

BARBARA V. SPRAKER TOURISM PARTNER AWARD—Town of Caroga's Wheelerville Mountain Biking Trails

When the Fulton Montgomery Regional Chamber of Commerce named The Wheelerville Mountain Biking Trails as the recipient of its Barbara V. Spraker Tourism Partner Award, it recognized more than a fast-growing recreation asset. It honored a bold vision that has helped reposition the Town of Caroga as an emerging four-season destination in the southern Adirondack Park.

At the center of that transformation is Jeremy Manning. Elected to the Caroga Town Board in 2016, Manning saw opportunity in a largely underutilized parcel of town-owned land. Purchased in 1962 with New York State funds and subject to recreational restrictions, the property had historically been used for hunting and little else. But Manning had watched other small towns across the country leverage outdoor recreation to drive economic growth. Why not Caroga?

A 2017 Smart Growth Grant funded a feasibility study of the parcel. Two years later, another Smart Growth award supported the first phase of construction. The New York State Department of Environmental Conservation became a key supporter. In 2020, the project broke ground. Manning and his team hired experienced trail builders with national credentials—craftsmen who had shaped marquee systems in places like Bentonville, Arkansas and Old Forge. Lead builder Eli Glessman brought design inspiration from Arkansas' progressive trail networks, translating that flow-focused style to Caroga's steeper terrain. "We knew we had to build something unique and remarkable," Manning says, "that trails riders would want to experience again and again."

With limited acreage, the strategy was intentional. The first six trails leaned into advanced and expert-level downhill riding—terrain that would capture attention on social media and within the tight-knit mountain biking community. The gamble paid off almost immediately. While organizers initially hoped to draw riders from Albany and Saratoga, opening weekend brought visitors from Rochester, Syracuse, Vermont—and beyond.

Today, the Wheelerville Mountain Biking Trails encompass more than nine miles of trail, with five additional trails added in its second phase. Riders routinely drive two to three hours to experience the system. On one May opening weekend, a late-night Instagram post was followed by a group of 12 riders arriving from Maine by morning. Visitors from Toronto, Quebec, Colorado and Virginia have followed GPS pins to Caroga, often discovering the community for the first time after a three- or four-hour ride.

That discovery is part of the point.

"The trails engage directly with the Southern Adirondack landscape," Manning explains. "That's why people come." Once in Caroga, riders explore the lakes, golf course, kayaking routes and local businesses. Partnerships with the Chamber, Fulton County Tourism and local business owners have amplified that effect. Restaurants and shops such as Lakeview and Vrooman's see steady post-ride traffic. Cross-promotion has become standard practice.

The annual Wheelerville Mountain Bike Festival in August—launched with strong backing from county tourism leaders—has grown each year. This summer's event, taking place August 21 through 23, will feature high-profile competitions, including jump exhibitions supported by Red Bull, downhill racing, and youth programming backed by L.L.Bean.

What began as a grassroots gathering is now a signature regional event.

Collaboration extends beyond county lines. Wheelerville participates in the Bike Borderlands Initiative, organized through the Northern Forest Center, linking 18 trail networks across New York, Vermont, New Hampshire, Maine and Quebec. The shared marketing effort—powered largely by social media and YouTube content reaching more than 150,000 followers—encourages riders to circulate among destinations, boosting small-town economies throughout the Northeast.

Rider feedback has continually shaped the Wheelerville Trails' evolution. Biennial surveys ask not only about trail preferences but also about restaurants, lodging and overall community experience. While the initial build emphasized advanced downhill features, future phases will broaden the appeal.

A federally funded connector trail will soon link Wheelerville to Caroga Lake's commercial center, creating a new trailhead near local businesses. Another 100 acres south of the Nick Stoner Municipal Golf Course are slated for development, with gentler terrain designed for beginners and intermediates.

Adaptive mountain biking is also a priority. Plans include widening select trails and creating ride-grounds for technical features, making the system more accessible to riders using hand-powered adaptive bikes or recovering from injuries. E-mountain biking—once approached cautiously—has become an important component, enabling more visitors to tackle the hills and extend their stays.

Winter is no off-season. Volunteers and partners groom the trails for cross-country skiing, snowshoeing and fat biking, reinforcing the Wheelerville Trails' identity as a true four-season asset. Community volunteer days routinely draw dozens of participants for spring cleanup and maintenance.

Local reaction has evolved alongside the trails. Early skepticism centered on cost and impact. Manning notes that grants and private fundraising—including \$30,000 raised by a group in memory of a friend—have minimized taxpayer burden. As visitation numbers climb and outside recognition followed, support has grown. Awards like the Chamber's Tourism Partner Honor help validate the project's value.

Looking ahead, Manning is working to establish a Wheelerville Trails 501(c)(3) nonprofit to ensure long-term sustainability beyond any one individual's leadership. Expansion plans include greater mileage, stronger connections to nearby trail systems such as Peck Hill, and deeper integration into the fabric of Caroga—bike racks at bars, coordinated events, and continued collaboration with complementary attractions like the rodeo, the lakes and concerts and events by the Caroga Arts Collective.

For Manning, the Tourism Partner Award represents a milestone for the entire town. "In just a few short years, the Wheelerville Trails have helped Caroga become a recreational leader," he says. "This is a Caroga victory."

In a region where many communities are searching for sustainable economic drivers, the Wheelerville Mountain Bike Trails demonstrate what strategic vision, strong partnerships and world-class design can achieve. By tapping into the pulse of modern eco-tourism while staying rooted in local identity, Caroga Lake has built more than trails—it has built momentum.



Jeremy Manning & son

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