

The Indian Lake Experience: Living and Earning in the Adirondack Park

The Adirondack challenge is the global challenge in microcosm

BY JERRY ROSENTHAL

There is an old song that goes, "New York, New York — It's a Wonderful Town." Well Indian Lake, located in the center of the Adirondack Park, is also a wonderful town, but in a rather different way. The Town of Indian Lake, with a year round population of 1,500 and consisting of the hamlets of Indian Lake, Blue Mountain Lake and Sabael, contains many wonderful mountains, lakes and streams. But, in addition to its beautiful setting, the town contains many qualities that are a tribute to the dedication and energy of its people. Not only are there the usual facilities, such as a school, supermarket, churches and restaurants, but the town also has a library, a regional arts center, a regional museum, a summer movie theater, a health center, many campgrounds and beaches, and two golf courses. Many extended families have resided in the town for several generations, providing a sense of continuity and stability. There are many seasonal home owners who contribute to the vitality and economy of the town. All of this can be found in an area that has the lowest population density in the entire Northeast, including northern Maine.

However, from an economic point of view, the town is not that wonderful. The median family income is only 70% of the state average and the unemployment rate is chronically in the double digits. The

opportunity for economic improvement is limited by being located in the Adirondack Park and by the large amount of land that is owned by the state. While tourism is the traditional industry, it is only strong during two or three months of the summer and, even then, it has been declining for several decades. People in Indian Lake are like people everywhere. They hope to see their economic condition gradually improve over the years. They hope that their children can settle nearby and experience a higher standard of living than they had. The stagnant economy of the town does not permit those hopes to be realized.

A Community on the Move

With these considerations in mind, the people of Indian Lake were invited to gather for a series of meetings in June and July of 1996. People from all segments of the Town came — merchants, teachers, board members, students, retirees, government employees, parents, building contractors, health providers, and members of the fire department and ambulance corps. The meetings were conducted at first by a consultant from the Rocky Mountain Institute (RMI) and later by townspeople who had been trained in the techniques RMI had used successfully in many towns across the country. Credit should also be given to the Indian Lake Town Board, which decided that this program should go forward, and to the Adirondack Council, which funded the RMI participation.

Most of the meetings were conducted as workshops in which groups of six to

eight people discussed topics, such as what they liked most about the town, what they thought were the strongest assets of the town, and what vision they had for the town in twenty to thirty years. The groups shared their ideas by writing them out on large flip charts that covered the walls of the room. There was an atmosphere of enthusiasm and excitement as people expressed their own ideas and joined in the community effort to help shape the future of the town. This process produced more than one hundred project ideas, which were evaluated and prioritized in the larger group setting. The final output were a Future Vision Statement and ten project ideas.

Indian Lake Vision Statement

Community Choices for Economic Renewal (CCER) was formed to carry forward the work of these meetings. Our mission is to work toward making the Future Vision Statement a reality. The statement reads as follows:

All members of our community will feel that their voices can be heard and that they can influence change. We seek a cohesive community in which citizens work through their differences together and create thoughtful progress. We will live in an atmosphere that will foster leadership and volunteerism. Our focus will be on our children, our families and the good of the community.

We will have a year-round, sustainable economy in harmony with

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the community and the environment that provides full-time employment, entry-level jobs and cultural and recreational opportunities.

We wish to remain a safe, small neighborly community in a beautiful, tranquil and healthy setting. Our local government and school will fully cooperate and collaborate. There will be adequate health and emergency services available.

The New York State Vision for Indian Lake

In his 1996 State of the State Address, the Governor articulated the following vision for the Adirondacks, which we believe reflects the vision the people of the state have for the Adirondacks and Indian Lake:

The Adirondacks are also a magnificent resource. They link us to our past. They provide a glimpse into our future. Our efforts in the Adirondacks will further demonstrate our vision of developing a consensus that will make New York the leader in environmental protection while allowing for economic prosperity.

To the people living in the town, Indian Lake is home. They look to their town to provide security, economic well being and a good quality of life — just what people everywhere expect from their communities. To the people living outside the Blue Line, Indian Lake is a resource that must be protected.

The Governor's statement implies that if environmentally benign prosperity were to appear, the state would "allow" it to happen. The people of Indian Lake, who have lived in an economically depressed economy for decades, are looking for a more pro-active approach for achieving economic improvement.

Looking for Ways to Increase Tourism

Despite the difference in perspective, there is a common ground with respect to tourism. For people outside the Blue

Line, tourism provides a way to access the Adirondack resource, while, for people in Indian Lake, tourism is a way of providing a livelihood. With this in mind, several CCER projects were selected because they will make Indian Lake a more appealing tourist destination.

Increasing tourism is a difficult challenge. The number of tourist accommodations in Indian Lake has actually been declining, since it is more economic to sell lake shore lots than to continue operating them as tourist accommodations. The tourist economy is highly seasonal, being concentrated during the short summer season. Not having a plentiful source of quality tourist accommodations makes it difficult to attract a growing number of tourists. Yet, it does not make business

Lake, and Newcomb, would augment the existing snowmobile trails in Indian Lake and could also be used for mountain biking. Since snowmobiling is a growing tourist activity, we see an opportunity to attract some of the growing number of snowmobiling enthusiasts. Catch and release trophy fishing is another tourist activity that is growing. We plan to stock a designated water body in the town with trophy fish to increase tourist activity during the spring season.

Since tourists enjoy staying in an attractive town, we have been looking at ways to improve the appearance of Indian Lake. The Town Beautification Committee of CCER has been responsible for increasing the number of plantings around town and the installation of



The movie theater in Indian Lake.

sense to build and operate quality accommodations unless there is more of a year round tourist economy. By increasing off-season tourism, we hope to provide more of a year round economy and also encourage investment in the improvement of tourist accommodations.

The Outdoor Recreation Committee of CCER has taken the lead by exploring two projects that will increase off-season tourism. Construction of a snowmobile trail system to link Indian Lake, Long

benches in the small town park. A bulletin board, built with an Adirondack style birch frame, has been installed in the post office vestibule. It was built by a member of the committee and paid for entirely by donations. We also proposed replacing the welcoming signs that appear at the entrances to town. The Town Board agreed to this suggestion and, after several designs were investigated, a moose design was selected. The Chamber of Commerce became excited about using a

moose logo on their promotional material and took the lead in the final design, construction and installation of the signs.

Improving the Quality of Life

During our town meetings, a strong desire was expressed for increasing community cohesiveness and recreational opportunities for youth. Our starting point for thinking about the needs of young people was recognizing that, because of Indian Lake's remote location, our youth are very isolated, without many options for recreation during most of the year. Consequently, we are working with the Town in preparing a grant application to the state Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP) for a youth recreation center. We envision a park that will have many activities that will appeal to young people, such as ice skating, hockey, rollerblading, mountain biking and cross-country skiing. We plan to construct a building with a large recreation room and a kitchen, so that young people can gather within an indoor recreational space. An important element of the plan is upgrading the existing skating area so that it has a paved surface, roof, and bleachers and will be available year round for skating, hockey, dances, barbecues, and other activities. We are also working with a local landowner to obtain permission to construct a nature trail between the park and the Indian Lake Central School.

A very exciting aspect of this project is the tie-in we have made with Hamilton County's program for preventing alcohol and drug abuse among young people. The New York State Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services has ranked Hamilton County second highest in risk for alcohol abuse among young people for all the counties in the state outside New York City. In recognition of this problem, the county runs the Trailblazers program, funded by the State's Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services. This program builds self confidence, motivation and leadership in young people through an outdoor-based



Above: Indian Lake's Grand Union

Below: The Indian Lake Chamber of Commerce



adventure learning program, similar to Outward Bound. Currently, the county program does not have adequate space to conduct its activities and we are designing the building so that it will provide the space needed for Trailblazer groups to learn wilderness skills and plan trips as well as store the gear and materials necessary for the program.

The townspeople have shown their enthusiastic support by raising more than \$5,000 for the Multi-Use Recreation Park. On a per capita basis, this is equivalent to a city, such as Syracuse, raising \$3 million! Donations came from many sources, such as private citizens, business people, and civic organizations. Additional money was raised through a community festival, square dances, and raffles. The community festival was a town-wide event, involving dozens of volunteers. It

raised more than \$1,800 for the project and it brought increased tourist traffic to local merchants on the day of the festival. In this way, the festival not only raised money for the recreation center, but also brought economic benefit to the town.

The recreation park reflects the best thinking of the community on how to deal with a serious problem affecting our young people — the lack of sufficient constructive activities. The needs recognized by the community are, however, not the same as those recognized by OPRHP. The OPRHP determines recreational needs by estimating activity days for the various recreational activities in each county of the state. There are separate activity days assigned for local and tourist use. In Hamilton County, ice skating gets a local value of 3,064 (total value of 28,503) activity days, while camping

gets a total value of 606,057 activity days, over 99% of which are due to tourists. The final rating for Hamilton County (on a ten point scale) is five for campgrounds and one for ice skating rinks. Thus, while the people of Indian Lake see the ice skating rink part of the Multi-Use Recreation Park as being vital to the well being of their youth, their needs are overwhelmed by the needs of tourists for additional campgrounds.

Members of CCER have been responsible for establishing a town Recreation Commission that attempts to coordinate recreation activities and publishes a monthly calendar of recreation events in town. Working with the town, the Recreation Commission was instrumental in creating a highly successful summer recreation program in 1997 for children in grades K- 8. The program, led by a certified teacher, provided swimming and other outdoor activities, arts and crafts, and trips to local historical sites. In addition, the Commission has played a major role in shaping plans for the recreation center.

The work of the Community Theater Project of CCER is focused on increasing cultural opportunities in the town by adapting the local movie theater so that it can offer live performances as well as movies. We are working with the owner of the local movie theater to replace the existing movie screen with a roll up screen, making the stage available for live performances. The project is being financed primarily through a canoe raffle, which was donated by a boat builder who is a member of the committee.

Finding Ways to Improve the Economy

We realize that we will not be able to have a large impact on the economy unless we find new sources for jobs. The most promising possibilities we have found thus far are telemarketing or other telecommunications-based industries.

Many billions of dollars of commerce are conducted each year through call centers. Because labor constitutes 60% of the cost of running call centers, they are often

placed in remote rural locations where labor costs are low. The industry has been growing at 20% per year and companies are seeking new places to locate their facilities. Rural areas outside of New York State have attracted this type of industry through partnerships with their states, but New York State does not have an agency for helping rural communities in attracting telecommunications-based industries. The help that other states provide rural communities includes funding of studies, assistance in working with telecommunications companies and guidance in approaching telemarketing firms looking for new sites. It should be obvious that an effective telecommunications infrastructure in a large, lightly populated, area such as the Adirondacks is not a town but a regional problem. Yet the state has provided the Adirondacks with neither the political identity nor the expertise to develop an area-wide solution.

At the same time we are investigating the telecommunications business, we are

actively looking into other business opportunities for the town. Early on, we realized that many people in town who wanted to start a new business, or improve an existing one, needed help in preparing business plans and applying for loans. Therefore, townspeople with business savvy formed the Financial Access Committee, which helps people in acquiring funds for new or existing businesses. This committee has also helped the town board evaluate applications for loans from a revolving loan fund. The CCER website is another mechanism we are using to encourage tourists to visit and businesses to locate in Indian Lake.

Moving Towards the Future Vision

Unlike other parks, in which people come only as visitors, the Adirondack Park is a patchwork of public and private land in which people are permanent residents. For the Adirondack experiment to be a success, both the people and the environment must prosper. In this respect, the Adirondack challenge is the global challenge in microcosm. The people of Indian Lake are attempting to rise to this challenge by finding new avenues to lift the economy of our town. We live in a place that is dominated by the conflicts between the environmentalists, developers and timber companies. Attempts to resolve these conflicts, which have been ongoing for over a century and show no sign of abating, seem to dominate the political landscape. We would like to open a new playing field, one that is predicated on meeting the needs of the residents of the park, while preserving the natural beauty and resources of the Adirondacks. Although we have much to be proud of, we recognize that the gap between the Future Vision Statement and present reality is very large. The people of Indian Lake have shown an eagerness to find fresh solutions to conquer economic problems. We invite the state and people living outside the park to look at the Adirondacks from the people's perspective and work with us in finding new solutions to long standing problems.



Signs on Route 30 point to recreational facilities available to Indian Lake visitors.