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Adirondack Caucus launch attracts a crowd

By NATHAN BROWN, Enterprise Staff Writer

CHESTERTOWN - The line to get into the Chester Municipal Center extended out the door a little before 7 p.m. Thursday, and more than 100 people, the majority middle-aged or old, packed into the auditorium for the Adirondack Caucus' first public forum.

The caucus is being organized by Adirondack legislators in Albany to better push for the area's concerns, and its organizers spent the second part of the two-hour meeting listening to the concerns of the attendees and hearing their suggestions.

Julie M. Berry, of Indian Lake, said she works two or three jobs, and "it's getting to the point where I can't work 24/7."

One of Berry's jobs is in providing health care for seniors. She said the area is going to have to improve its health care facilities to deal with the aging population.

In contrast, "The biggest problem I see is, there is nothing for kids to do," said Jay Holcomb, one of a handful of younger people at the meeting. "There are no kids here."

Holcomb said there are plenty of low-cost activities that could be organized for young people, such as nature walks. He also mentioned being picked up earlier that day by the police for hitchhiking, which he said he does because he doesn't have a car.

"I'm poor," Holcomb said. "I have a job, and I'm poor."

The majority of the people who spoke were Warren and Hamilton County residents, but at least one person came from Fine, in St. Lawrence County, and at least two from the town of Keene. Numerous town officials also came, including some Franklin and Essex county supervisors.

Before the public comment period, Jim Martin and Brad Dake gave a presentation on the Adirondack Park Regional Assessment Project. The report, which was done last year, showed the Adirondacks to have an aging population, declining school enrollments and a heavy dependence on government jobs, and has often been quoted since by local officials as showing the need for increased economic development in the Adirondacks.

State Sen. Betty Little, R-Queensbury, said the APRAP confirmed many trends that people had noticed already.

"Now we have not just 'I thoughts,' but the proof is here in the pudding," Little said.

Some areas on the fringes of the Park are gaining population, but the center of the Park is losing people as the birth rate declines and young people leave to find work elsewhere. For example, the median age in the town of Newcomb was 51 in 2000, and the median age parkwide jumped by about 10 years from 1980 to 2000.

"You're aging as a population at half the speed of time," said Dake, who was the APRAP's steering chairman. "That's a pretty scary prospect."

Lorraine Duvall of Keene, who is on the board of directors of the environmental group Protect the Adirondacks!, said people need to compare the APRAP's data to that of other rural areas. Population loss is happening in other rural areas, too, and isn't being caused by the Adirondack Park's existence, she said.

"You're right: Figures lie, and liars figure," said Neil McGovern of Lake Pleasant, "but those pictures do not lie," referring to maps that show that only 0.4 percent of the land in the Park is in areas the state Adirondack Park Agency classifies as hamlets, or the areas where most development takes place.

Little, Assemblywomen Teresa Sayward, R-Willsboro, and Janet Duprey, R-Peru, Warren County Board of Supervisors Chairman Fred Monroe and Hamilton County Board of Supervisors Chairman Bill Farber sat at the front of the auditorium and conducted the meeting.

The Adirondack Park is about one-fifth of the state geographically but only has about 130,000 people. The idea of the caucus is to increase the region's clout in Albany by working as a group.

The Park is entirely represented by Republicans in Albany, but Little said Democratic Sen. Neil Breslin, D-Bethlehem, and Assemblyman George Latimer, D-Westchester County, both of whom have summer homes in the Adirondacks, are on board. Democratic Sen. Darrel Aubertine, D-Cape Vincent, whose district borders the Adirondacks, has also expressed interest, Little said.

Sayward said the idea for the caucus came from Garry Douglas and Todd Shimkus, heads of the Plattsburgh-North Country and Adirondack Regional chambers of commerce, respectively.

The caucus' first legislative goal is to create a special Adirondack economic zone, an idea that has found favor with local officials, business groups and environmental groups alike. The Empire Zone program requires businesses to create 50 jobs to qualify, which is unrealistic in a region where so many private employers are small businesses, Douglas said.

Dave Scranton of Inlet said the state should stop buying land and that preservationist groups hold too much sway with the Adirondack Park Agency. Some people applauded as Scranton said something needs to be done about what he called the Adirondack Council's "pipeline to the board of directors" of the APA. Farber took back the microphone.

Taking back the microphone, Farber said he didn't disagree with some of Scranton's comments but wanted to keep the meeting positive and thinks the caucus should focus on things it can achieve.

"We ought to pick wins first, and head in that direction," Farber said.

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