

Adirondack Daily Enterprise
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Common Ground Alliance to focus on sustainable private-sector jobs

LONG LAKE - The Adirondack Common Ground Alliance will hold its fourth annual summer conference at the Sabattis Pavilion here on Wednesday in an effort to hammer out a strategy for building long-lasting, private-sector employment in the 103 towns and villages that comprise the Adirondack Park.

The Common Ground Alliance is a forum for public-private collaboration. State and local governments, nonprofit organizations, business owners, stakeholders and residents of the Park participate as equals. The alliance works to promote the common good of the communities, residents and resources of the Park, not to further specific organizational, institutional or individual agendas.

The Adirondack Park is a 9,300-square-mile region of upstate New York encompassing the headwaters of the state's major rivers, its tallest mountains and thousands of lakes and ponds. Home to 132,000 year-round residents, half of the Park is private land, governed by a state land-use plan while the other half is "forever wild" state-owned Forest Preserve, where logging and development are banned.

Over the past two years, the alliance has developed a 14-point "blueprint" of economic and environmental challenges for its members to tackle together. Issues include property taxes, high-speed communications, energy, infrastructure development, land-use issues, marketing opportunities, affordable housing, rural health care, main street revitalization, control of invasive species and curbing acid rain.

"We are in a unique position in the Adirondack Park - one that presents both advantages and drawbacks in terms of building our rural economy," said Bill Farber, chairman of the Hamilton County Board of Supervisors. "We have more protected wild lands than any four national parks in the contiguous United States. But we also have more than 100 small communities embedded within those wild lands - something no national park has. The key to the Park's future is finding ways to build on these opportunities while protecting the health and beauty of the wild lands and waters that millions of people come here to enjoy."

"Our communities are the year-round support system for the people who want to explore our vast reserve of mountains, forests and waters," said Kate Fish, executive director of the Adirondack North Country Association. "But they are also much, much more than that. They are home to 132,000 people who live and work full-time in the Adirondacks. Many of our communities are very small, physically isolated from the other 20 million people in the state. We want our communities to become much more economically resilient, able to attract new residents, new visitors and grow new businesses."

"Currently more than 30 percent of all employment in the Adirondacks is in state and local government," said Brian Towers, president of the Adirondack Association of Towns and Villages. "With the reality of dwindling state and local budgets, the need to expand the private sector economy within the Park becomes obvious. Just as the state has designated the Adirondack Park as a unique zone for purposes of environmental conservation, a new state economic development program must designate the Adirondacks as a special economic zone in which small and micro businesses are seen as the bedrock of development and employment."

"We need planning and marketing assistance to take advantage of economic opportunities that don't exist in other parts of New York, or the Northeast," said Zoe Smith, director of the Wildlife Conservation Society's Adirondack Program. "We have a laid-out plan for the public lands and waters for the Adirondack Park, but we need a complementary plan for how to take economic advantage of these natural resources for our communities."

"We have a good plan for the acquisition of additional public lands and waters for the Adirondack Park," said Brian L. Houseal, executive director of the Adirondack Council, the Park's largest environmental organization. "But we don't have a complementary plan for how to take economic advantage of the natural wonders outside that exist just a few blocks from Main Street. How do our communities reap the economic benefits for having constitutionally protected Forest Preserve in them? What businesses would thrive near the entrance to a huge wilderness? How do we use our clean air and abundant clean water to our best advantage?"

"The state's main focus for economic development is on big cities," said Ross Whaley, senior advisor to the Adirondack Landowners Association. "We don't have any cities. But the Adirondacks bring millions of people to New York every year. We need a centralized economic development office and plan capable of promoting the whole Adirondack Park, not just individual towns or villages."

Participants will hear updates on positive changes within the Adirondacks including the creation of the Adirondack Non-Profit Network, Tupper Lake ARISE, as well as trail and arts and culture projects in Clifton Fine and Old Forge respectively.

Common Ground Alliance core team members include Ray Curran, Adirondack Sustainable Communities, Inc.; Bill Farber, chairman, Hamilton County Board of Supervisors; Brian Houseal, executive director, The Adirondack Council; Kate Fish, executive director, Adirondack North Country Association; J.R. Risley, Adirondack Economic Development Corporation; Greg Hill, Adirondack North Country Association; Zoe Smith, Wildlife Conservation Society; Brian Towers, president, Adirondack Association of Towns and Villages; Lani Ulrich, Adirondack Park Agency, founding director of CAP-21; Gregg Wallace, Wallace Contracting; Ross Whaley, senior advisor, Adirondack Landowners Association.