From My Perspective

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First, let me say that I am very pleased to be here with you today. When I was asked to speak by the President of the Adirondack Research Consortium, at first I was a little hesitant to accept, since I am by no means a polished or gifted public speaker. I am known however, as someone who speaks out publicly on issues which concern the 130,000 plus year-round residents of this area known as the Adirondack Park. I was the first President of the Adirondack Association of Towns and Villages (A.A.T.V.) and one of its co-founders. I currently serve as first vice president. The A.A.T.V. represents approximately 70% of all the towns and villages within the Adirondack Park. That in and of itself speaks of the very importance of the Association, which is made up solely of elected officials. I am hopeful that following my talk here today we can all go forward and work together toward a common goal, via our own separate avenues or fields of expertise, keeping in mind that unless we, all of us here today, truly believe in working together—there will never be a resolution to the Adirondack issue.

Many people, most of whom reside outside the Blue Line, often ask the question “What is the role of local government in properly running the Park?” I might even ask, “How can local government be expected to properly run the Park?” My reason for such a statement is simply this, we are the only area of New York State where we have state mandated land use controls, the Adirondack Park Agency, and the Park Agency map. Much of the development in the Park is under someone else’s control and out of the hands of local government. Is this good? I truly do not know, but I do know that until local governments and residents are included in the decision making process, there will always be resentment, anger, and perhaps someday even violence. I believe that the local governments and the people who live here can and would do a great job running the Park given the opportunity. You see, what some people consider to be back-country many of us consider to be our front or backyards. Would you yourself want to destroy your own back or front yard? I think not, and neither do we. A picture has been painted by certain people from the environmental community that we, from local government, will agree to any type of development simply to increase our community’s tax base and thereby our tax revenues. This is simply not true. Yes, even though we operate on taxes, we cannot simply sell out to developers. I also do not believe that we want to see our region over-developed. Remember we live, hunt, fish and camp here ourselves throughout the year.

I am one who believes in sustainable development and I feel it can be attained. However, in my opinion it will require compromise on all sides of the “Adirondack Debate.” By that I mean that we, all of us, should take a look at changing the Adirondack Park Agency map in our areas from 8 acre rural-use zoning, which makes up about 17% of the land in the Park, to 3.5 acre zoning. For the most part, this will not destroy our environment by any means, yet it will allow towns where there is 8 acre zoning to vastly increase the amount of build outs they once had. There will then be no need for additional restrictive zoning to be incorporated into the new map other than that which already exists.

For example, there exists between the hamlet and moderate intensity areas approximately 160,000 acres of land. This translates into little over 1 acre of land for every person who resides within the Park’s boundary. Let us say for a moment, that we should consider another alternative to the zoning map. That alternative could be to re-designate low intensity (3.5 acre) zoning, which is approxi-
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mately 5% of the land within the Park, to moderate intensity zoning which makes up a little less than 2%. By doing so, the Agency will have provided for a very sustainable development picture while preserving the so called "back country". There is also land for development in the resource management areas which, if looked at realistically, could provide suitable development for all sides. Finally, I believe that there needs to be a change in attitude on the part of the Commissioners and Agency staff when issuing permits and dealing with development applications for these areas.

My proposal for sustainable development is simply this: there is a need for cooperation between local governments and the environmental community to have monies set aside through the Environmental Protection Fund for grants to improve the infrastructure of municipalities such as: sewer, water and roads. I ask those of you who belong to the various environmental groups and fear the impact of development on the Adirondack environment and its ecosystems to truly consider supporting this idea. If you were to extend municipal sewer to a number of sensitive areas such as, lake fronts, along rivers, etc., the threat of a negative impact by development would be negligible. I would like to see the environmental community support such a proposal by a local government official. Is there a great need for the state to purchase more land? Most local governments and residents would say no! That does not mean that some purchases of development rights would not be acceptable, I believe they would. I urge local governments and environmentalists to come together, perhaps through the Adirondack Association of Towns and Villages, and work to receive E.P.F. funding by shifting monies within the fund from land purchases to grants for infrastructure. If successful, the infrastructure grants could serve two purposes: allow a sustainable growth in development, and provide the much needed infrastructure which would encourage business and industry to locate here, thereby providing economic development in the form of jobs.

Local governments as a group have to see some type of positive movement at the Adirondack Park Agency, not only with regard to a new agency (APA) map, of which I speak, but also through increased communication between the Agency and all of our local governments. I might suggest the Commissioners themselves go out and hold hearings, which would allow the people who live here year-round to discuss what they would like to see happen to the Agency. I realize that there has been a task force which has held such hearings and issued a report of their findings, however it is not the same as the Commissioners themselves holding the hearings. I feel that the Commissioners' hearing would serve two major benefits: first create a dialogue between the actual Commissioners and the public, second it would give the public the opportunity to see face to face who these people (Commissioners) are. The Adirondack resident is a very good judge of character, and perhaps their decision might be one which would surprise many people. I feel that these hearings would, without a doubt, serve to enhance relations between all parties.

This brings me now to local schools and the education of our young with regard to the development of a politically and environmentally educated citizenry for the future. I believe that the school districts throughout the Adirondack Park have done an excellent job educating our young people as to the unique environmental situation which exists here in their own backyard. I also believe that these same schools have done a great job teaching our young about the political realities which occur daily within the boundaries of the Adirondack Park such as: forest related jobs, our economy, what workable
forest lands mean to all of us, and what a benefit they are to a large number of Adirondackers. I would urge the various school districts, through the B.O.C.E.S. program, to develop an Adirondack curriculum which deals with the environmental and socio-political aspects of our area.

Some statistics which you may find interesting concerning residents who reside within the Adirondack Park include: 35% have a high school diploma, compared to only 29% statewide. Those figures in and of themselves speak positively about the local schools within the Adirondacks. On the other hand, the percent of residents who have a bachelors or graduate degree account for approximately 15% of our total Adirondack population. Statewide, the percent holding the same degree is 23%. The comparison between the percentage of residents who receive a high school diploma (35%) versus jobs are available in our region for college graduates? In my opinion, the jobs requiring a college degree are not here in great enough number for those who want to make the Adirondacks their home, therefore why should they go on and get a college degree. Some may argue this point with me, however, I am sure I am right by simply looking around my own town. Would you spend thousands of dollars on a college education knowing you want to always spend your life in an area that does not require that type of education to survive? I ask you, the economist out there, what can you do to help us? What can be done to provide better paying jobs, et cetera?

What do you think can be done to help improve medical care here within the Adirondacks? Did you know that we have only half the average number of doctors per capita as compared to the statewide average. Statewide, the average is 3 doctors per 1,000 people. Here in the Adirondacks, there are approximately 1.5 doctors per 1,000. Why? Think of how many more people there are throughout this region in the summer. What do you think the ratio is then? I ask you, the members and guests of this fine consortium, why do we not have more doctors? I am sure that there must be a way to overcome this, although it may require state involvement. There must be people dying throughout our region because they simply cannot get the medical care that they require. That is not to say that those who practice medicine here are not doing a good job, quite the
contrary, but there are not enough of them to go around. I am sure the type of medical care here is top quality however, the amount of care available here is unacceptable to all of us who live here. I urge the Adirondack Association of Towns and Villages and all of you to strive to greatly improve this situation, which needs to be seriously addressed.

Our entire economic situation here is not good. The people who live within the Park deserve and are entitled to the same economic opportunities as others in this state. Why are we not afforded those same benefits? I ask you to study this and help. The per capita income of people who reside here is approximately 28% below the state average of per capita income. That should not be acceptable. If the residents of our area had a higher standard of living there would be less animosity between them and the “Environmental Community.” The fear that less development means higher taxes would be somewhat diminished, since they could better afford to pay their own taxes and at the same time maintain the area where they live, in somewhat of a more picturesque or natural setting. Believe me, we also like to look at and appreciate the beauty of our own area.

Finally, it remains to be seen whether or not our new Governor will simply pacify us or truly make positive changes to benefit the residents of our Adirondack region. I believe there is much our Governor can do to help improve the economic conditions here in the Adirondacks. The Governor’s support, along with that of my friend Senator Stafford, could very easily amend the Environmental Protection Fund legislation and transfer funds from land purchases to much needed infrastructure, which would truly serve to benefit our area’s environment. I have a fear and perhaps should not express it, but as a locally elected government official who truly wants to see the people of the Adirondacks living conditions, economic opportunities, and medical care improve greatly, I feel I must. In the past, it was easy for us to speak out against our previous Governor and make our opinions known whenever we disagreed with what he was doing here in the Adirondacks — he was a Democrat. I am sure that you are all aware of the fact that the vast majority of locally elected officials throughout the Park are Republican.

My fear is simply that most elected officials will not speak out publicly against our Governor—a man who I believe had approximately a 100,000 vote plurality from the people of the twelve counties which make up our Adirondack region. However, should the Governor forget that fact, we must remind him, and not be hesitant to criticize him if something he does is not in our constituents’ best interest. Remember, we represent them and should be their voice to the officials in Albany. It is a two-way street. We did not fail to respond to a Democratic Governor when we disagreed with him and if we are honest, we will not fail to respond now should this Governor not support something we as elected Adirondack officials oppose. I do believe however, that the Governor will remember our support and will work with us. One way to start would be to fill the two expired seats on the A.P.A. Board with people who are on the Adirondack Association of Towns and Village’s list of possible appointees, since it is the only organization which truly speaks for the residents of the Adirondacks, and is made up solely of locally elected officials.

Last, I personally would like to see the boundary of the Adirondack Park, the Blue Line, become synonymous and serve as a coterminous boundary for several state agencies. Examples of this would be the D.E.C. Region V boundary becoming coterminous with the Blue Line boundary, as well as the D.O.T., the Department of Labor and D.E.D. It is not impossible, and there is no reason that this cannot be accomplished. We often hear how unique our region is, and I feel it should be treated as such. I believe my proposal would simplify all transactions between our people and the state agencies. For example, a town in D.E.C. Region V might be told to do something one way, while a town in D.E.C. Region VI might be told to handle the very same issue in another manner. With my proposal, fairness and continuity would be attained and all towns within this Adirondack Park would be addressed in the same fashion.

I am not sure what you can do to help promote these ideas, but I challenge you to work with us openly and honestly so we can move forward to care for both our people and our environment which, in turn, will only serve to benefit us all.