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## Edinburg facing challenges that concern town prosperity, unity

By PAUL POST, The Saratogian

EDINBURG — Eighty years ago, Edinburg became a lakefront community when a large part of the town was forever lost beneath the waves of Sacandaga Reservoir.

Today, it enjoys the financial benefits of belonging to one of upstate New York's most affluent counties, and it is located within the quiet and pristine 6-million acre Adirondack Park.

More and more, however, longtime local residents are struggling to make ends meet because of stringent Adirondack Park Agency regulations that have restricted growth, development and opportunities for employment.

“There needs to be more flexibility to meet the needs of the future or it's going to become an area where the only people who can live here are very rich people,” said town Supervisor Jean Raymond, a Connecticut transplant who moved here 31 years ago. “You can have this park and all the good things that go with it, without being insane. Somewhere between clear cutting and don't-touch-a-branch there's got to be a happy medium.”

Except for local municipal and school jobs, most residents are self-employed, primarily in construction and logging, or they commute to places such as Saratoga Springs and Gloversville. Recreational income is also huge — boating, fishing, hunting, snowmobiling — and Edinburg has a healthy “second home” industry that creates countless part-time jobs such as lawn mowing, carpentry and plumbing during summer months when the town's population explodes fivefold.

At present, the most important issue on everyone's minds is the fate of Batchellerville Bridge, built from 1929 to 1930 when the reservoir, now known as Great Sacandaga Lake, was created to control downstream flooding. Trusses on the span are severely deteriorated. This summer, traffic was reduced to one lane and many are concerned the bridge will be closed before money becomes available to build a new one.

The state Department of Transportation is redesigning the project to reduce costs, and a request for bids may be issued in early 2010, but not until adequate funding is secured to cover the job, estimated at about \$50 million. The state still needs to come up with another \$11 million.

“The reservoir was created by the state to benefit the state,” Raymond said. “It's produced millions of inexpensive kilowatts of hydropower and avoided millions of dollars in flood damage. The bridge was an integral part of the project in 1929. It's not just a bridge over the lake. The state has to keep their part of the bargain, or economically we'll be devastated.”

The 3,000-foot span connects the north and south shores, providing a lifeline for commuters, rescue personnel, small business and residents making all kinds of daily trips. Most businesses and services are on the north side.

“Should the Batchellerville Bridge not be repaired or replaced and ends up getting shut down, as did Crown Point, you have cut off the residents of the entire south shore from all municipal facilities, including schools, landfill, town offices and road maintenance, all of which we pay taxes to support,” said Paula Blackwell, of The Bridge of Life Committee.

The bridge, without question, is the most critical issue Raymond has dealt with during her 22 years in office — but not the only one. Recently, the APA approved a plan, advanced by the state Department of Environmental Conservation, which allows widening of snowmobile connector trails and the use of self-propelled grooming machines.

Environmental groups such as the Adirondack Council were highly critical of the plan. “Snowmobile trails must have the ‘character of a foot trail,’ ” Executive Director Brian Houseal said.

The group says the plan will allow more rock and stump removal, increase vehicle use in the woods and promote that tree cutting be done away from trails. The council says trails should only be built within 500 feet of existing road corridors, not deep in the woods.

Raymond agrees with some of the group’s arguments, such as keeping trails close to roadways, but applauds changes that encourage a regional network that allows people to snowmobile throughout the Adirondacks, boosting local economies at the slowest time of year. “Canada and Vermont have done more of that type of thing,” she said. “Why not here? It’s state land.”

While striving to stay connected, a large part of Edinburg’s appeal lies in its remoteness. From downtown Saratoga Springs, the most direct route to Batchellerville Bridge is up and over Fox Hill Road, past Lake Desolation. It’s about 23 miles, but several of those are over unpaved, bumpy town highway in northwest Greenfield.

“People around Lake Desolation don’t want it paved,” Raymond said. “It would be more convenient, but on the other hand that makes other people closer to me, too. Be careful what you wish for. People in general tend to like the way they are. People here are the same way.”

However, some recent developments may have a major impact on people’s lives.

#### Lake under heavy regulation

The lake was specifically created to prevent flood control at places such as Troy, which used to be inundated by heavy spring runoff. These cities and other downstream beneficiaries — power companies that operate Hudson River hydro stations — were required to pay for the lake’s infrastructure, Conklingville Dam.

Power companies also paid property taxes for land beneath the water and shoreline. Companies paid fees to the Hudson River-Black River Regulating District, which controls the lake, which in turn pays taxes to school districts and Saratoga and Fulton counties.

There are numerous downstream hydro stations such as Spier Falls Dam in Moreau. Water released from Great Sacandaga Lake allows those companies to generate electricity and earn a profit.

Several years ago, however, one firm challenged the system, and the U.S. Court of Appeals ruled that federally-regulated power companies are no longer required to make property tax payments. The decision may cost the regulating district up to \$4 million in lost revenue, or nearly 80 percent of its annual \$5.4 million budget.

Left high and dry, the regulating district will have to find new sources of income. It has retained a consultant to identify new downstream beneficiaries — towns, cities, even municipal sewer districts — who benefit from the lake's flood control value. Whitewater rafting companies that benefit from water released from the dam might be assessed, too.

Numerous entities that have never been taxed before might be billed. Or if they were taxed, their bills might be going up dramatically.

“They could get a new bill or a larger bill,” said Philip W. Klein of Saratoga Springs, the district's Hudson River Area chairman.

Some lakefront residents and business owners are concerned the regulating district might tax them, too, to make up for lost revenue. But Executive Director Glenn LaFave said that won't happen.

“There is no plan to assess anybody upstream (of Conklingville Dam),” he said.

In a related matter, earlier this year the DEC proposed highly controversial changes that would have affected lake use. Lakefront business and home owners do not own the shoreline bordering their land. All around the lake, the regulating district owns land up to an elevation of 778 feet. Property owners must obtain permits to use the lake in front of their home or business.

Under the DEC's proposal, people would no longer have exclusive use of the shoreline along their property. Essentially, the entire shoreline would have become public domain, available for anyone's use.

“You could have a million-dollar house on the lake and somebody could pull up and use your beach for the afternoon,” said Bob Campbell, owner of Edinburg Marina and Power Sports.

But property owners would still be liable for accidents or injuries that occurred there, said Peter Byron, of the Great Sacandaga Lake Association.

Also, people could no longer use any type of motorized equipment on their waterfront property, including lawn mowers.

“We’d have to go back to using oxen to pull boats out of the water,” Campbell said.

In response to huge public outcry, Gov. David Paterson had the proposal shelved.

“Right now it’s only been temporarily put on hold,” Campbell said. “We’re in the time-out stage. It’s a huge issue.”

He described Great Sacandaga as one of the most heavily-regulated lakes in America. Involved parties include the APA, DEC and the regulating district itself. “There are about seven agencies that have some level of jurisdiction,” he said. “This lake is like no other in the country that we know of.”

Concerned parties can’t remember having so many problems all at once — the bridge situation, combined with possible lake policy changes. “It’s almost like the perfect storm here,” Byron said.

Balancing growth, character

Aside from its own set of unique lake issues, Edinburg faces the same challenge as every other rural town in Saratoga County.

“We want to grow reasonably, while maintaining the character of the community,” Raymond said. “It’s tough. More people are going to be looking for retirement places to live. Lakefront property in the Adirondacks is considered pretty desirable.”

As demand goes up, so do property values — and taxes — making it more difficult for long-time residents to make ends meet.

For now, despite limited employment opportunities, Edinburg residents enjoy one of the lowest tax rates in the entire Capital Region, paying from \$8 to \$14 per \$1,000 for all taxes combined — fire district, county and school. In contrast, taxes in Milton range from \$14 to \$20 per \$1,000.

The town has a \$1.2 million budget and derives three-fourths of its revenue from Saratoga County’s lucrative sales tax distribution, putting Edinburg in much better shape than its Fulton County neighbors. There is no local town tax, and Edinburg Common School is only for grades kindergarten through six, so its budget is relatively small. After sixth grade, students go to Northville for high school.

“There are tradeoffs, no question,” Raymond said. “It’s a long trek if you want to go to a library or you have to go to a hospital.”

Still, there's no place she'd rather live, and she is concerned about trends affecting all parts of the Adirondacks. Several years ago, for example, the town explored the possibility of developing affordable senior housing.

"Most park agency rules deal with density," she said. "We couldn't get enough land to build enough units to make it worthwhile, because of APA land use rules."

On another front, she said the region is quickly losing one of its most valuable resources — local history and community identity. The entire hamlet of Batchellerville was inundated when Great Sacandaga Lake was created. In the years since, a new threat has arisen.

"As property is acquired by the state and goes into the forest preserve, buildings are burned and roads are allowed to overgrow," Raymond said. In some cases, structures and hamlets that once contributed to the Adirondacks' settlement and social fabric are lost forever.

In an attempt to preserve its roots and preserve the past for future generations, Edinburg has developed two local history museums and restored the Arad Copeland Covered Bridge — built in 1879, it's the last of its kind in Saratoga County. The hamlet of Beecher Hollow is home to Barker's Store, once a safe haven for African-Americans on the Underground Railroad. Military Road was once an Indian footpath that ran from Schenectady to Lake Champlain.

Some of this history is preserved in Edinburg's comfortable new town hall which opened four years ago.

When Raymond was first elected, most town officials worked out of their homes and the supervisor's office was located in cramped quarters at the current highway garage. A lot has happened during her tenure — landfill closure, 911 system numbering, computerized filing, local zoning and a new building department just to name a few of the changes.

One of her favorite jobs is simply helping people deal with all of the rules and regulations that are part of everyday life here.

"I like it when I can help someone who's having trouble with bureaucracy cut through the red tape," she said.

Town Clerk Denise Ferguson exemplifies the kind of person who's found the secret of successful living here. "In this building there's always something going on," she said.

When her work day comes to an end she is surrounded by the peace and quiet of one of the most beautiful parts of the county, with lake views rivaling some of the most scenic spots in the United States. Like many others, her biggest challenge is coping with the long, cold winter ahead.

"If you can make it through February, you've got it made," she said.