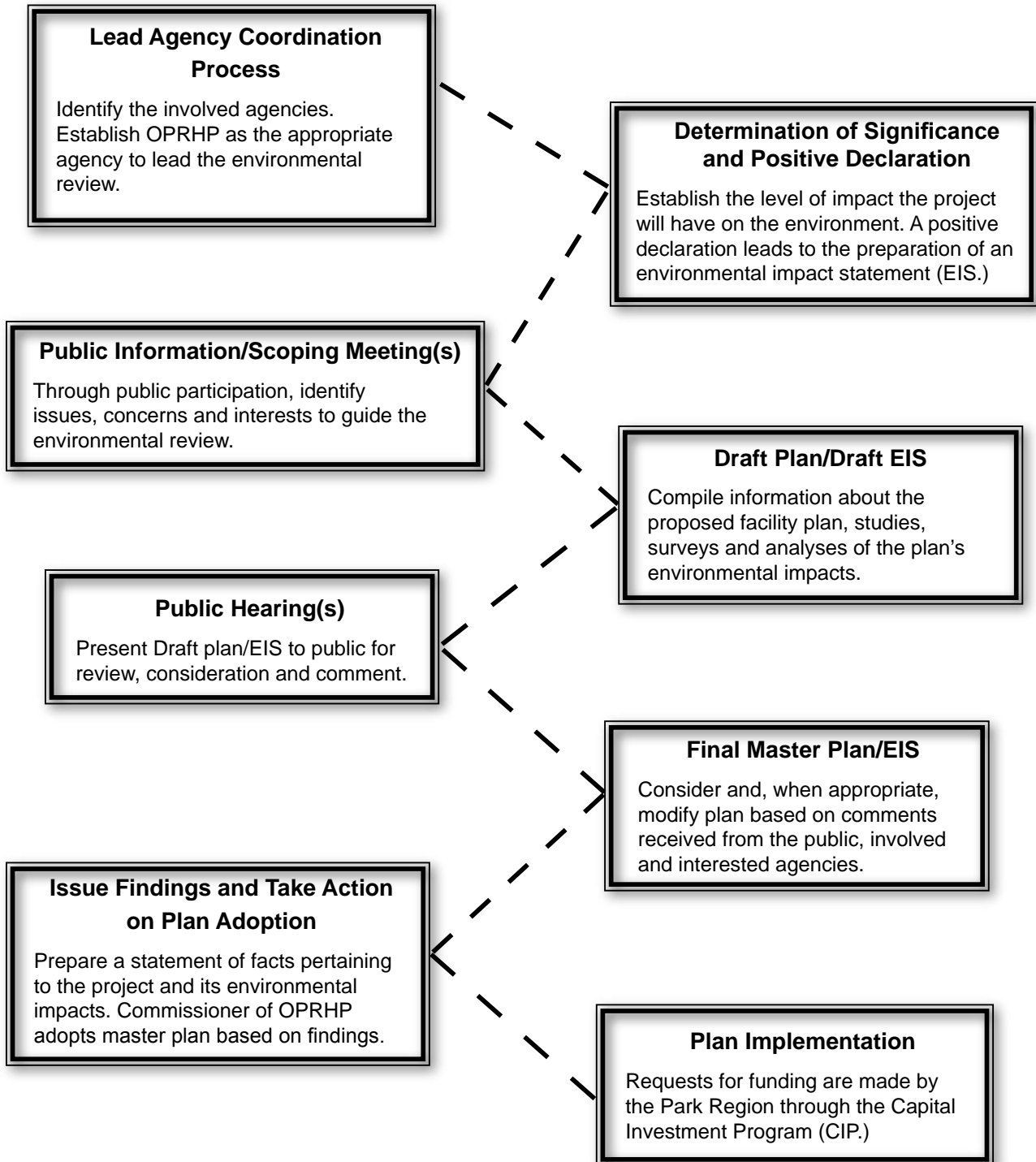
PLAN CONTENT

Combining the requirements of OPRHP's Master Plan process and SEQR, the following chapters present the information used to prepare a master plan for the Black Diamond Trail and evaluate its impact on the area's natural and cultural resources.

Chapter II presents the guiding principles followed to develop the Black Diamond Trail project from concept to concrete plan. Chapter III describes the geographic setting of the trail and existing conditions within the trail corridor that define the trail's character. Chapter IV synthesizes the Chapter III information in an analysis with regard to the resources' capacities and capabilities to support trail development. Alternatives to address potential development issues round out the chapter.

The proposed development, operation and management plan for the trail is presented in Chapter V. Chapter VI summarizes the potential environmental concerns of building and operating the trail, both from positive and negative viewpoints.

Figure I-1
New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation
Master Plan Process



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