

Transitions at the AATV:

John Risley Replaces George Canon as President

Affordable Housing Emerges as Priority Agenda Item

By KIRK D. PETERSON

Abstract

John Risley, Supervisor, Town of Inlet, has assumed the presidency of the Adirondack Association of Towns and Villages, replacing long-time AATV President George Canon. "JR" is a life-long resident of the North Country and former Inlet businessman deeply involved in his community and thoroughly conversant with the challenges facing Adirondack towns and villages. High on the list of agenda items for the AATV are the issues of affordable housing and taxation, which are making it almost impossible for local people to buy a home and raise a family in their own communities. However, the strong grass-roots organization of the AATV, together with a close working relationship with state representatives, has resulted in a number of legislative successes, including the full state reimbursement of tax monies lost to towns and school districts from forest lands exempt under 480 and 480A of the Real Property Tax Laws.

In January of 2004, John Risley became President of the Adirondack Association of Towns and Villages, replacing long-time AATV chief George Canon, not easy shoes to fill since George had been head of the organization since 1993 – almost from its inception in 1992. However, like George, "JR" is a life-long Adirondacker and fits comfortably into his role as representative of our not-so-populous region, understanding well its unique perspectives, hard-working people, and special challenges.

Kirk Peterson is Professor of English and Spanish at Paul Smith's College.

John graduated from high school in Old Forge, his dad a state trooper who was often transferred, his mom a school teacher. He moved "a whole 12 miles" to Inlet in 1972 to go into the fuel oil business with his dad, and in 1983 began a contracting business of his own. After being elected Supervisor of the Town of Inlet in 1998, however, he found it increasingly difficult to devote enough time to his business, finally selling it in 2001 to devote all of his energies to the supervisor's job.

JR is typical of the leadership of the AATV, men and women deeply involved in their local communities, with a thorough-going understanding of the people they represent. Implicit in their personalities and careers is a sense of obligation to community, small towns which don't function without the continuous commitment and altruism of local leaders who view their jobs as more than nine-to-five responsibilities. Among other activities, John's community service includes 33 years on the fire department, including 12 years as an EMT, and he still drives ambulance part time. JR is also a charter member of the Fulton Chain of Lakes Performing Arts Council, and on the day when I first interviewed him, the Syracuse Symphony was due to perform in Inlet as a result of their efforts.

A single-engine pilot with sea-plane and instrument ratings, JR loves flying over the Adirondacks, whether on his way to the county seat in Lake Pleasant on business or relaxing with his wife,

Christine. "It's how I escape," he declares with obvious passion. It's also a convenient way to cover those long miles between Inlet and distant meetings in a region where you may be 25 miles away as the raven flies – but sixty or more by road.

Everyone familiar with the AATV knows that no other organization is as closely in touch with the Adirondack towns and villages they represent, perhaps because it is a requirement that all AATV members must be currently serving elected representatives of local municipalities. If you are voted out of office, you lose your membership in the AATV. Each year the organization takes input from the local governments they represent and forges a legislative agenda. At any time during the year towns may also pass resolutions and send them along to the AATV Executive Board for dissemination across the region and inclusion in the AATV legislative agenda. Thus, the AATV is never far from its roots and has earned a reputation in Albany as the single most effective and reliable local voice speaking for Adirondackers.

"The AATV tries to be realistic in looking at issues, in saying this is what we really need. We have no hidden agenda," JR puts it sincerely and it does seem to be that way. Certainly, no one familiar with the AATV track record of lobbying successes will underestimate its effectiveness.

"Very effective...very important to the region," is how Senator Betty Little

recently characterized the Association and its efforts at representing local interests in Albany.

Senator Little has worked closely with the AATV on a number of issues, including the effort to secure full state reimbursement to towns, counties and school districts for tax revenues lost under section 480 and 480A of the Real Property Tax Laws, an effort which was successful this year. Under this legislation, up to 80% of the assessed value of forest land may be exempt from taxes, and since some Adirondack towns have huge tracts exempted, the resulting impact on town — and school district — budgets can be dramatic. In the Town of Newcomb, a township of approximately 144,000 acres, just one timber company has 60,000 acres exempt — about 40% of all town lands! However, this year the state returned over \$100,000 to the Town budget to fully replace lost tax monies, according to George Canon, Town Supervisor. Even more money was returned to the school districts in the Park, with \$183,000 being returned to the Newcomb School District and a lesser amount, about \$22,000, to Hamilton County, according to Senator Little's Legislative Director, Rebecca Marino. Another important benefit of the law and the reimbursement is the protection of open space and continuing of these lands as working forests with the associated local jobs — jobs that are hard to replace in a never-burgeoning Adirondack economy which lives with extensive land use restrictions that towns outside the Blue Line do not have to contend with.

Even with a job, however, it is increasingly impossible for someone who grows up in Inlet or one of the other small Adirondack communities to buy a home, and taxation and affordable housing have become top AATV priorities in the past few years. At regional meetings

and conferences over the past year, area leaders have wrestled with this pressing local concern, so far without solution.

**It is the purpose
of the Adirondack
Association of Towns and
Villages to act as a
representative of the
towns and villages of
the Adirondacks in
addressing issues unique
to Local Government
and residents within the
Adirondack Park.
The Organization
shall develop a
consensus on the
resolution of
Adirondack issues.**

— From the AATV website

"With an entry level job in Inlet at \$10 an hour, a house is out of reach," JR observes, adding that the housing challenges that local people face in the Adirondacks are similar to the crises facing many people across the country. "We're so far behind I don't know how we'll solve the issue." He points out that if he and his wife, the general manager of a hardware business, were starting out they would not be able to afford their present home based on its assessed value. "People just can't move into the community, get a job, and buy a home."

JR believes there are two basic reasons for the affordable housing crisis in the Adirondacks: the huge amount of

disposable income available to "boomers," who are looking for an alternative to stocks as investments; and the willingness to pay almost any price for a piece of the Park, a place where home and property are environmentally protected and far from vulnerable urban areas in our post-9/11 world. Compounding the problem, he believes, is the limit on new development in the region based on the Adirondack Park Land Use Plan. The challenge is to continue to live and work in the Park, he says: "Without the residents, it's not the Adirondacks."

Writing in a recent opinion piece in the *Plattsburgh Press Republican*, Town of Keene Supervisor Thomas Both cited affordable homes and rising taxes as the "two most critical issues" facing North Country residents. However, Both cites another cause of the problem as primary: the decreasing level of state and federal support of local government services like Medicaid and schools, which forces local government — especially in rural areas like the Adirondacks — to rely more heavily on residential property taxes. The federal tax reductions of the past few years, especially in the higher income brackets, he believes, have both prompted a reduction in the federal revenue stream to towns and also put more disposable dollars in the hands of well-to-do investors, who want to invest them in Adirondack real estate.

In addition to being active in the AATV, Tom Both is Chair of the Essex County Tax Relief Subcommittee and involved in several initiatives to ease the tax burdens on North Country homeowners, one being an updating of the existing Circuit Breaker Tax Credit Program. This program gives homeowners a partial exemption from property taxes based on family income — now under \$18,000 — and the assessed value of their home, but since the income figures

have not been updated in two decades, few residents can seek relief under the existing law. Tom feels the figures would be more useful if they were tied to state median family income and home values, but that, ultimately, the best solution is to eliminate the reliance on the property tax, since the school tax is often the most onerous burden the local homeowner has to bear.

Another approach (than the Circuit Breaker) is taken by the Town of Newcomb and its homestead law, which effectively freezes the residential share of property taxes and seems to work well in a township with few commercial businesses. And the entire region as well benefits from the STAR legislation, a state program which grants partial exemptions

from school taxes to all homeowners in the region. Senator Little points out that more than \$45 million was returned by the state to the six counties in her senatorial district this year alone.

Nevertheless, one size does not fit all, and homestead provisions tend to shift the tax burden to commercial property, a strategy which might be workable in some townships, but discourage the growth of business in others and does not address the issue of the lack of availability of building lots because of the APA Land Use Plan. A proposal supported by Senator Little would entail shifting building rights to hamlets when easements on large tracts of forest land are acquired by the state. This would create more buildable lots and, seemingly, help in address-

ing the affordable housing concerns raised by people such as Supervisor Risley, but no one solution seems to promise relief on this critically important issue.

Clearly, there is no easy solution to the pressing problems of affordable housing and taxation in the Adirondacks. Instead, what seems to be emerging is a mosaic of programs and initiatives tailored to specific needs of the towns across the Adirondacks. It is equally clear that the dedicated grassroots-based efforts of people like JR Risley and the other local leaders who make up the AATV, together with the close working relationship they have with Senator Little and our other elected representatives, make them a most effective force in addressing the region's challenges.

Call for Papers

The Adirondack Research Consortium (ARC) will hold its Thirteenth Annual Conference on the Adirondacks on May 24-25, 2006, at the Hilton Hotel in Lake Placid, New York. The ARC encourages research papers and topic sessions on all aspects of the Adirondack natural environment, history, politics, economy, and culture. This interdisciplinary, regional consortium is home to physical and social scientists, humanists, planners, environmentalists, government officials, and all those interested in this important region.

Papers, posters, discussion panels, and workshops are encouraged that explore the natural, economic, cultural, historic, and philosophical features of the Adirondacks, Lake Champlain, and the North Country. Of particular interest are themes addressing the intersection of the humanities, social and natural sciences in research, and issues of public-private ownership and management of complex natural and social systems.

Graduate and undergraduate students are strongly encouraged to participate in the conference through both paper and poster presentations. Paper presentations should be designed as approximately 20 minute summaries and ten minute question and answer, with a general audience in mind. Technical language should be limited to the greatest extent possible and, when necessary, fully explained.

Abstracts should be sent to the address below no later than March 29, 2006. **ELECTRONIC SUBMISSIONS ARE REQUIRED.**

Each proposal should include:

1. Title of the presentation.
2. Name and address of author(s), with presenting author specified.
3. The type of presentation proposed (paper, poster, panel, workshop, etc.).
4. A 250-word abstract of the presentation, suitable to be published in the conference program.
5. Audio-visual equipment needed. Poster displays are the responsibility of the presenter.
6. Participants will be encouraged to provide their presentation or paper on electronic media prior to the conference, to be added to the ARC website.

Authors are encouraged to submit their completed papers for consideration for publication in the Adirondack Journal of Environmental Studies. Additional information is available at the ARC website: www.adkresearch.org

Send inquiries and proposals for presentations to:

Wayne Glass, President
Adirondack Research Consortium
c/o Center for the Advancement of Sustainable Tourism
P.O. Box 747
Saranac Lake, NY 12983

Send e-mail submissions to: wayne@cast-online.com.