Ski event coordinators dream of conditions like these. Fresh snow, sunshine and the temperature hovering around 20 degrees. Saturday, January 29, 2011 had all the makings of a perfect day. Yet, as the Chili Ski Tasting event got under way at the Paul Smiths VIC, everyone was a little uneasy.

It was the same building, but with a new owner. Paul Smith’s College officials didn’t know what to expect, and, as they searched for light switches and electrical outlets in their newest building, they had one big question on their minds: Would people come and enjoy themselves like they had for the past decade of ski festivals when the Adirondack Park Agency (APA) owned the building?

By early afternoon, their question had been answered, and they breathed a collective sigh of relief as dozens of families did indeed come and enjoy themselves, eating chili and cake made by open to the public—was deemed a success.

While this was the first event since Paul Smith's College took over the 24,500-square-foot building from the APA on Jan. 1, the transformation of a Visitor Interpretive Center to the college’s version of the VIC is still in its formative stages. Officials at the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry (ESF), too, are still trying to define the role of their new Adirondack Interpretive Center (AIC) in Newcomb, formerly known as the Newcomb VIC, after taking over the 6,000-square-foot building on July 1, 2010 and the public programming on January 1.

After all, it was only a year ago, in January 2010, when then Governor
David Paterson announced in his budget address that the APA would be closing the state-owned VICs in Paul Smiths and Newcomb to save over $500,000 annually and help New York close a multi-billion-dollar budget gap. And, as 2010 progressed and the VIC Transition Steering Committee was formulating ideas to keep the two centers open to the public, in one form or another, both colleges had less than a year to come up with solid plans that would fund the buildings’ operations.

For many, January 29 was an emotional day at the Chili Ski Tasting event in Paul Smiths. Event organizers from the college and the VIC friends group, the Adirondack Park Institute, were hoping for a warm public reception. The longtime volunteers who had once assisted APA staff with environmental education programs and special events were now working with a new owner they didn’t know very well. Some former VIC staff and current APA staff were enjoying the festivities, witnessing history in the making while reminiscing about the many memories they had made there. And the public was simply curious.

Susan Sweeney, Paul Smith’s College director of human resources, helped organize the January 29 event and was taking photographs during the day. She serves on the VIC Transition Steering Committee and has made many memories herself at the VIC.

“There is so much nostalgia here,” Sweeney said in an interview the day before the event. “We want to take what is here, modify it and improve it.”

In 2011, Paul Smith’s College began transforming the VIC from an interpretive center into a public building with exhibits, programs and new tenants, including the Adirondack Center for Writing. In addition to environmental education, there will be an emphasis on outdoor recreation and the arts.

And new trail events will be held on the VIC property, which was initially a 2,885-acre preserve owned by the college and leased by the APA. A new lease agreement in 2009 reduced the preserve to about 1,400 acres. The college owns more than 14,000 acres.

The chili, hot drinks and cake made for a party-type atmosphere on January 29. It showed that the building was slowly coming back to life again after sitting empty, save for a few maintenance workers, for 28 days. APA staff had closed the building to the public at the end of the day on Saturday, October 9, 2010—Columbus Day weekend—so they could pack up and move out before literally giving it to Paul Smith’s College on January 1. The trails remained open throughout the transition.

In Newcomb, the two-phase transition began in June 2010 and finished six months later. Originally, the Paul Smiths and Newcomb buildings were expected to be handed over to new owners on January 1, 2011, with the APA staff given that long to keep their jobs; however, since the SUNY-ESF fiscal year begins on July 1, it was decided to give the building to the college—“turnkey” style—at that time. Therefore, June 30 was the last day the APA owned the Newcomb VIC. APA staff continued to offer public programming there until December 30, the last day of APA employment for most of them. SUNY-ESF took over programming on January 1 at the newly named Adirondack Interpretive Center, which sits on 236 acres in the college-managed Huntington Wildlife Forest.

Like his colleagues at Paul Smith’s College, Paul Hai, program coordinator at SUNY-ESF’s AIC and nearby Adirondack Ecological Center, is also trying to reassure the public that the Newcomb building is still open. And while the mission will change, with interpretation of the Adirondack Park’s natural and cultural resources as a focus rather than visitor services, the college has made it clear that there are many years of public education left at the Newcomb facility.

“We are here for the long haul,” said Hai, who has worked closely with VIC staff on programs since moving to Newcomb in 2008. “The APA made a tough choice ... We’re really hoping we can lessen that blow by keeping this center open.”

In all, the APA cut eight full-time staff positions at the VICs in December, four at each facility. Two employees from the Paul Smiths building were able to transfer to APA headquarters in Ray Brook.

Star Lake naturalist Peter O’Shea has known many of the APA employees since he began leading trail walks at the Paul Smiths VIC when it opened in 1989 and the Newcomb VIC when it opened in 1990. He was mingling with some of his friends at the Chili Ski Tasting event after taking a snowshoe trip on the Boreal Life Trail. He saw tracks of a river otter, fisher, red fox, two coyotes, half a dozen white-tailed deer, and a snowshoe hare. A former volunteer, he was also one of the curious visitors.

“It’s a wonderful day,” O’Shea said, looking around at the lobby full of people. “They (Paul Smith’s College) have made a wonderful start.”

Although the Paul Smiths VIC and Newcomb AIC are still open to the public, neither facility will continue their former role as official New York state visitor centers, welcoming the traveling public to the 6-million-acre Adirondack Park. Annual visitation has been between 20,000 and 30,000 at the Newcomb center and between 60,000 and 75,000 at the Paul Smiths center.

“The Adirondack Park is now without an official visitor center,” O’Shea
said. "So there is something that is missing and the state will have to rectify."

**Name, Mission Change at Paul Smith's VIC**

May 24, 1989 was such an important date that Governor Mario Cuomo opened the Adirondack Park Agency's first Visitor Interpretive Center (VIC) stone—underneath the "Tree of Peace," a white pine tree, planted by Mohawk Chief Jake Swamp on opening day.

Having the governor in town was a big deal, and Paul Smith's resident Jack Burke has fond memories of that day. "I remember shaking his hand," Burke said with a smile.

Burke is now the vice president of business and finance for Paul Smith's of snow-covered Heron Marsh and St. Regis Mountain at his back, Burke and company spoke about the history of the VIC and the college's plans for re-inventing the center.

Ultimately, the college's goal is to expand events, programs, exhibits and the trail system, make considerable improvements, and find creative ways to pay for it all.

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Paul Smith's College Director of Communications Ken Aaron poses in front of the new sign at the Paul Smith's College VIC, located 1 mile north of the college on State Route 30. The college has dropped "Visitor Interpretive Center" from the name, and the facility is now officially called the "VIC."

himself, with a ribbon-cutting ceremony and a speech surrounded by hundreds of onlookers and swarms of blackflies.

After a ride from Paul Smith's College on a restored 19th century stagecoach with college President David Chamberlain, the governor sealed a 100-year "environmental time capsule," filled with artifacts from North Country schoolchildren. The mystery objects are still there—encased in concrete and College, which has always had a role in the VIC property, leasing the land to the Agency and using the trails and building for student projects. In May 2011, Burke will retire and oversee the trail system, becoming what his friends jokingly call the "trail czar." On Jan. 28, he met with the college's director of communications, Ken Aaron, and director of human resources, Susan Sweeney, in the building's Great Room. With a view

**Vision for the Paul Smith's College VIC**

"We want this to be a place where people come over and over again," said Sweeney, who is a member of the VIC Transition Steering Committee.

Steering Committee members have adopted four guiding principles to help them plan public and private usage of the Paul Smiths VIC: 1.) linkage to academic mission; 2.) public access; 3.) collaboration with arts and cultural
organizations; and 4.) entrepreneurial opportunities.

Members of the VIC Transition Steering Committee have adopted four guiding principles to help them plan public and private usage of the Paul Smiths VIC:

1. Academic mission. The college is encouraging faculty to consider the VIC building and property when planning their lessons for coming semesters. Students have traditionally spent class time at the VIC since 1989, mostly in outdoor programs such as forestry and recreation. In the future, though, culinary arts students will practice their craft in the new VIC kitchen, which is planned to be built in the former office of the APA’s artist/designer. This facility will be useful during special events. Hospitality students will get hands-on experience welcoming the public to the VIC by training volunteers at the front desk. And the Draft Horse Club will help maintain the trail system a couple times a year, especially in the spring by removing blown-down trees from winter storms.

2. Public access. The hiking trails have remained open for cross-country skiing and snowshoeing since the college re-acquired the property on Jan. 1, and the 24,500-square-foot building is expected to be open to the public sometime in the spring. College officials want to have exhibits, programs and events, such as the APA did for almost 22 years. The VIC friends’ group—the Adirondack Park Institute—will continue to keep its office at the VIC and fund, organize and implement public programming, such as the Butterfly House, which opened in 1993. Public information will be available for visitors, as will the rest rooms and public spaces. And the college plans to install free Wi-Fi for the public.

3. Arts collaboration. The Adirondack Center for Writing will move from the college’s administration building to the VIC this year and will be able to present programs in the theater. Partnerships with other arts and cultural groups will be fostered to offer programs and exhibits.

4. Entrepreneurial opportunities. The college will work with small business owners who want to either rent space at the VIC or offer programs there. For example, MAC’s Canoe Livery owner Brian McDonell will be offering outdoor recreation activities for his customers on the VIC property.

Hai and his crew will expand the interpretive mission beyond the natural resources of the Adirondack Park to include programs that will explore science, recreation, natural history and culture.

When making plans, “We are always coming back to our four guiding principles,” Sweeney said. “It keeps us focused.”

Steering Committee members see the college’s takeover of the VIC as an opportunity to do something bigger and better than the APA did. Throughout the APA’s ownership of the VIC, many thought there was room for improvement.

“It never met its potential under state operation,” said Paul Smith’s College President John Mills, sitting in the Great Room during the Jan. 29 Chili Ski Tasting event. “Our goal is to reach that potential.”

Challenges for the Paul Smith’s College VIC

Mills and his staff members are excited about running the VIC and keeping it open to the public. At the same time, they are being honest about the challenges they face.

“Our number 1 challenge is paying for it,” Mills said. “They (the public) don’t realize how much it costs just to keep the lights on.”

Mills said he wasn’t sure how much money it will take to operate the VIC, adding that there are more costs associated with the VIC acquisition than most people realize. The college, for example, has already hired one full-time VIC maintenance person and purchased a new four-wheeler to maintain the trails, and it will spend about $20,000 to fix the roof.

To help the college monitor the financial health of the building, the VIC will be set up as a free-standing auxiliary enterprise. In order for the college to reach the building’s potential, it will take a business model that requires a mix of rental income, revenue from programs and events, and a lot of community support. There have already been requests for weddings and parties at the VIC, and Burke is planning some trail-running competitions, such as the Jenkins Mountain Scramble and Half Marathon in June.

College officials want to reassure people that they are doing their best to re-open the VIC building as soon as possible. But they don’t want to make mistakes by rushing their plans.

“Our aim is to make good, thoughtful decisions up front,” Sweeney said. “Just give us a little time.”

Name, Mission Changed at Newcomb VIC

More than 20 people crowded the R.W. Sage Jr. Memorial Trail sign on Sept. 24, 2006. Rays of sunshine penetrated the rustling fall foliage, and the wind howled through the forest while Adirondack Ecological Center (AEC) Director William Porter and Adirondack Park Agency (APA) Chairman Ross Whaley welcomed the public to the newest trail at the APA Visitor Interpretive Center (VIC).

This was a shining example of the close bond between the APA and the State University of New York (SUNY) College of Environmental Science and Forestry (ESF).
Mary Tisi works at the front desk of the Adirondack Interpretive Center in Newcomb, now operated by the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry.

The VIC was built on 236 acres in the Huntington Wildlife Forest, managed by the college, which also owns and operates the AEC less than 2 miles away. Whaley is a past president of SUNY-ESF, based in Syracuse. And the man they were honoring on Sept. 24, 2006—Richard “Dick” Sage—was the AEC’s associate director until his death in August 2002. He was the person who picked the location for the APA’s Newcomb VIC in 1985.

But has Dick Sage really left the building?

As Porter was finishing his comments at the 2006 ribbon-cutting ceremony, a small tree crashed to the ground in front of him. As they removed the tree, many nervously commented that Dick Sage was watching over them that day—the heart and soul of the Adirondack Ecological Center making his presence known at the interpretive center he helped build. The VIC opened in October 1990.

**Vision for the AIC**

The APA transferred the building to SUNY-ESF on July 1, 2010 and handed over programming on Jan. 1, 2011. With the transition now complete, it’s the job of AEC Program Coordinator Paul Hai to lead the interpretive center through its new life as an ESF facility. That means a new mission and a new name.

What was once the APA Visitor Interpretive Center at Newcomb—with a focus on environmental education and visitor-information services—is now the SUNY-ESF Adirondack Interpretive Center (AIC), featuring a 6,000-square-foot main building and a 2,500-square-foot classroom/garage.

“This center is not just for visitors, it’s for everybody, including residents of the Adirondack Park,” Hai said, defending the name change. Hai wanted the name communicate new ownership of the facility, and he wanted people to know that ESF is still at the interpretive center and committed to serving the public with educational programs.

Under the auspices of the Northern Forest Institute—managed by SUNY-ESF and based at the Huntington Wildlife Forest—the AIC will focus less on visitor-information services and more on interpretation. Moreover, Hai and his crew will expand the interpretive mission beyond the natural resources of the Adirondack Park to include programs that will explore science, recreation, natural history and culture.

“We are able to consider a new suite of programs that the APA couldn’t do,” Hai said. “We have an opportunity to reach beyond nature ... There are many complex issues in the Adirondack Park,
and we want to offer programs to address that complexity.

Through school field trips, workshops, conferences, programs and special events, the AIC will continue to offer public programming and serve upwards of 30,000 people a year. Yet, the flavor of the programs will be more diversified. Regular programs such as bird walks, packbasket workshops and the summer Huntington Lecture Series will also be teamed with new programs such as a professional development series, gardening series, fly fishing workshops, a “Working Forests Working for You” series, a fall series on animal species that are harvested during hunting season, and a trapping program.

The Adirondack Park Institute—the friends group of the two VICs since 1989—will continue to offer programs there as well.

In addition, the 3.6-mile trail system has remained open throughout the transition from the APA to SUNY-ESF. The hiking trails are open for snowshoeing and cross-country skiing in the winter. People can borrow the AIC’s snowshoes for free. And there is a connector trail from the Sage Trail to the Great Camp Santanoni trail.

The ownership transition was fairly seamless. Unlike the transfer of the APAs Paul Smiths VIC to Paul Smiths’s College, a private not-for-profit institution, the Newcomb VIC was transferred from state agency to state college. There was no need to de-accession state-owned property and move out like the APA was required to do in Paul Smiths. In Newcomb, it was literally a turn-key exchange of the building on July 1, 2010, with all its assets intact, including exhibits and educational tools.

“We were really fortunate with our partnership with the APA,” Hai said.

Hai is also the program coordinator for the Northern Forest Institute for Conservation Education and Leadership Training (NFI) and now splits his time between the Adirondack Interpretive Center and the Adirondack Ecological Center. The AEC is the college’s research component at the Huntington Wildlife Forest, and the NFI is the education and outreach component. The NFI—formed in 2008—uses several buildings to serve its constituents: the Masten House, the Carriage House, the Arbutus Great Camp and the AIC. Having the AIC to serve as the Institute’s public venue is just what the NFI needed, according to Hai.

“It is a great piece of the puzzle,” Hai said.

The NFI is a working partnership between SUNY-ESF, Open Space Institute, state Department of Environmental Conservation, Adirondack Park Agency, Northern Forest Center, Adirondack Wild, Purdue University’s Department of Organizational Leadership and others. The program has three main components: 1. professional development; 2. public outreach; and 3. academic outreach (primary, secondary and collegiate).

The AIC is also expected to help the college’s efforts to establish a work study program, which they plan to implement this year.

The biggest challenge for Hai during the ownership transition was the quick turnaround and the unfunded accession of new property.

“We were getting this jewel (in less than six months) but with no funding,” Hai said, adding that the college is looking for ways to pay staff and keep the doors open “to make sure we can keep the ball moving forward.”

Due to a “substantial grant” from a private foundation, SUNY-ESF will be able to hire a full-time position for two years to help Hai create and deliver programs at the AIC. In addition, Hai is trying to get funding for a one-year full-time naturalist at the AIC. He hopes to have both positions in place by summer.

Hai is no stranger to the interpretive center. He began working for SUNY-ESF in 2000, moved to Newcomb in 2003 to assume his current title, and took over program coordinating duties for the NFI in 2008. He has led educational programs at the center since 2003.

VIC Friends Group Works with Colleges

History has shown that the Adirondack Park Institute’s tag line—“Teaching a Generation to Care”—was almost taken literally. Now, 22 years after it was founded, the group is poised to teach many more generations.

When Adirondack Park Agency (APA) officials announced in January 2010 that they would be dissolving the Interpretive Programs Division and leaving the Visitor Interpretive Centers (VICs) in Paul Smiths and Newcomb by the end of the year, the VIC friends group—the API— was faced with an uncertain future.

After all, the not-for-profit group was created specifically to fund educational programming—for school kids, families, and the general public—at the two VICs in 1989, the same year the Paul Smiths VIC opened (the Newcomb VIC opened in 1990). With its office located at the Paul Smiths VIC, the API and the state-run VICs were joined at the hip, so to speak. It was a unique public-private partnership, a model for visitor/education centers around the nation.

The API board was left with the question, “What would happen to the API if the VICs closed for good?”

The year 2010 proved to be a pivotal and emotional one for API officials. While the mission remains the same, the partners have changed. API board members will now be teaching generations to care with Paul Smith’s College at the Paul Smiths VIC and the State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry at the Adirondack Interpretive Center in Newcomb.

“Both colleges said to the API, ‘Work with us,’” said API Executive Director Dan Fitto, who was hired in 2010. “People love the VICs, and nobody wants them to close, especially us.”

The API is a membership-based organization. While it raises program
money through grants and fundraisers, it relies heavily on membership dues. Among its list of accomplishments, the API has funded school programs, the Native Species Butterfly House at Paul Smiths, special events, and publications such as the interpretive trail brochures at the Paul Smiths VIC. But in 2010, despite a letter-writing campaign, the API’s membership took a hit.

“Now that our future is more clear, we are able to build membership and attract corporate and foundation funding.” Fitts said in an interview at the Adirondack Research Consortium office at Paul Smith’s College.

**Institutional Memory**

Fitts now splits his time between executive director positions at the API and the Adirondack Research Consortium. Yet his love affair with the VICs began more than 20 years ago.

When the APA was making plans to build the VICs in the 1980s (actually it was only supposed to open one VIC, but Gov. Mario Cuomo decided to open two instead), Fitts was a legislative coordinator for New York Sen. Ronald Stafford. He helped Stafford find money to build the VICs.

“I remember going out there (in Paul Smiths) when the site was filled with trees,” he said. Fitts’ administrative experience includes a 10-year stint as the executive director of the Adirondack Park Agency, from 1995 to 2005, a time that he cherishes mostly for his work with the two VICs.

“The one thing being away from the APA that I missed the most was the VICs,” he said.

Since the VICs opened, volunteers from the community—seasonal and year-round residents—have helped the staff and the API with educational programs, special events, the front desk, the Butterfly House, trail walks, and special projects. With an ever-dwindling staff count at both buildings, the volunteer corps had been an essential component of public programming. The larger group of volunteers—reaching about 60—was located at the Paul Smiths VIC.

“I think the transition was very hard on them,” Fitts said of the volunteers. “They didn’t know what was going on, other than the VICs were closing.”

While the API and both colleges helped bridge the institutional memory gap between the old and new owners of the VICs—by holding meetings with the volunteers in late 2010—many, such as longtime Paul Smiths VIC volunteers Dick and Joy Harvey, found the lack of
information and communication frustrating. The Harveys mainly volunteer with school field trip programs.

“Our biggest concern is that we would like to know what is being done to re-establish the environmental education programs here,” Dick Harvey said while volunteering for the January 29 Chili Ski Tasting event. “The school groups. Will we have them? And, if so, who’s going to run them?”

Volunteers, for the most part, are retired and don’t have time to administer programs, Dick Harvey said, suggesting that the API hire a full-time paid naturalist to coordinate the school group programs. He also recommended that Paul Smith’s College and the API keep the volunteers updated on a regular basis with the plans for the VIC.

“So we have a degree of confidence and know that they are working toward these programs,” Dick Harvey said. “Right now we are in the dark.”

(An organizational meeting for volunteers was held April 20 at the Paul Smith’s College VIC, after this article was originally published.)

**Vision for the API**

As details were being worked out between the API and the colleges, Fitts outlined some of the API’s plans.

In Newcomb, the API will continue to sponsor programs and events at the AIC with its new partner, SUNY-ESF. It will also continue to fund two paid summer internships there.

In Paul Smiths, the API will fund the Butterfly House (including a paid naturalist), the Nature for the Very Young program, school field trip programs (starting in the spring), and three traditional special events: the ski festival in January, the Great Adirondack Birding Celebration in June, and the Adirondack Wildlife Festival in August. All these will be held in partnership with Paul Smith’s College.

While working with the two colleges on their plans for the VICs, Fitts sees a similarity between the excitement in the 1980s and today.

“This is the excitement I felt when we first planned the VICs ... I see a Renaissance coming here,” Fitts said. “Both colleges have visionary ideas which are fresh and new.”

The API is still working on a Memorandum of Understanding with Paul Smith’s College, and, therefore, many of the details regarding programs are not yet available. However, Fitts said he expects to work with the college to create employment opportunities to facilitate some of the programs, such as school field trips. And he expects to work closely with the volunteer corps.

**Winners, Losers in VIC Transition**

When the state Adirondack Park Agency (APA) transferred ownership of its Visitor Interpretive Centers at Paul Smiths and Newcomb to two colleges on January 1, 2011, not everyone escaped the transition unscathed. For the most part, however, many of the key players say there is a happy ending to this story.

First, here are the basics:

- **Government downsizing.** Due to a multi-billion-dollar New York state budget deficit, the APA dissolved its Interpretive Programs Division and successfully transferred ownership of its Visitor Interpretive Centers to two colleges by Jan. 1, 2011. The move was expected to save the APA about $500,000 a year.
- **Staff.** During the 11-month process, four jobs were cut at each facility. Two VIC employees transferred to the APA headquarters in Ray Brook (one of them "bumped" another employee out of his position). Since then, Paul Smith’s College has hired a full-time maintenance person for the VIC, and SUNY-ESF will hire one full-time staffer (a two-year position) at the AIC. More seasonal jobs are expected to be created at each facility.
- **Facilities and programs.** The trails remain open at both centers. The Newcomb building is still open to the public, and the Paul Smiths building is expected to be open to the public sometime this year. The API will continue to offer environmental education programs for schools and the public at each building.

“There’s no way to sugarcoat it,” said Paul Hai, program coordinator for SUNY-ESF’s Adirondack Ecological Center and Northern Forest Institute, “The wonderful people who were doing the work for the Adirondack Park Agency at the VICs.”

Hai said the out-of-work employees lost in the short-term and he hopes they will soon move on to other jobs. He had worked closely with these employees since 2003 and speaks highly of the APA and the staff who built the centers and operated them for more than 20 years.

“These places exist because of the people who did the work here,” Hai said. “What those guys created at the interpretive centers is a legacy, and they should be proud of it.”

At the same time, as New York agencies dealt with budget shortfalls by closing environmental education centers around the state in 2010, “environmental education lost,” he said, noting the workforce reduction at APA and Department of Environmental Conservation environmental education centers. “The APA made a tough choice ... We’re really hoping we can lessen that blow by keeping this center open.”

API Executive Director Dan Fitts agrees with Hai about the loss to employees and the legacy they created. He calls the APA’s decision “understandable,” yet he laments the loss to taxpayers who once learned about the wonders of the 6-million-acre Adirondack Park from state workers.

“I sure think the state of New York loses by not being able to fund those areas,” Fitts said. “It was real nice for the state to tell the story of the Adirondack Park.”

While Paul Smith’s College Communications Director Ken Aaron recognizes that the transition created hardship for the people who lost jobs, he sees the state of New York as a winner because the mission of the VICs will be continued under the college’s watch.
"There are no losers," Aaron said, adding that if the building had gone dark, the story would have been different. "But we stepped forward and that didn't happen."

All people interviewed for this story agreed that the communities of Paul Smiths (town of Brighton) and Newcomb both come out as clear winners because the facilities will be open to the public. That means roughly 100,000 visitors will still be making their way to these towns annually (about 70,000 at Paul Smiths and 30,000 at Newcomb), staying at inns, eating at restaurants and shopping. It was a good deal for the local economy, they said.

"The citizens of the Adirondacks are winners," Hai said, referring to the residents' use of the centers as an educational and recreational resource.

More broadly, the educational community in the region is a winner, according to Hai, organizations that interpret the environmental and cultural history of the Adirondack Park and partner with SUNY-ESF in Newcomb, including the Wild Center, Wildlife Conservation Society, Adirondack Mountain Club and Adirondack Museum. And the citizens of New York are winners, he said.

"Ultimately, New Yorkers paid for the structure," Hai said. "That investment didn't go away."

Fitts—who also sits on the SUNY-ESF Board of Trustees—said both colleges come out winners, as these public facilities are unique assets for their educational programs.

Paul Smith's College officials concur. Their students will benefit, as will the greater Tri-Lakes community, according to college Director of Human Resources Susan Sweeney.

"This once again gives us the opportunity to say we are good neighbors," Sweeney said.

Perhaps the biggest winner is the Adirondack Center for Writing, which will be moving from the Paul Smith's College administration building to the VIC in the spring of 2011. The move will give the not-for-profit group the opportunity to be more accessible and use the theater space for programs, according to ACW Executive Director Nathalie Thill.

"We really lucked out as a community. This is a gorgeous building with so much potential," Thill said. "This will be transformative for our organization."

And Brian McDonnell, of MAC's Canoe Livery, will be hired as the VIC facility manager to organize school field trips and public programs at Paul Smith's College VIC.

Editor's Note: This article was written as a five-part series about the Visitor Interpretive Centers' transition from Adirondack Park Agency ownership. It first ran in Denton Publications' six newspapers in February and March 2011.

Appendix – APA answers questions
Adirondack Park Agency Director of Communications Keith McKeever answered the questions for this article in writing.

What is the APA's legacy of the VICs, building a foundation for the future of the VICs under new ownership?

APA legacy is more than two decades of the VICs showcasing the beauty and history of New York State's Adirondack Park to approximately one-and-a-half million visitors. Concurrently, the VICs provided environmental programs and services, which reached a multi-generational audience that included over 75,000 school children. The extensive trail systems combined with innovative interpretive services fostered a greater public appreciation for the value of the Adirondack Park to all New Yorkers and citizens of the world.

What is the APA most proud of in regard to its Interpretive Programs Division and operation of the VICs from 1989 to 2010?

We are most proud of the VIC staff for their years of engagement in educating generations of Park stewards and for their outstanding commitment to increasing environmental awareness. Their dedication and commitment enhanced the public's awareness of Park resources and the Agency's role in their protection. Staff played an important part in interpreting the Park Agency's responsibilities for the public and private lands of the Park.

Now that the APA doesn't have operate to the VICs, how has that benefitted the APA so far? Have you seen a direct financial impact in January? How much money will it save per year?

The Agency successfully transitioned the VICs and met all mandated budget saving mandates. This helped contribute to the overall state goal of reducing state spending. The Agency did not have to cut back additional staff or resources in its regulatory and legal responsibilities and continues to effectively manage a demanding and complex workload.

In regard to the VIC transition from the APA to the new owners, who are the winners here?

The Agency's handling of this downsizing is being discussed as a model for other state agencies. Therefore, we see the outcome as a win-win. Working in partnership with SUNY-ESF and Paul Smith's College, we were able to navigate through complex legal requirements and reach an outcome that resulted in continued public access to outstanding trail systems, nature viewing opportunities and environmental programming.

Who are the losers?
No comment.

A couple of people have said that the APA and New York state government are "losers" in this VIC transition because the APA dissolved its Interpretive Programs Division and no longer offers environmental education programming directly to the public. What is your take on those comments?

All agency staff provide environmental education as part of their daily work responsibilities. Staff has always worked hard to explain how the Agency's work plays an important part in protecting the environment, public heath and enhances community sustainability. We will continue to incorporate education and interpretive services into our job responsibilities.