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DEC chief marks environmental success stories

Grannis touring state in hybrid SUV for Earth Day events

BY STEPHEN WILLIAMS Gazette Reporter

When state Environmental Conservation Commissioner Pete Grannis was a young tax lawyer helping organize the first Earth Day in New York City in 1970, he could smell the Hudson River.

“The Hudson River was basically a polluted open sewer,” Grannis said Monday, beginning a week of events leading up to Thursday’s 40th anniversary of Earth Day.

“Today, except right after a major rainstorm, it’s basically swimmable,” he said.

Grannis used the backdrop of lower Lake George, as seen from the top of state-owned Prospect Mountain, to highlight some of what’s been accomplished since 1970 to reverse pollution and protect the environment.

“Across the state, air and water quality have improved dramatically,” he said.

The official Earth Day is Thursday, but events are marking the anniversary all this week.

That first Earth Day was a major event for the modern environmental movement, leading to Congress passing the federal clean air and clean water acts and creation of the Environmental Protection Agency, Grannis and other speakers said.

The commissioner will be touring the state this week in a state-owned, plug-in electric-gas hybrid Ford Escape. He will highlight local environmental achievements today in Syracuse and Rochester, Wednesday in Buffalo and Thursday in Albany.

Grannis said Monday that plenty of good has been accomplished in the Adirondacks. Recent federal reports have found the level of acid rain in 48 monitored lakes across the Adirondacks is dropping.

Also, since 1970 some 82 unlined landfills in DEC Region 5 have been closed, and wildlife, including bald eagles, moose, fisher and peregrine falcons, have returned to the Adirondack Park, he said.

“The bald eagle is to me the most exciting. They’re back in record numbers,” Grannis said.

In 1970, the Adirondacks “were environmentally threatened because of acid rain, poorly located landfills, substandard wastewater treatment facilities and potential fragmentation of large timber tracts,” Grannis said. “Since then, we’ve made impressive gains. Our mission is certainly

not accomplished. But this anniversary gives New Yorkers a chance to take stock of how far we've come.”

Peter Bauer, executive director of the Fund for Lake George, said there are still challenges, and many of them can be seen at Lake George, where development on the upland mountain slopes needs to be controlled and sensitive shorelines need protection.

But the lake also shows the economic benefits of having a beautiful, clean body of water for people to visit and use, Bauer said. “It is without a doubt the biggest economic resource in Warren County,” he said.

Whether progress will continue, though, is uncertain.

The DEC has lost 400 staff positions in recent years because of budget cuts, and the agency continues to face budget cuts as the state tries to cope with a \$9.5 billion budget deficit.

“Part of my goal is to make sure we have the resources, but it is very difficult,” said Grannis, who was appointed environmental commissioner by former governor Eliot Spitzer in 2007, after serving in the state Assembly representing Manhattan for 32 years.

Looking forward, Grannis called dealing with the environmental impacts of global climate change “the single most pressing issue facing the state.”

Grannis is co-chairman of a Climate Action Council, which is supposed to submit a detailed plan by the end of the year on how the state can reduce carbon emissions 80 percent by 2050.

Brian Houseal, executive director of The Adirondack Council, agreed that climate change is an overriding issue for the Adirondack region. Lake Champlain doesn't freeze as thoroughly as it used to, he said — “ice fishermen can tell you that.”

Also, fruit trees are blooming earlier, and this spring's rapid warm-up in March cut short the usual maple sugaring season, hurting the bottom line for maple producers.

“Climate change is really going to be widespread ecological change,” Houseal said.

Houseal said DEC staff are to be congratulated for remaining focused and dedicated to the environment in the face of the state budget cuts.