

Adirondack Almanack
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BLOG ENTRY

Commentary: Ron Stafford, Adirondack Conservationist

Two weeks before Ron Stafford died on June 24, 2005, the North Country's longtime state Senator was honored by the Adirondack Council on its 30th anniversary.

I thought of Stafford when Adirondack Almanack editor John Warren decided to solicit nominations for a list of influential Adirondack leaders.

While some might argue that Stafford's importance lies in the number of prison jobs he created in the North Country, or in the millions in state funds he brought back to the district, I would argue that he deserves to be remembered as an Adirondack conservationist.

Though conventional wisdom might say otherwise, the Adirondack Council's award to Stafford was richly deserved.

According to conventional wisdom, Stafford used his office to obstruct the protection of the Adirondacks.

In the early 1970s, he weakened the Adirondack Park Agency's private land use management plan before it was allowed to pass the Senate and he tried to delay its implementation by a year. In the years that followed, he sponsored bills that would have abolished the APA. In the 1980s and 90s, he made certain that the recommendations of the Berle Commission, which would have tightened environmental controls in the Adirondacks, never saw the light of day. And he blocked funding for land acquisition.

So why did the Adirondack Council honor him? In part it was for his efforts to control acid rain and grant local governments the authority to ban jet skis.

He was also as responsible as any other single individual for the passage of Governor George Pataki's environmental bond act, which has generated millions of dollars for clean waters and wilderness protection.

But the Adirondack Council was not honoring him for a late-in-life change of heart. Without Ron Stafford in the Senate for 35 years, the Adirondacks would have much less protection than they have today.

In the 1990s, Stafford was accused of being a tool of developers. Stafford was never anyone's tool, certainly not that of developers. Political power, the ability to shape events in the North Country, interested Stafford, not money.

Perspective, Stafford never tired of saying, depends upon where you stand. He also frequently reminded younger politicians to pay attention to their base, or risk losing office.

Stafford's perspective was shaped by his position as the representative of a constituency that was deeply old fashioned, but not necessarily politically conservative.

It included local government officials who resented threats to their autonomy, which any regulation delivered down from Albany could appear to be.

It also included a succession of anti-government demagogues with a talent for fanning the resentments of a people who felt deprived of opportunity.

Stafford knew that he could move no further, and no more quickly, than this constituency would allow. But what he could not do publicly, he could do behind the scenes.

During the drafting of the Adirondack Park Agency Act, he was, I have been told, responsible for extending the boundaries of the blue line to include the Champlain Valley.

When the Senate and the Assembly voted to delay the implementation of the Private Land Use Management Plan, he restrained his North Country colleagues in the Assembly, Andy Ryan and Glenn Harris, from mounting a campaign to override Rockefeller's veto of their bill.

And when he was compelled to move, as when the Senate Majority prevailed upon him to consent to the passage of the act creating the Environmental Protection Fund in 1993, he made certain that local governments would support it through the benefits they continue to receive.

By these means, Stafford retained office. Who now remembers Mrs. Newberry, Tony D'Elia, Dick Purdue or Don Gerdts? Stafford outlasted them all. And because he retained office, he prevented people like these from assuming power, and truly stripping the Adirondacks of its protections.

Stafford had as deep a love as any for the natural world. He did not go into the woods out of affectation, and his desire to protect the Adirondacks was genuine. But he never called himself an environmentalist, because the protection of the environment was not, for him, an end in itself, but a means, a means of preserving the way of life that we who live in the Adirondacks have been given.

Stafford never wanted to go to Washington, or even be far removed from the place of his birth. He protected the Adirondacks because it was home.

For news and commentary from Lake George, read the Lake George Mirror.

NOTE: This piece was written by Anthony Hall (John Warren only posted it for him!)

Posted by John Warren

