

The Adirondack Association of Towns and Villages

A.A.T.V. — A Definition, a Direction

Dean D. LeFebvre

Within the Adirondack Park, among the beautiful mountains and along the lakes and rivers are 101 towns and villages either wholly or partially located within its boundaries. Of these towns and villages, 70% belong to the Adirondack Association of Towns and Villages, which is solely comprised of local elected government officials. The credibility of the Adirondack Association of Towns and Villages is considered to be second to none. Why? Because it is representative of the residents of the Adirondack Park in that it is the only group exclusively made up of local elected officials, and as such it is the true representative of the people who reside within the Adirondacks.

Many people wonder how the Adirondack Association of Towns and Villages (AATV) came to be. In 1992, following the demise of the Adirondack Planning Commission and another failed attempt by Governor Mario M. Cuomo to pass more restrictive Adirondack legislation, I wrote a guest editorial that first appeared in the *Adirondack Daily Enterprise* of Saranac Lake, New York, and shortly thereafter in the *Plattsburgh Press Republican*. Subsequently it was printed in several other newspapers throughout the Adirondacks in an abbreviated form.

The main thrust of my article was that the people of the Adirondacks, we who live here

year-round, should become proactive. Actually, I suggested at first that there be regional meetings among the Towns and Villages of the Adirondacks and from these meetings would come a consensus on various issues of concern to those of us who live here. I also suggested the coming together of the various economic groups from throughout the Park to try and develop an overall economic profile of where we are and where we should be headed economically.

Shortly after the publication of my guest editorial, I also sent out personal requests to all supervisors and mayors throughout the Adirondacks to see what, if any, interest was there for us to do anything for ourselves. The response started out slowly with Supervisor George Canon of Newcomb being the first, followed by others who became the core group to form the AATV. The others were Supervisors Jean Raymond of Edenburg, Jean Olsen of Horicon, Andy Halloran of Minerva, Fred Monroe of Chester, and Maynard Baker of Warrensburg. Without the help of these other Supervisors and the many hours they put into this cause, the Adirondack Association of Towns and Villages would not exist to benefit our people. December 12, 1992, I believe will always be remembered as the day when the residents of the Adirondacks decided the time had come to unite and begin

Dean D. LeFebvre is
President of AATV
and Supervisor,
Town of Altamont

“ . . . The more land that is kept as timberlands that produce forest products helps our economy through the vast number of local jobs provided. . . ”

speaking with a unified voice. On that date in Newcomb, New York, at the Visitors Interpretive Center the AATV was born. Following the December 12th meeting came the actual first official delegate meeting, held in Tupper Lake on January 30, 1993. At this time, the bylaws were approved and our officers elected. Also, on January 30th the Association debated and passed several resolutions.

The Adirondack Association of Towns and Villages divided the Adirondack Park into five regions at its January 30th meeting. Each of the five regions is represented on the Executive Committee of the AATV by one regional director. The remainder of the executive committee is comprised of a president and five directors at large from throughout the Adirondack Park. The total number of elected officials on the executive committee is 11. The 11 members represent a good cross section of the Adirondacks elected local officials. The five regions are comprised of all the Towns or Villages either wholly or partially within their respective boundaries and that of the Park as well. Region A consists of Clinton and Franklin County Towns and Villages. Region B is solely Essex County. Region C is made up of Washington, Warren and Saratoga Counties. Region D is Hamilton and Fulton Counties. The final region, Region E, includes St. Lawrence,

Lewis, Herkimer, and Oneida counties.

One resolution passed by the AATV following four official meetings called for new local APA commissioners to be chosen from regional lists provided by the AATV. The AATV held four regional conventions from four of the five regions, which the Adirondack Park had been divided into by our Association. One region, Region A (Clinton and Franklin Counties), did not hold a convention to select nominees for the post of A.P.A. commissioner. Commissioner James Frenette of Tupper Lake was from the region and had only shortly beforehand been appointed by the Governor and confirmed by the State Senate. Following the four regional conventions, I personally provided to the Governor's Office a list of three people from each of the four regions for a total of twelve potential nominees. Fortunately for the AATV and the people of the Adirondacks, the Governor saw fit to select two of our nominees. So, of three new local commissioners nominated by the Governor in June of 1992, two came from our list — Barbara Sweet of Newcomb and Richard Lefebvre of Caroga Lake, both of whom now serve as commissioners of the APA. Their appointments are something of which I and the entire Adirondack Association of Towns and Villages are proud.

Many people here in the

Adirondacks feel that those two appointments are perhaps the most significant changes at the Park Agency since its inception on behalf of the people who reside here year-round. There was a need for a true local perspective, and it seems as if that may have been accomplished to a degree with the Sweet and LeFebvre appointments, following Frenette a year earlier.

Another Association resolution called for State reimbursement of taxes on Forestlands under Real Property Tax laws 480 and 480A. I feel that this resolution is good, and I believe it will serve two purposes. First, it will provide additional and much needed tax revenues to our Adirondack Towns, Counties, and School Districts. Also, the more land that is kept as timberlands that produce forest products helps our economy through the vast number of local jobs provided. Finally, and of great importance to all of us, is that these lands under the Real Property Tax Laws 480 and 480A help to definitely maintain the “open space” character of our region. They are in no way harmful to the environment, while acting as a part of our heritage as well as offering lumbering opportunities. Interestingly enough, the environmentalists have a fear of over-development within the Adirondacks. While I do not believe this to be true, the maintenance of large or small tracts of lands as timberlands

would help to eliminate that fear. The simplest way to do this is by the state reimbursing the local governments for the lost tax revenue. I further believe more lands will be placed under these tax programs by landowners once they know that their municipalities will not lose any of the much-needed tax dollars for which the state would reimburse them.

LEGISLATION

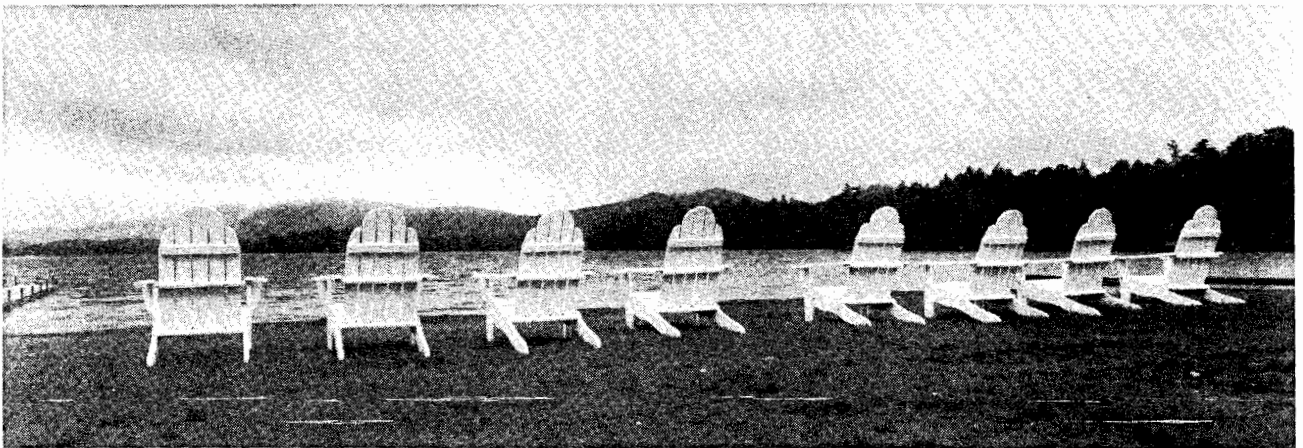
I am a firm believer that there is a need for legislation. The legislation which I believe is needed is not the same old type of legislation which has been proposed previously, calling for more land restriction upon the Adirondacks. The first type of legislation that I propose and support would establish a special fund to provide monies to the Adirondack Towns and Vil-

much-needed infrastructure it is cost prohibitive for a company or business to locate within the Adirondacks and create new jobs and an increased tax base.

I believe that this type of legislation should have a wide base of support from all sides in the Adirondack debate, since everyone says how important economic development is to our region and the people who live here. I further believe that someone such as our great State Senator Ronald Stafford, who is Chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, would be very much in support of such a bill, since a vast majority of his district encompasses the Adirondacks. I foresee the bill as something that would provide grants to our Adirondack local governments to provide much needed infrastructure for economic development. The money would be

should also support this type of infrastructure grant funding, because some of their environmental concerns with regard to development would definitely be diminished if Towns and Villages here in our region could provide proper sewer and water, etc., to its people, not only those who now own homes, but especially where there might be new construction. Also, I would hope that all environmental factions would agree with me and other local government officials of the benefits to all of this type of grant legislation for infrastructure.

The next piece of legislation that I believe would benefit the Towns and Villages within the Adirondacks would deal with its economic development specifically. I believe, as I did two years ago, that there is a need for a meeting to take place



Blue Mountain Lake

Photo by Mark Kurtz

lages for infrastructure. Infrastructure, which is water and sewer lines as well as roads, is badly needed by many towns and villages throughout the Adirondacks. One reason why I believe infrastructure funding to be so important is with regard to economic development. What company or business wants to locate where there is no infrastructure in place? Without this

funded each year at a certain level, and that level would be maintained year after year to allow the various Adirondack Towns and Villages the advantage of the grant allotment. One must remember that our region is already hindered somewhat more than other areas of our state, due to our regional state implemented zoning, the Adirondack Park Agency. I feel the Agency

among the various economic development groups. The purpose of the meeting would be to garner a consensus as to exactly what type of economic development would best serve the residents of the Adirondacks. I believe we, or should I say they, should perhaps concern themselves with trying to enhance some of our already existing industries such as the forest products industry.

I would suggest that perhaps manufacturers of wood products be granted certain incentives, whether it be through taxes or outright grants for construction, in return for the guarantee of much needed new jobs for the Adirondacks. It has never made much sense to me that although we have an abundant supply of raw material (wood), we ship it outside our region to be processed or used in the construction of many wood products.

I feel very strongly about this, and I also feel that the Adirondack Economic Development Corporation in Saranac Lake, under the able leadership of Ernest Hohmeyer, could serve as the overall catalyst in this procedure, or of setting up the meeting of all the various groups. Although those of you who live outside the Adirondack Park may not fully understand this, again I believe that because of the Adirondack Park Agency, if even by perception only, we lag behind other areas in economic development, and yet we should not. There is a perception of great difficulty in anyone trying to establish any type of economic venture within the Blue Line or Park boundaries.

I believe that the AATV should push hard to follow through on my ideas and that the other executive committee members must try to do as I originally intended — put aside what is only best for them or their own town and look at what is best for the entire region. That was my original premise when I started out, and lately I feel that the AATV has strayed from it. It will not benefit any of us if we become self-centered; it will benefit us all if we work together for

the overall economic well-being of the region's people.

The final type of legislation I would like to see is with regard to financial aid to local governments to defray the costs of cleaning up or revitalizing many of our lakes here within the Adirondacks. Our beautiful lakes play such an important role — not only from an aesthetic viewpoint, but also as a part of our own socio-economic wealth. I also visualize this specific piece of legislation being set up in the form of grants once again to the Towns and Villages that can show a need. I also hope and believe that this type of legislation should receive widespread support from all of the various groups involved in the Adirondack debate.

I believe that local government and its leaders are long overdue in asking for these three pieces of legislation. If we can unite behind these types of legislation, we can all benefit greatly not only in the short term but definitely over the long term. We must become pro-active and not just criticize or complain about our plight here in the Adirondacks under the APA. We must do something to benefit our area and the people who live here and are often forgotten. For far too long we as a people have not been united, and now with the Adirondack Association of Towns and Villages we have found a very strong and unified voice for the people of the Adirondacks. The Association has proven our credibility in Albany, and we should use that to our advantage and the advantage of our area and people. We must remain forward-thinking and positive.

In summation, you can

see how much each of the three segments of my plan or ideas is contingent upon the others. I truly do believe these ideas of mine are not out of reach and that by working together the Adirondack region, which I and an additional 130,000 people call home, can truly benefit both environmentally and economically. For far to long, we have not taken a pro-active approach; if we are to succeed we must be forward thinking and not only complain about our circumstances but try and do something to change them.

LAND SALES

No one should come between a willing seller and a willing buyer. I do, however, feel that in the interest of our area, its people, and our way of life, great concern should be taken by anyone who intends to sell land to the State of New York. Although the State of New York does pay property taxes on lands it owns within the Adirondacks, there is no guarantee that will continue forever. Until there is a guarantee on the permanent payment of taxes, any and all towns and their residents should have a concern. What would happen to certain towns if the state stopped paying taxes on the lands it already owns? I will tell you some towns would go bankrupt. This also is an issue which the Adirondack Association of Towns and Villages has addressed in one of our resolutions. Resolution #3 of 1994 calls for the Amendment of Real Property Tax Law Section 532 to add a new subsection (h), which would read as follows:

"532 (h) No law repeal-

ing subsection (a) hereof shall be effective unless enacted by the legislature at two successive regular sessions by a two-thirds vote of the Senate and the Assembly."

Resolution 3 of 1994 also supports the Amendment of Article VII of the New York State Constitution to provide a new additional Section 20:

"The State Budget shall include the amount necessary to pay the real property taxes on wild or forest lands owned by the state within the forest preserve."

Along with us from local government, the "environmental groups" could and should wholeheartedly support the above two areas. Why? because they are always saying how the State pays its fair share of taxes on its forest lands here in the Adirondacks. This may be true; however, these two changes would serve as better guarantees as to the continuation of these taxes and the payment thereof.

Let's return to the issue at hand — parcels of land being either sold outright in fee or through the purchase of easements. Again, until there is some type of guarantee on taxes, I feel that many local towns will oppose any outright purchase by the state of any forestlands within the Adirondacks. I personally feel that any timberland owner, whether they be owners of large or small parcels, should consider selling only the development rights if any rights at all. Further, I feel that if they should decide to sell these development rights they should consider selling them not in perpetuity, but

in blocks let us say of 15 or 20 years. My reasoning is simple: no one knows what the future holds or what value those same lands may have 15 or 20 years from now. It also keeps the landowner somewhat in control over these lands, not only from an economical standpoint — that is to say that the value of those development rights will or should increase — but also the development itself of the property. I also feel that the sale of the so-called conservation easements only causes controversy for the landowner. What you have are our traditional leased hunting clubs coming into conflict with those people who then have free access to their leased lands at certain times of year. However, we find they are accessing them year round in many cases.

What do you think will happen to such parcels as Follensby and others, once the State takes fee title? Do you think the pond will still have fish in it in years to come, or will it be fished out? What about the land itself if ten or twenty thousand people a year were to access it annually? Would it remain unharmed and beautiful, or would it become a littered mess? What about the additional manpower needs and cost to patrol and maintain these parcels? I am not sure that the existing aesthetic and natural beauty will remain after State acquisition in fee.

Finally, all that I have ever heard from the true environmentalist is this perceived fear of over-development. That is why the purchase of development rights only makes sense and seems logical; however, those two *sense* and *logical* sometimes get lost in higher forms of

government and among certain groups. I truly hope that will not be the case in regards to this issue, and I feel that if this approach is taken there could be less animosity amongst all parties. If this approach were taken, many landowners would consider the sale of development rights only for a 15- or 20-year period. The landowner would still maintain ownership and control of all other aspects of their property. This would then be a win-win situation, since the landowner would gain much needed revenue to help offset the expense of maintaining the land, and the open space character for which some seem so concerned would also be guaranteed for a time. All anyone has to do is look at the management of these lands now, by their owners, to see that they are not interested in developing major portions of their land.

I believe that the AATV and I could act as a vehicle to help bring about a meeting between the State and various owners of crucial pieces of Adirondack forestlands. The purpose of the meeting would be to discuss the proposed idea of selling only the development rights to these properties for a specified amount of time, since none have a crystal ball to see what the future may hold in store.

THE FEELINGS NOW

We all need to begin taking a more moderate and logical approach on Adirondack issues. I believe that the time is long overdue for the environmental groups to try and moderate their positions. People, no matter how easy-going, will only be pushed aside and ignored for so long,

and then they will make themselves heard. Some of us wonder if the 130,000 year-round residents are not in some way being discriminated against. Think about it for a moment — no other people in the state fall under State-mandated zoning regulations, except us. Do you think this type of policy could exist anywhere else in our state to the degree it exists here? I think not. One of the hardest things that the people of Adirondacks have to deal with is that they are among the most patriotic of any in this state or elsewhere, as statistics have and will continue to bear out. So, now you can perhaps understand how people who can believe so much in their country and state question how it can be that their own private lands can be regulated by the State, unlike anywhere else. Why? Also, there is definitely a need for more change at the Adirondack Park Agency. I urge the Governor, whoever it may be following the election, to truly consider making changes at the Park Agency before trying to implement any more restrictions.

We as a people need to know and feel that we have not been overlooked when people outside the Adirondacks discuss the Park's future. We feel far too often that we are lost among the beautiful mountains, lakes, rivers, and streams. Most times when the Adirondacks are discussed by people, they usually discuss the mountains, lakes, and rivers, etc., and how important and valuable they are to all. I for one believe that the greatest asset of the Adirondacks is its people. They are its most valuable and unique commodity. Yes, there are people who live here, good hard working friendly

people, who own their own land. That's right - the Adirondack Park is made up of approximately 6 million acres of both public (State-owned) and private land. As of now the State owns approximately over 50% of these lands, which again most people feel is sufficient.

The Adirondack Park Agency map, I feel, needs to be re-visited, since it has been over 20 years since its creation. Certain areas such as rural use (8-acre zoning) many feel should be changed or amended to 3 1/2-acre zoning to allow for a somewhat sustainable growth in tax base, while at the same time not causing any adverse environmental impact. Take into account what I have said earlier about infrastructure and grants, and there would be no negative environmental impact. If you were to take the total number of residents here in the Adirondacks (130,000) divide them into the number of acres of land (6 million) you would find that it works out to one person, man, woman, or child for every 46 acres of land. Does that seem as if we are overdeveloped or becoming overcrowded, or endangering the environment?

Another point which should be made here deals with a requirement which is placed on landowners who plan to develop some of their land. Although their development plans may very well meet all APA criteria, the Agency in many instances places an undue requirement upon those landowners. This would come in the form of having them submit a masterplan as the future uses of their own lands. Why? It is not set forth in any statute of the Agency or anywhere else, yet

once again we have the Agency creating their own rules, rather than following their legislative mandate.

The Adirondack Association of Towns and Villages has supported and passed a resolution chastising the Agency for calling for or requiring such masterplans. How can any landowner, whether large or small, know what the future holds? For the Agency to require these masterplans is just another method by which they can further prohibit the development or use of private lands by their owners. If these owners do not submit the masterplans, they are often times refused an original permit for a qualifying plan or sub-division. It is almost as if it is a form of blackmail on the part of the APA. They should follow their mandate and not take it upon themselves to legislate. The Agency does not have that authority.

Finally, I and fellow members of the AATV believe there is still room for many more improvements at the APA. Many people feel there should be several new commissioners appointed at the Agency. These new commissioners would not only be the so-called local or park resident commissioners, but also those who reside outside of the park boundary as well. I wonder just how many people of our state realize that as of now only three out of the eleven are serving unexpired terms. The other commissioners who have not been re-confirmed by the State Senate should all be replaced, which would call for the Governor to nominate several new commissioners aside from those already existing state appointees who do not need to be re-confirmed.

Also, a vast majority of people throughout the Adirondacks believe there is a great need at the Park Agency for a new executive director, although very few will say so publicly. I along with the AATV feel that the Governor could go a long way toward showing that he truly does care about the people of the Adirondacks by making these new appointments. Hopefully, his nominees will be people with common sense and a concern for people as well as the natural resources found in our region. I believe this can and should be accomplished for the benefit of all.

STATE LANDS

How much is enough? It is said that the State of New York owns approximately 50% of the 6 million acres known as the Adirondack Park. Why does anyone own land? What purpose does it serve by the State owning approximately 3 million acres here in our Adirondack region? Is it for the public good, or is it as Theodore Roosevelt once said, "So we would have a future timber resource"? I am not sure, but I do believe the time has come for the State of New York to take a look at the management policy of its forestlands here in the Adirondacks. I believe that the State should talk to some of its own foresters at the DEC and see if they do not agree that maybe the time has come to consider some timber harvesting of specific sections of the Adirondack state forestlands. Why? Because as with any forest, timber harvesting creates new growth, which in turn revitalizes the forest, both environmentally and with regard to habitat and wild-

life.

As any environmentalist may know, new young trees are actually more beneficial to our environment than are the much larger, older ones. Young trees definitely give off more oxygen than older trees, which would serve to benefit us all. Also, I believe that there would be more wildlife on the state lands than there has been for some time. This is because new growth means more food and timber harvesting produces better habitats for many varied kinds of wildlife. For example, I believe that hunting would improve on State forestlands, and that is another benefit for the many hunters who cannot hunt the private lands, where there is definitely more game to hunt. Why? Because good forestry management

be considered as part of a course of study for the forestry students. It should not merely be looked at as a teaching experience, nor should it be looked at as a money maker. However, that is not to say that the State could not realize some economic benefit. The true longlasting benefit would be that some State forestlands would be re-vitalized with new growth, more wildlife, etc. What better benefit for our future generations than to know that there would always be growing vital state forestlands with an abundance of wildlife for them to enjoy? We should not sit by and watch much of our State forestlands here in the Adirondacks go to ruin.

Once again, all sides should see that his type of very selective timber harvesting is to

" In no way can the residents of the Adirondacks be forgotten or overlooked any longer . . . "

has provided the necessary food and habitat to sustain wildlife.

I propose that the State should seek support of a Constitutional Amendment, which if presented properly would allow them to timber harvest its Adirondack lands. The project as I see it would involve the DEC and their foresters from the State Schools of Forestry. It would be a very selective program, with perhaps only certain areas to be cut each year over a five-year period or longer.

The trees to be cut would be selected by the foresters and hauled out by horses rather than machines, so as to not unduly impact the environment adversely.

The entire program could

the benefit of all and support such a measure. I believe that only the most extreme environmental groups would oppose this type of State supervised timber harvesting.

In conclusion, I feel that everyone should be realistic and honest about what is best for the people of the Adirondacks. In no way can the residents of the Adirondacks be forgotten or overlooked any longer. They are the people who live here and love these mountains the most. We as a people need to be included in any discussions of Adirondack issues if they are to be successful or beneficial. If this occurs, then much of what I have said will happen.