

WNBZ

June 17, 2010

Environmentalists, officials team up for planning grant

In the wake of last year's Adirondack Park Regional Assessment Project and with no end to the state's budget crisis in sight, environmentalists and state and local officials are teaming up in the hopes of developing an economic development strategy for the park.

The new project is being spearheaded by the same groups that produced the \$93,000 APRAP – the Adirondack North Country Association and the Adirondack Association of Towns and Villages.

But this time, officials are seeking up to \$2 million in recently-announced funds through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Environmental Protection Agency. The monies would be used to develop strategies to increase private sector proliferation and go to the potential implementation of said strategies.

Bill Farber is chairman of the Hamilton County Board of Supervisors and a former president of the Adirondack Association of Towns and Villages.

“The APRAP has brought a lot of attention to the Adirondacks and some of the demographic changes like housing affordability, whether or not schools or fire departments can survive,” Farber said. “Rather than spending a huge amount of time pointing our fingers at each other, what we really need to do is plan for how we are going to change the demographics.”

Farber says the current state budget crisis is partially driving the initiative because the high-paying state and municipal jobs that prop up the region's middle class are likely to disappear.

Officials said HUD's official request for proposals has yet to be released, but groups from across the Adirondack political spectrum are jumping on board with the concept.

Adirondack Council Executive Director Brian Houseal sits on the state-funded Adirondack Planning Initiative Steering Committee.

“The outcome of this process should be to create meaningful private sector employment opportunities where people live, work and play in a high quality environment,” Houseal said. “It's really to trigger a region-wide smart growth strategy for the Adirondack Park.”

Houseal says the study would have to look at – quote – “sub-regions of the park.” He and Farber both note the huge divergence of communities within the Adirondacks, ranging from tiny towns like Clifton-Fine to cultural centers like Saranac Lake.

“This is an effort to take this on at a park-wide level, but the trick will be to plan on a sub – regional basis,” he said. “So like the Warrensburg area or the northern tier. So we sort of break out of the hamlet to hamlet approach to something more integrated.”

The study would focus on the principles of smart growth and hamlet-based development.

Since the APRAP's release, environmental groups have complained that it's been used by local governments as a lobbying tool. Local officials argue that it's evidence of the Forest Preserve's negative impact on the region's economy.

Environmental groups point to the economic states of other rural, tourist-driven regions outside of the Blue Line as evidence that the preserve isn't the reason the APRAP found relative poverty in the region.

But for Farber, whether or not the Forest Preserve is a detriment is moot and the focus must be how it can be used to further the private economic development in the park.

"I tend to agree with Brian Houseal that it is high time we look at the Forest Preserve, determine whether it's an economic benefit and if it isn't find out how to make sure it is," Farber said.

The Adirondack Park Agency has also volunteered its services in the project, offering staff and specialized assistance.

APA Executive Director Terry Martino was ANCA's leader during the development of the APRAP.

Agency spokesman Keith McKeever said this fact puts the APA in a prime position to be of assistance.

"Terry really thinks that this step is a direct result of and the next step from the APRAP study itself," McKeever said.

Martino also sits on the steering committee.

Officials said when the HUD money becomes available, a region-wide congressional lobbying effort will likely commence to steer funding in the park's direction.

-Jon Alexander, 6-17-10