My View

JOHN PENNEY

"It's called the Commission on the Adirondacks in the 21st Century," reporter Laura Rappaport said patiently, trying to gauge the reaction from her new boss. "Sounds patently obvious now," I replied. "What do you think you'll have for page one?"

It was the fall of 1989, the commission was holding its public hearings on the future of the Adirondack Park, and I had just arrived as the new managing editor of the Adirondack Daily Enterprise. Rappaport was heading to one of those hearings, and I (it seems patently obvious now) was in dire need of getting up to speed on the major issues of the day in the Adirondacks.

Little did I know of the hornet's nest of activity the 21st century commission report would soon stir up, how its top-down, extreme approach toward government control would enrage many Adirondackers — and how it would dominate the Daily Enterprise's page-one coverage for the weeks and months ahead.

A six-million-acre patchwork of private and public lands (viewed by many as the most valuable environmental treasure east of the Mississippi) the Adirondack Park is a complicated place, pulled in different directions by competing special interest groups.

The state's appalling view of home rule here was made apparent by the fact that of the dozen or so public hearings held by the commission, only two were located within the boundaries of the Blue Line. And the commission infuriated many with its calls for wholesale changes to the Adirondack land-use map and for a building moratorium in the Park until its 245 recommendations could be implemented.

Following the public's furor over these and other matters, the state backtracked, and the 21st century report proved to be a bust.

Much like the Adirondack Park Agency Act itself, the report was replete with vague and subjective terminology; commission members advocated that the APA permit process take into account such nebulous concerns as biodiversity, locally significant scenic vistas, and undue, adverse impact standards.

Such terms have been the basis for much of the hostility regarding the Adirondack land-use issue. Even the premise behind why I was asked to write this article — to offer a view of CAN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT BE ACHIEVED IN THE ADIRONDACKS?

how sustainable development can be achieved in the Adirondacks — is subjective in nature, conjuring up different images for different people. It's all fiendishly difficult to quantify. Yet, from Wal-Mart to the Whitneys, the underlying issues endure in the Adirondacks.

The Back-Room Agenda

There are members of the APA staff and commissioners who, through words and deeds, have deemed the APA Act insufficient and have charted their own course for how development should take place in the Adirondacks; in essence, the agency is in the bartering business. Most developers realize this when they forge ahead with a project subject to agency review — even if their plans seemingly comply with the APA Act.

For instance, several years ago, the Town of North Elba sought to make improvements to the Lake Placid Airport, including the installation of pilot-activated lighting and navigational aids, construction of a taxiway, and improvements to the existing runway. The Federal Aviation Administration approved the plan — but the APA process lingered. First, the Park Agency made the town pay $8,000 to conduct a nighttime noise study as part of its master plan for the improvements — a study deemed unnecessary by the FAA. Then, APA staff wanted the agency to have oversight over town leases with present and future airport operators, and it called for the formation of a citizens advisory group to advise the town on future issues related to the aviation facility.

This should have been a one-shot project review; instead, APA staff was advocating placing the airport under the agency's authority on a continuing basis. Moreover, it was seeking to become involved in such business decisions as lease agreements, an ambitious agenda for a land-use agency, to say the least.

In a more current example, the agency is attempting to exceed its authority over the Whitney land in the Town of Long Lake. The Whitneys want to subdivide 15,000 acres of Whitney Park into 40 "great camps" and build a hotel near Little Tupper Lake. They intend to keep 36,000 acres in private ownership for logging and recreation purposes, though they are reserving their right as private landowners to consider other uses in the future. But the agency wants a detailed accounting now of what the Whitneys plan on doing with those 36,000 acres, even though they are not part of the development project currently before the agency.

Distrust on such Park land-use is-

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sues runs deep; it is apparent not only in day-to-day battles between developers and the APA, but also by the comments of local officials concerned about proposed state laws — and even the language of existing ones.

For example, Gov. George Pataki has proposed making payments in lieu of taxes (PILOTs) on state-owned lands not currently subject to taxation. While the plan would not affect state holdings in the Adirondacks, local leaders are troubled nonetheless. Under the Real Property Tax Law, the state currently pays taxes on Adirondack Forest Preserve lands, but proposed PILOT agreements involving other state holdings would have no such statutory protection. Some local government officials are worried that this will be a first step toward placing a tax cap on state lands in the Adirondacks.

In another case, although no action toward this end has been taken — or even suggested — several local boards have mounted a campaign to ensure the state won't tear down the Mount Arab Fire Tower in the Town of Piercefield. All indications from the state are that such structures will be preserved and, in some cases, possibly renovated. And state Department of Environmental Conservation officials have noted that this particular wooden tower cannot be torn down since it is listed on the National Register of Historic Buildings.

Still, local officials are unconvinced. They cite the language in the state Constitution as it relates to Forest Preserve lands, pointing out that those lands are to be kept “forever wild” and, therefore, could be interpreted to mean the fire towers don’t belong.

The Protectors as Perpetrators

While the Park requires some form of special protection, I believe such protection is already in place, considering the economic conditions and the environmental regulations in the Adirondacks. True, the Park has been carelessly developed in places — but some of the worst abuses have been at the hands of the state itself, whether that be for construction of Olympic venues, prisons or state agency buildings.

Indeed, in many instances, the Park has needed protection from, rather than by, the state. For example, a public authority was found to have buried toxic barrels on state land in the Adirondacks — and a state-run fish hatchery was identified as at least one of the causes of a blue-green algae bloom in Upper Saranac Lake several years ago.

The hypocrisy and contradictions are apparent in other ways.

Through the Department of Economic Development, the state pumps millions of dollars into “I Love New York” campaigns, in part, to promote tourism in the Adirondacks; then, through its environmental agencies, the state complains about overuse in the High Peaks area and seeks public funds to help alleviate the problem.

Through such initiatives, the state controls not just the regulatory condition but the economic engine of the Park. It is, in essence, a false economy, a place too reliant on public sector jobs — a place where the salary of a typical school teacher draws more envy than sympathy.

Under these prevailing conditions, it is obvious that sustainable development will occur in the Adirondacks only if the state says it should. Based on what I have seen — especially in light of the aforementioned actions of state government in the Park and the move to downsize the public sector in general — I would question the basic fairness and wisdom of this continued direction for the Adirondacks.

Rectifying the Problem

If the state wants to tightly restrict the Park and set it off as a “special place,” it must find a way to pay for that privilege.

More money should be used for low-interest loans and grants for Adirondack businesses. Seasonal changes are common in most places — but ours are more extreme, affecting both institutional structures and personal attitudes. The terrain and weather conditions already make the Adirondacks less than business-friendly; the onerous land-use regulations merely seem to seal our fate.

Now and again, I remember the words of David Petty, the former president of North Country Community College, who lamented that Adirondack children are being raised as second-class citizens. They are essentially steered in the direction of forest- or service-industry jobs if they intend to stay and grow old in the Adirondacks. (Several studies, in fact, have shown that the Adirondacks lose their best and brightest students after they have graduated from high school.)

Is there hope? Of course. Perhaps as environmental studies become more accurate, land-use data will become clearer and less subject to personal interpretation. Until then, though, environmental groups and advocates of private property rights will continue to push and give a little, depending on the political wills and winds of the day and the most pressing of needs.

In the meantime, the Adirondack spirit, coupled by an unfailing sense of community pride, endures. During my tenure as managing editor of the Adirondack Daily Enterprise, I have witnessed it on many occasions: Those images include: hundreds of volunteers gallantly fighting a forest fire in Vergennes where 400 acres were lost — but only one structure damaged; scores of people gathering to take part in a Crop Walk to raise funds for the hungry; rescuers braving severe weather conditions to search for lost hikers in the High Peaks; volunteers working at break-neck speed in bone-chilling temperatures to build and/or restore the Ice Palace for the Saranac Lake Winter Carnival; and business people, already walking a razor’s edge financially, unable to look the other way when a community organization knocks on the door and asks for help.

The 21st century report referenced above said, “Environmental considerations should be set aside of any other in the Park.”

I would respectfully disagree. Economies do many things — remaining stable is not one of them. For those raising families here and trying to eke out a meager existence, other factors must have at least equal importance if people are to survive, and development is to be sustained, in the Adirondack Park.