



A Vision for the Adirondack Park

By all accounts, the U.S. financial system is facing an historic crisis with Wall Street as the epicenter. New York State will need to drastically cut government spending with the resulting impact that the Adirondack region will not receive as much state support for infrastructure improvements or public services.

Although it is easy to dwell on negative scenarios for the Adirondacks and simply ‘hunker down’ to weather the coming financial storm, this situation also presents an extraordinary opportunity to envision a better future and set in place strategies to achieve them. One assumption is that the Adirondacks may be entering a period of less external support and needs to become more self-sufficient to solve its own problems regarding jobs creation, housing, food, energy, transportation, etc. The Adirondacks are a special place with abundant natural resources, energy resources and the intellectual capital to confront this crisis and emerge with a new economic model for this very special protected area.

Based on the Adirondack Council’s vision statement, the following are some ideas to move that vision forward over the coming year. In addition to the actions described below, the Council will continue its long-term efforts to reduce air pollution as the primary cause of global climate change, acid rain and mercury contamination, and to improve water quality across the Adirondack Park.

“We envision an Adirondack Park composed of large core wilderness areas connected to working farms and forests, and augmented by vibrant local communities, all within a diverse mosaic of biologically intact landscapes.”

...large core wilderness areas...

Large intact, functioning natural communities with a full array of native fauna and flora will be more resistant to invasive exotic species and more resilient to climate change than fragmented landscapes.

Opportunities for action:

- With recent land acquisitions by the Nature Conservancy and Open Space Institute, advocate for major additions to the Forest Preserve, guided by the Council’s 2020 Vision on Completing the Adirondack Wilderness System.

- Prepare a Concept Master Plan for the 408,000-acre Bob Marshall Great Wilderness based on ecosystem management principles by consolidating existing Forest Preserve units, designing a comprehensive network of trails, and demonstrating economic opportunities for local communities as ‘gateways’ to the largest wilderness complex in the East.
- Advocate for the removal of interior roads on the Forest Preserve, and better control and enforcement of the roadways and waterways that serve as entry points for invasive species.
- Engage local communities as stewards of the Forest Preserve lands within their towns by providing EPF contracts for trail construction and maintenance, invasive species removal, campground operations, etc. to reinforce a sense of pride in the land, as well as jobs.

...connected to working farms...

The Champlain Valley was once the breadbasket of the Northeast, but is now mostly fallow or hay fields. As concerns about food security and fuel miles increase, there is a growing demand for locally grown organic foods. The increased cost of imported fossil fuels is also opening a market for biomass energy crops such as willow (successfully demonstrated by SUNY/ESF at the Tully, NY research station).

Opportunities for action:

- Create economic incentives for regional farmers to produce North Country products and move them to downstate markets, as well as selling locally.
- Increase support for the Adirondack Harvest network, Community Supported Agriculture (e.g., Essex Farm) and organic agriculture (e.g., Rivermede Farm).
- Explore willow biomass energy production on fallow farm lands in the Lake Champlain Valley and possibilities to use CP railroad for bulk transport to the power plants.

...and working forests...

More than 3 million acres of the Adirondack Park are privately owned and the vast majority of that land is forested. Not long ago, Adirondack mills supplied pulp and paper and dimensional lumber to a global market. Today, most of the mills have closed and the last of the forest product industry lands have been sold to timber investment management organizations (TIMOs).

Opportunities for action:

- Improve monitoring of the 750,000 acres of forest lands with conservation easements via a network of partner organizations, aerial surveys, and cooperation with DEC.
- Expand conservation easements on currently unprotected forest lands with significant ecological values.
- Advocate for an expansion of the 480-A Timber Tax Abatement Program to include non-commercial lands of ecological value (e.g., wetlands, riparian corridors, rocky ledges, etc.) and demand full reimbursement of lost property taxes to affected towns.
- Explore sustainable forest biomass energy production that also ensures the forest’s ecological integrity.

- Create economic incentives to value ecosystem services provided by private forest lands (e.g., sustainable forestry certification, carbon sequestration, watershed protection, water and air filtration, nutrient recycling, wildlife habitat, scenic and recreational uses, etc.)

...and augmented by vibrant local communities...

Adirondack communities are increasingly worried about their economic survival as property taxes climb, energy costs increase, houses become less affordable, local populations age, and young people seek employment opportunities elsewhere. Many communities know they need to plan for their futures and secure the resources to get there but lack the expertise and funds to carry out comprehensive planning.

Opportunities for action:

- Secure additional smart growth funds for comprehensive local planning.
- Use smart growth principles to concentrate development in the existing population centers by installing broad-band telecommunications, revitalizing main streets, providing affordable housing built from local materials, upgrading water and wastewater treatment systems, and providing public transportation.
- Create incentives for ecologically sound uses of small scale renewable energy from solar, hydro, biomass and wind.
- Reduce exurban sprawl and habitat fragmentation in Resource Management and Rural Use zones by advocating for APA cluster development regulations and demonstrating the additional costs of municipal services (e.g., fire, police, emergency, school buses, road and utility maintenance, etc.)

...all within a diverse mosaic of biologically intact landscapes.

In a regional context, the Adirondack Park is a biogeographical island of green in an increasingly urbanized and suburbanized landscape. Within the Park, large lot subdivisions are fragmenting previously intact forests and farmlands. This situation is leading to a reduction in the biological diversity and ecological integrity of the Park.

Opportunities for action:

- Establish regional wildlife migration corridors between remaining large natural areas to permit native species to adjust to the coming impacts of climate change. Focus on restoring river corridors and flood plains, and enhancing known movement routes.
- Reconnect previously natural corridors from the Adirondacks to Tug Hill in the west, northwest to Algonquin Provincial Park in Canada; along the Lake Champlain-Richelieu River to the north; east to Vermont's Green Mountains; and south along the Hudson River valley.
- Make transportation corridors permeable to permit viable wildlife migration along terrestrial pathways, flyways, wetlands and water courses. The same linear natural open spaces can be used to sequester carbon, control flooding, remove contaminants from water bodies, and provide non-motorized recreation opportunities.

Conclusion

To achieve this ambitious vision for the future, the Adirondack Council will work with key organizations and individuals to build the coalitions that can produce the needed. Among them are the Adirondack Park Agency, Department of Environmental Conservation, local governments and state elected officials. In particular, the APA needs reform to return to its original mandate of comprehensive planning for the Adirondack Park and to enable local planning. The DEC should also reconfigure its regions to manage the Park as one administrative unit.

The Adirondack Park has been a marvelous hundred-plus-year experiment, an experiment that has succeeded on many levels. And just as it served as a model for the 20th century, we must move ahead to continue the experiment as a model for the 21st. The Council is prepared to collaborate with many organizations to face the challenges ahead.