

Caroga News Flash

Town Board Meeting Highlights

September 5, 2025

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This work session at Town Hall began at 3:00 PM and lasted 78 minutes. In addition to the Town Board and Town Clerk, 43 people attended this meeting about Wheelerville Bike Trails.

Supervisor Ralph Palcovic emphasized, *"I want to thank everybody for their input in every respect, and I want to thank everybody for attending"* (see below discussion and input).

Resolutions:

1. New Commercial Use for the Royal View Pub at 2533 State Highway 10 (5-0 vote)

- The Board voted 5-0 to approve waiving a waiting period for a liquor license application, despite lack of certificate of occupancy and lack of zoning use variance (see 9/4 meeting).

2. Wheelerville Trails October 1 Round 8 DEC Smart Growth Grant Application (5-0 vote)

- Unanimously approved Jeremy Manning's request to submit a \$125,000 grant application for the \$137,000 project supporting trail maintenance, management, and new trails in the Wheelerville Trails bike park and on Town-owned land behind the cell tower.
- This new project proposal scales down the work plan from the unfunded \$324,000 Municipal Parks and Recreation (MPR) grant submitted earlier in 2025.
- The new grant project proposal does not overlap with the \$88,600 2023 Recreational Trails Program (RTP) to build the Wheelerville-Caroga Connector Trail funded to help the local economy by getting trail users closer to downtown businesses and venues.

3. Wheelerville-Caroga Connector Trail (2-3 vote rejected the current resolution)

Supervisor Ralph Palcovic presented a resolution (seconded by Council Member DeLuca).

Resolution to Support the Construction of the Wheelerville-Caroga Connector Trail

WHEREAS, Wheelerville Trails is a very successful tourist attraction, bringing thousands of visitors annually.

WHEREAS, Wheelerville Trails currently operates at no cost to the taxpayers with grant funding and donations.

WHEREAS, the Town of Caroga was awarded a 2023 Recreational Trails Program (RTP) grant in the amount of \$88,600 for the construction of the Wheelerville-Caroga Connector Trail.

WHEREAS, Fulton County has committed over \$10,000 in local match for the Connector Trail project.

WHEREAS, resolution 2024-029 was approved to control the growth of the Wheelerville Bicycle Trail System.

WHEREAS, the growth aspects of the trail system have stalled, because of golf course access disagreements.

WHEREAS, original deed documents clearly state both golf and recreation are on the subject property.

WHEREAS, the regional forester from the State of New York Department of Environmental Conservation toured the area and made suggestions as to where the future path along the golf course may run.

WHEREAS, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation Regional Director Joe Zalewski supports expansion of the trail system onto State lands with an UMP amendment.

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WHEREAS, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation Regional Director Joe Zalewski has made reference to several bike trails that happily coexist around golf courses.

WHEREAS, the Town has submitted a formal request to DEC supporting the amendment to the Shaker Mountain Wild Forest UMP in order to place a ±300-yard trail into the State Forest Preserve along hole 3 of the Nick Stoner Municipal Golf Course, along with additional trails in the Forest Preserve.

WHEREAS, New York State funding sources have provided the Town of Caroga with hundreds of thousands of dollars supporting continued growth and maintenance of the existing trail system which are contingent on the construction of the connector trail.

WHEREAS, recent [\$324,000] grant funding was rejected due to the lack of progress on the RTP grant, and existing approved grant funding could be withdrawn, thus resulting in significant budgetary impacts and costs to the taxpayers.

WHEREAS, the Mohawk Valley Regional Economic Development Council has named the connector trail a priority project for tourism growth in the Mohawk Valley.

BE IT THEREFORE RESOLVED, that the Town of Caroga Town Board supports the construction of the Caroga-Wheelerville Connector Trail, and in addition supports the construction of a narrow 3-foot-wide trail temporary path that could be used while the amendment of the Shaker Mountain Wild Forest UMP proceeds. This trail would allow for recreational trail users to make their way along the golf course, and when the UMP is completed, the Town would then have the option to relocate the trail on the Forest Preserve, if it is still preferred.

* This clause was removed after Council Member Rick Sturgess alleged,

"I just want to note that the part 'grant funding was rejected' has no factual proof that is the case, even though we were told that, but we do not have any documentation stating that we have lost the previous grant because this one is not started, so we need to take out that section."

In fact, Mr. Sturgess has been informed repeatedly and at length about grant proposal review criteria, and New York State's written 2025 CFA Resources plainly detail "Grant Selection Criteria" including:

"Readiness" & "Feasibility" ("Applicant has proven experience in projects of similar scale and/or scope.") and "Past Performance" ("How timely an applicant completed previous projects, including its reporting requirements.") (see <https://regionallcouncils.ny.gov>).

In addition, Mr. Manning attested in the meeting to direct oral feedback from State personnel that untimely performance on the 2023 RTP grant contract adversely impacted the 2025 MPR grant review scores.

In other words, the Town's lack of progress on the 2023 Wheelerville-Caroga Connector Trail resulted in lower scores and denial of the \$324,000 2025 Municipal Parks and Recreation (MPR) grant. In addition, the Town Board's delays with approving a construction start date now further risk the Town of Caroga's:

- (1) RTP contract default and \$88,600 grant non-reimbursement and
- (2) adverse review scores for the Town's future state grant applications.

Mr. Sturgess' denials of facts increase public financial risks. Disagreements about the Wheelerville-Caroga Connector Trail have resulted in RTP contractual delays, and insufficient progress on the RTP grant contributed directly to not getting the \$324,000 MPR grant funding. Now, the Town faces ongoing risks that the \$88,600 existing approved RTP grant funds could be revoked, leading to significant budgetary impacts and increased costs for taxpayers. Plus, if current controversies cannot be resolved and grant momentum is lost, Caroga will be left with major funding gaps for key local capital projects. Questions remain about a remedy, given Mr. Sturgess' insistence, *"I don't want to get in the way."*

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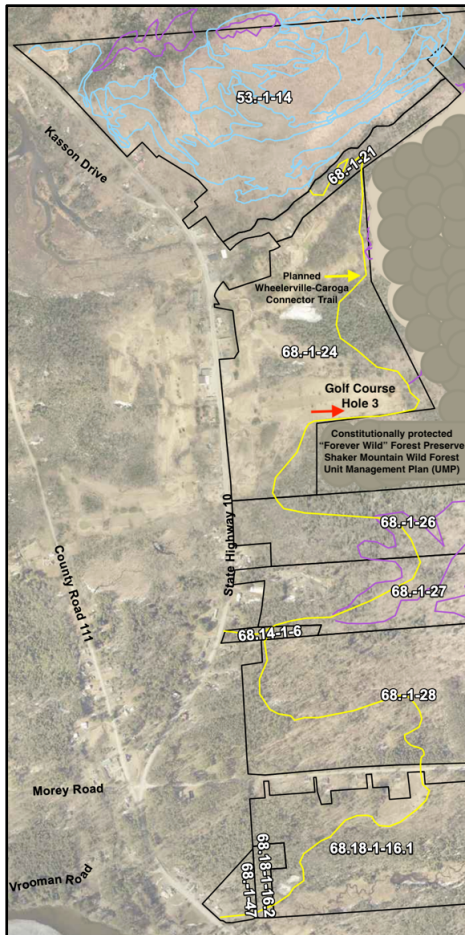
Wheelerville-Caroga Connector Trail: September 5, 2025 Work Session

What?

The Wheelerville-Caroga Connector Trail is a 3-mile community recreation path connecting Wheelerville to the downtown business district. This beginner-level trail serves as a corridor for future trail expansions. Supported at all levels of New York State government, this is a Priority Project for the Mohawk Valley Regional Economic Development Council (MVREDC). In 2023, the New York State Recreational Trail Program (RTP) and the Town of Caroga contracted to build the trail with \$88,600 in state funding, \$10,000 from the county, and \$10,000 in local matching funds. Further funding is connected to the project completion.

Where?

The planned trail runs through both Town and private lands, as shown in the adopted map to the left. The RTP grant covers only the Town section. However, trail building has stalled, due to golf access disagreements. To resolve the controversy, the Town Supervisor and Trail Manager have worked with the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) and other stakeholders to amend the Shaker Mountain Wild Forest Unit Management Plan (UMP) to relocate the trail that runs near hole 3 on the golf course. However, the timeline for this amendment is beyond the timeline for completing the grant contract. So, DEC has recommended starting with a Phase 1 Solution on Town land to fulfill grant requirements and maintain momentum.



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The meeting featured valuable input from regional and local stakeholders.

Scott Henze, Director of Fulton County Planning and Executive Director of the Industrial Development Agency, expressed strong support to move promptly to deliver the grant-funded Wheelerville-Caroga Connector Trail.

- The plan follows the guiding tourism priorities featured in the current *Town of Caroga Comprehensive Plan*, including the specific recommendation on pages 66 and 78 to “develop...new recreational facilities...[and] recreational trails on Town-owned properties surrounding the Nick Stoner Golf Course.”
- Fulton County Business Visitors Bureau and Tourism Program—funded through the Bed Tax—studied what is working and invested for growth (e.g., \$40,000 to Wheelerville Trails, \$27,300 to Caroga Arts, and also to the Nick Stoner Golf Course and Kane Mountain Centennials). These programs are thriving, and the county is investing to keep it going.
- Further, he also presented the *Fulton County Tourism August 2025 Report* that documented Fulton County’s 2024 \$83.8 million in visitor spending, marking the county’s 4.5% annual growth from 2023. The report featured activities and participation from the Wheelerville Trails 4th Annual MTB Festival August 23 and 24, 2025. This was “another jam-packed session with participants from throughout New York, the northeast, and as far as California.” In marketing studies, Fulton County digital advertising showed promising responses to tourism ads, with the highest click rate specifically for Wheelerville Trails.

In short, plans and studies show that for local residents and visitors alike, “*People want trails.*”

Ron Peters, President and CEO of Fulton County Center for Regional Growth (CRG), emphasized that Caroga is a gem and gave 100% support. Wheelerville Trails is growing from a local to regional to national attraction. Completing the Wheelerville-Caroga Connector trail now is a project with nothing to lose and everything to gain. It can work together with golf and everyone involved. The CRG has a key role in getting Mohawk Valley Regional Economic Development Council (REDC) grants from the state, and Wheelerville Trails is a MVREDC Priority Project. He urged the Town Board to keep building trails. “*We’re all for it.*”

Sean Rogers, Town of Blecker Civil Engineer, emphasized his family’s user perspective. He’s all in, and he called the Board’s attention to the good sense of advancing this low-environmental impact project with high community benefits. His son is an internationally-ranked athlete who competes around the world. He emphasized, “*Caroga is where he wants to train.*” Technically, these trails are world class, and they draw high-level enthusiasts. At the same time, they are great for every level, including entry level riders and the whole family.

Honorable Judge Mike Smrtic described his connections to Wheelerville Trails and the Peck Hill group, noting the excellent potential for expansion into a 20 to 30 mile destination regionally. In addition, his brother is a Caroga golfer, and he acknowledged the local controversies among riders and golfers, emphasizing, “*There’s got to be a way to make it work and get things done. It would be a shame where you have a chance to expand and you don’t build on what you have. If you stand still, you’ll lose. I support growth. As a Board, please look out for the greater community as a whole—not just individual points of view. You have a chance to build something really special. Caroga is a great place. Build on it. Find a way to come together and go forward.*”

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Bill Fielding, long-time Caroga resident, community leader, and business owner, emphasized, “The proof is in the pudding.” He described cars with bikes on the back at his store and all over town. With the bike festival, even more. That’s all new. We see it working. Let’s support it. The bike trails help bring in grants plus sales tax. People come—they buy ice cream, sandwiches, and more—and then 4% comes back to the County and the Town. We want it. Personally, it’s Bill’s 80th birthday today, and he came with his kids and grandkids. He has 4 children and 7 grandchildren. Everyone enjoys biking—everyone from age 8 to 54 to 80. We all support the bike trails for ourselves and for our larger community.

Steve Smith, third-generation Caroga resident and LL Bean CEO, sent a 1½ page letter of support to enter into the record. Supervisor Palcovic thanked him and expressed gratitude about what a big supporter he is for our Town and community.

Council Member Jack Glenn noted, *“I appreciate the input, but we’ve missed the big picture. I hear the rush, but where’s the 5-to-10-year long-term plan? I don’t have it. There are alternative ways instead of interfering with golf.”* [Response: He received & voted to approve that long-term trail plan.] *“How about the other side of Irving Pond?”* [The steep, rocky, wet terrain is not viable.]

Council Member Barb Deluca said, *“Recently, I went to the trails and walked. They’re beautiful. I understand why people come here. We have so much land that was donated to the Town. This project is exactly what we need to do. Starting with the first phase of a multi-phase approach is a great idea. I play golf, and I ride a bike. I do both. I support the plan to go forward.”*

Council Member Rick Sturgess added, *“I don’t think anyone is against the bike trails. It’s been yes 95% and no 5% of the time about coming through the golf course. I took another ride today to explore another route, and we found it’s more invasive than this. So, how about a plan to cross Irving Pond Creek? We need to get across the water!”* [Response: The bridge is in the long-term plan, and implementation is underway, but the bridge is not part of the RTP grant. After the connector trail is approved and underway, the bridge can proceed. It is just paperwork.] *“I don’t see why it can’t go along Route 10!”* [Response: DOT has deemed that unsafe. We’re not putting kids at risk on the highway. Plus, expanding the shoulder is a half-million-dollar project.]

Council Member Matt Cooper insisted, *“We didn’t hold up the grant. We’ll figure it out. I’m a planner. We need primary, contingency, and alternate plans that are separate and distinct... We’ve looked at other options, and we’ve all come back to a phased build, until we get approval to use state land.”* [Response: Final work plan approval was due in 2023, and Phase 1 on Town-owned land is required now for the grant contract. Phase 2 is a separate longer-term project.]

Supervisor Ralph Palcovic described collaborations and remedies to advance the project. *“I sat in a round table with New York State officials from DOS, DEC, and APA. I met and talked with Joe Zalewski, the DEC Region 5 Director, and he supports the bike path. It’s what they want to see for the future of the North Country. The Shaker Mountain Wild Forest UMP addresses bike trails, but not these specific trails. We’ve walked and talked. It will happen eventually, but we’re not there yet. We’re concerned about losing the grant that supports the mission and the future. If you fail on one grant, you won’t get the next one. If we cannot complete this mission, there’s a domino effect. We want to get grants. If we default, it puts future projects in jeopardy.”*

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Supervisor Palcovic continued, *"If we cannot get this approved now, then the future would be bleak. I don't want to fail on the grant contract. We have a workable plan to run the trail or path along hole 3 and complete that, and then work on phase 2 in parallel."*

Council Member Matt Cooper interjected (without seeing risks), *"I don't support that right now."*

Supervisor Palcovic responded, *"We need to follow the procedure. There's a legal process. New York State is cautious, and they need to follow the verbatim procedures to avoid legal actions... So, we're moving through the process. It may take 6 months or several years. Other towns are ahead of us. Regionally, other bike trails harmonize on Town land. We can too."*

An audience member interjected, *"It's dangerous! Balls go there! We can't do it!"*

Local resident Rosemary Lee noted, *"We're lacking trust,"* and encouraged trust building to see the win-win situations in order to come together to find solutions for the whole community.

Paul Kidder, greenskeeper, said without evidence, *"A temporary trail turns out permanent! Plus, sales tax is more from golf than bikes!"*

Steven Stedman, Golf Superintendent, *"If you're not a golfer, you don't see it."* He continued to proudly confirm his extensive logging and trail-building obstructions. *"We've taken out at least 150 big trees in the past couple years, and we'll keep doing it! We've tried to cut all the way to the property line, and we'll keep cutting all the way into the bike trail. We're not just concerned about hole 3, we're concerned about the whole thing. We've said, 'No.' We've looked at other options. There's no way. It's limiting future expansion! I won't make it limited! I'll just cut more trees! I'll just do it!"* [Note: Environmental reviews for the trails have been required and done to review and protect wetlands and endangered species, and that Town and State woodland area is a northern long-eared bat habitat with a lot of wetlands. The Town staff have boldly ignored adverse impacts to the environment, trails, grants, economic development, and other issues.]

Jerry Groom added, *"Back in 2020, we had plans to expand along holes 6, 7, 8. The course has improved since then. Revenue and conditions have improved. This trail will impede holes 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8, because those plans to expand the course could come to light one day."* [Note: The long-term planning underway with the Phase 2 woodland trails fully addresses these concerns, but that is a separate project with a different long-term timeline. For now, Phase 1 trail approval on Town-owned land is past due to avoid default on the 2023 Recreational Trail Program (RTP) grant and to remain in good standing with State grant agencies to maintain funding momentum for all projects by the Town, including grants to meet funding gaps for the Golf Clubhouse.]

Judge Mike Smrtic responded, *"We need reasonable minds. There's a compromise here. There's land in the rough. That bike path is not going to impair golf games here. There are ways to work around bikes—like with screens or shrubs. It's 150 yards for a bike path to benefit the whole town."*

Supervisor Palcovic thanked everyone and presented the resolution for a vote (see page 1).

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A brief discussion continued among the Town Board members after the 2-3 vote to DISAPPROVE the required and overdue RTP grant contract's final work plan for delivering the Wheelerville-Caroga Connector Trail on Town-owned land.

Council Member Rick Sturgess ignored trail contract requirements and direct feedback during the current discussion and spoke about modifying the resolution, insisting, *"We have time! You won't even begin construction yet. What if you work on crossing the creek and at the ends?"*

Council Member Matt Cooper also ignored trail contract requirements and discussion, stating *"I support building both ends, but not hole 3."*

Supervisor Palcovic added, *"If you default on this grant, your odds for any grant application going forward are close to the trash can."*

Council Member Jack Glenn insisted, *"We're overstating that. We need an alternate plan."*

Council Member Barb Deluca replied, *"Respectfully, I disagree. We have the alternate plan in the works as a long-term solution. We can work together on this now."*

Council Member Sturgess proposed editing the resolution and voting again.

Supervisor Palcovic said that any changes to a resolution need to be planned and considered.

The Town Board's next meeting is Wednesday, September 10, 2025.