

You Can't Go Home Again . . .

by Michael G. DiNunzio

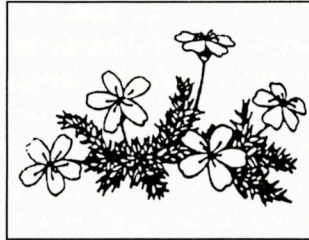
FORUM

On a showery spring day a few years ago, I paid a visit to Thomas Wolfe's boyhood home in Asheville, North Carolina. As I wandered through the well-preserved rooming house, my eyes fell upon a copy of *You Can't Go Home Again*. I was instantly saddened by the realization that the deeper meaning of that novel applied all-too-well to my own life.

Nearly three decades ago, after spending several years away from home in school and in the service, I returned to an unfamiliar landscape. Rezoning of residential areas had transformed our compact community into a commercial strip that was sprawling along the road in front of our home. My parents naively thought their residential rights to the land would remain secure, since our community had planning and zoning boards. But the town fathers, believing that growth equals progress, had other ideas.

Traffic, noise and pollution soon followed. Our home stood isolated, an oasis of green in a sea of development. The tax base rose, but our taxes escalated even more rapidly. Crime, and concerns about personal safety, became facts of life. I can remember the day when the local well that supplied our drinking water was declared "polluted." We began buying bottled water, like all our neighbors. Home was no longer a nice place to live. I decided to spend my life elsewhere, and I chose the Adirondack Park.

Although change is inevitable, it need not destroy the fabric of a community. For it is possible to meet the needs of today without limiting options for tomorrow. But to do so, we



must develop plans and make choices that will sustain us socially and economically without degrading our environment. This idea is central to the concept of the Adirondack Park, where lived-in landscapes are interwoven with protected wildlands. And

it is the reason why I devote an ever-increasing amount of my time to working with citizens, businesses, and governments to achieve sustainability at the community level.

Although the idea of designing a sustainable future for our communities is relatively new, it has captured the imagination of a broad cross section of our society, including planners, elected officials, environmentalists, and residents. Unfortunately, many of these well-intentioned people unknowingly propose actions which are, in essence, not sustainable. Residential and commercial development, for example, cannot be continued indefinitely without using up the open spaces of our lake shores and scenic vistas, which comprise important components of the Park's "environmental capital." Yet I often hear calls for a major relaxation of current zoning laws to allow for "sustainable growth."

An elected official once told me that his town needed about two new vacation homes per year, just to raise the tax base enough to equal inflation. Under certain circumstances, his thinking may temporarily appear correct. But such reasoning fails as soon as a vacation home becomes a year-around dwelling. For residential homes pay less in taxes than they receive in services, especially if children are sent to local schools.

Why would such an approach be viewed as sustainable? If a policy of trading precious open spaces for homes is pursued, even for a few de-

"They realize that a higher tax base does not mean lower taxes. And they realize that growth often leads to the loss of other "quality of life" amenities . . ."

ades, a community can be utterly and completely transformed. It is a policy analogous to living off one's capital, instead of the interest that this capital produces. Is this what Adirondack residents really want? Most residents I have talked to like things pretty much as they are now.

They realize that a higher tax base does not mean lower taxes. And they realize that growth often leads to the loss of other "quality of life" amenities, such as access to traditional hunting and fishing areas, clean water, plentiful wildlife, and uncrowded, crime-free neighborhoods.

An alternative to the failed strategy of chasing community growth is an approach referred to as "sustainable economic development." Instead of growth, which implies an increase in size or population, sustainable economic development involves vigorous business activity and the creation of jobs and amenities, such as health care services and educational opportunities.

Sustainable economic development is particularly well adapted to the communities of the Adirondack Park, in which renewable natural resources underpin the regional economy and largely define community character. It is a strategy which works best when integrated with other aspects of community planning, such as the process of developing an "approved" town plan under the provisions of the Adirondack Park Agency Act. In this way, communities can work with the Agency to amend the regional zoning map to allow for appropriate, compatible growth while developing a plan for their economic renewal.

Economic renewal programs can be tailored to meet the needs of a particular community. According to the Rocky Mountain Institute, these programs should include these basic elements:

- * Mobilize the community
- * Envision the community's future
- * Identify what you have to work with
- * Discover opportunities
- * Generate project ideas
- * Evaluate and select project ideas
- * Develop projects

Conducting an economic renewal process may not be right for every community. And some towns may not have the financial capacity or technical expertise to embark on such a venture. But I am convinced that the potential of the Adirondack Park to become a world model of integrated land conservation and development will not be fulfilled unless Park communities devise sustainable economic strategies.

Thomas Wolfe's assertion that "you can't go home again," certainly applies to me and a place I left long ago. But it does not as yet apply to most Adirondack communities, which still retain the core of their natural and cultural endowments. For them, there is still time to alter the course of their destiny to ensure that their children — and their heirs for generations to come — can indeed return to the special places they once called "home."

The author is the Director of Research and Education for the Adirondack Council, where his duties include work on the Council's Community Conservation Initiative. An important component of this work involves collaboration with other non-profit organizations to facilitate community economic renewal projects and related capacity-building programs.