

## Interview with Brian Houseal, Adirondack Council

Background: The state budget crisis gives New Yorkers an opportunity to learn more about how their tax dollars are spent. One controversial spending area concerns environmental programs. When Governor Paterson proposed to reduce the amount of money allocated for the environment, several environmental organizations responded critically. We interviewed Brian Houseal, executive director of the Adirondack Council, to learn exactly what he thinks the state ought to be doing with respect to the environment and why.

Empire Page: The Adirondack Council has criticized Governor Paterson's proposed 2010-2011 state budget for cuts made to environmental programs and funds. However, in the context of a 9 billion deficit for the current fiscal year, shouldn't you be pleased that the cuts weren't any greater?

Houseal: Actually, we are settling for less. In 2007, the Legislature passed a bill calling for the EPF to reach \$300 million by 2010. So far, neither the Governor nor either house has proposed more than \$222 million, or the same amount appropriated in 2009. The Governor has proposed half that (\$143 million).

In certain areas of environmental need, the Governor seems to want us to settle for nothing. He is acting as if the environment was a special interest -- like clean water and clean air were luxuries we can live without until the economy improves.

The Environmental Protection Fund has never had enough money in it to cover all, or even most, of the state's environmental priorities. But it is all we have in terms of money for capital projects -- big, one-time purchases -- that improve the health of our communities, parks, wildlife and open spaces. It has been a long time since we spent the last of the money that came from the Clean Water/Clean Air Bond Act of 1996. We have a lot of catching up to do.

The EPF pays for landfill closure and capping; for recycling facilities and transfer stations; and for new public lands, parks and historic sites. Without state funding, small Adirondack communities could never afford to handle these needs on their own.

Instead of adding money to the EPF when the economy was booming, the Legislature and three governors have established a pattern of raiding it when other accounts were low. The EPF has a rock-solid funding source in the Real Estate Transfer Tax, which even this year will generate much more than is needed to fully fund the EPF. The rest gets swallowed into the General Fund, where it is spent on non-environmental programs. Each year, it seems, more and more is diverted back into the General Fund before it gets spent on the environment.

Since 2003, three governors and the Legislature have raided \$500 million from the EPF -- about one-third of all money ever appropriated for the EPF since it was created in 1993. Now, Governor Paterson is also proposing deep cuts to the staffs of the Adirondack Park Agency and Department of Environmental Conservation. These cuts will close visitors' centers, historic sites and public facilities needed to maintain the tourism-based economy.

Timberland owners will not get the assistance they need with forest management plans because there are too few state foresters. Lost and injured hikers will have to take their chances with a smaller ranger force. Damage to public lands and wildlife from illegal all-terrain vehicle riding will only get worse. Poaching of fish and wildlife will go unprosecuted. All of these poor fiscal decisions will harm both the Adirondack environment and the economy that depends on it.

State Comptroller Tom DiNapoli just issued a report confirming the economic benefits of public lands and environmental protection. Both are a bargain. The EPF, even fully funded at \$300 million, would amount to less than 0.02 percent of the state's annual budget.

There are two important facts that lawmakers tend to forget in times of fiscal worry: every dollar spent on environmental protection comes back to us five-fold in public benefits.

Empire Page: In press releases the Adirondack Council claims the state is cutting \$69 million out of the Environmental Protection Fund, but the Governor's office points out that \$58.9 of that cut reflects a moratorium on land purchases. Is your group saying that despite the state's desperate financial situation we should be spending the public's tax dollars to take more property off the tax rolls?

Houseal: Adirondack land purchases don't take property off the tax rolls and they don't harm the economy. Quite the reverse. The state pays full local property taxes on every square inch of Forever Wild Forest Preserve in the Adirondack Park and Catskill Park. Recently, this has resulted in an instant boost to the local economy because the timber companies that formerly owned them were eligible for significant property tax abatements.

Even when the state purchases only development rights and/or recreational rights from private landowners (conservation easements), it pays its full taxes on its share of the property's total value. If the development rights and recreational rights amount to, say, 60 percent of a tract's value, then the state pays full taxes on 60 percent of the full assessment. Even if the timber company that owns the land itself is still eligible for an abatement on the remaining 40 percent of the land's value, the state is not eligible for any abatement. This too always boosts local property tax revenue.

In the case of new Forest Preserve, new public lands mean new places for hiking, fishing, camping, hunting, boating, horseback riding and other outdoor pursuits. New Forest Preserve always means new visitors and new economic opportunities. Communities benefit further because these new lands and waters generate both taxes and visitors without requiring much in the way of local services -- aside from prosecution of timber rustlers and wildlife poachers.

Since they were first approved for use in New York in 1983, conservation easements have been the state's most important cushion against the shock of the collapse of the Adirondack timber industry. It has allowed New Yorkers to prevent the subdivision and development of countless acres of forest that helps to purify our water and air and shelters some of the world's most spectacular natural wonders.

It hasn't been easy. Since the sale of Diamond International's 100,000 acres to Atlanta-based land speculator Henry Lassiter in 1988, all but one of the park's major timber companies and paper makers have fled to the third world. Of the giants, only International Paper still maintains its mill in the park (in Ticonderoga). During the Pataki Administration, it sold all 260,000 acres of Adirondack forest to a New Hampshire investment company.

Most of that acreage was protected from development by a state conservation easement, but remains in timber production. A much smaller portion was added to the park's public lands. Among the lasting legacies of this deal is a permanent public forest that is among the most accessible to people physical handicaps in the world. Dillon Park in Long Lake provides wild forest lean-tos and fishing platforms.

In the near future, the EPF's land acquisition fund would be called upon to complete the purchase of a conservation easement of 90,000 acres and to buy about 60,000 acres of new Forest Preserve from The Nature Conservancy. In this deal for the former Finch, Pruyn & Co. timberlands, the state would protect huge amounts of commercial forest, while also preserving for posterity some of the most amazing lakes and rivers in the Northeast -- all of which have been under lock and key for 125 years. For all that time, only those who purchased exclusive leases from these companies had access to these gems. Soon, they will be available to all.

They include the Hudson River Gorge and Blue Ledges -- arguably the Grand Canyon of the East. The Essex Chain of Lakes, OK Slip Falls, Boreas Ponds (in the High Peaks) several mountain summits and wild portions of the Hudson, Indian, Cedar, Boreas and Rock rivers. Adding these to the Forest Preserve would bring a stream of new visitors to Essex County for years to come, while taking pressure off of the eastern entrance of the High Peaks Wilderness near Lake Placid, by providing another easy route into the heart of the state's grandest mountain ranges.

Empire Page: You said "the Legislature passed a bill calling for the EPF to reach \$300 million by 2010." But the Governor's budget office argues this was a target, never a legal requirement. What's your basis for claiming it was more than a goal which the governor can and should set aside given exigent circumstances?

Houseal: A goal is exactly what it was -- a promise to try. That's why I wrote that it "called for" the EPF to reach \$300 million, and not "mandated" the EPF to reach \$300 million. I felt it was necessary to note that we have fallen far short of that goal. We are more than willing to give lawmakers credit for their work. We praised the Legislature loudly and publicly when it set this goal. We don't want them to forget to reach it once the economy improves. Back in 2007, then-Senator David Paterson supported a \$300-million EPF by FY 2009-10. He helped us pass that bill.

Still, we agree it would be unfair to hold the Legislature or Governor to such a promise, given the current fiscal situation. That is the basis of our willingness to accept a reduction of 25 percent or more, down to somewhere between the Assembly proposal of \$170 million and the Senate plan of \$220 million. It's no secret which end of that spectrum we'd prefer. We believe it is money well invested.

Please keep in mind that the Adirondack Council is entirely privately funded. We neither solicit nor accept government funding or taxpayer-supported donations of any kind. We publish each October our State of the Park Report, which details what specific public officials did to help or harm the park over the past year. We want to maintain the ability to be brutally honest in this report, so we will allow no government official to give us anything for which we would feel obliged to be nicer to them than their record of public service would otherwise dictate. We are entirely non-partisan.

We have twice been accidentally granted state Member Item funds. Both were cases in which a group with a similar name was performing a job for the state (building a park carousel; removing invasive plants). Being better known, the check came to us instead. We immediately returned both checks, totaling more than \$200,000, to the state. But it makes one wonder how careful the state really is with its checkbook. It was no surprise to hear that some legislators had set up phony not-for-profits to funnel money back to themselves, their families and their campaigns.

State land acquisitions, for example, are among the most carefully watched financial transactions undertaken by the state. It takes the review and signature of more than 30 state officials to buy a single acre. That's good. There are millions of dollars involved and long-term decisions being made. If the rest of the state budget were given half as much careful scrutiny, we'd find lots of ways to trim the budget.

The Legislature also has promised to return some of the \$500 million it has raided from the EPF to cover past budget deficits. But we won't hold our breath waiting for that to happen before 2011.

Empire Page: If the Legislature were to restore all of the cuts you've identified, they would have to remove approximately \$162 million from other programs, borrow the money or raise taxes. If a legislator were to ask you where that \$162 million should come from, what would your answer be?

Houseal: As of right now, the Governor doesn't have anyone's permission to remove funding from the EPF and redirect it to non-environmental spending.

It was the will of the public and the Legislature in 1993 that the EPF have its own funding source, independent of other state taxes and fees. They wanted it to provide sufficient money in good years and in bad, while preventing environmental spending from taking money away from other state priorities. The Real Estate Transfer Tax and a few voluntary fees (bluebird license plates, etc.) are the only major sources of revenue for the EPF. By law, that money is dedicated to provide full funding to the EPF and cannot be spent on anything else without changing the

law. After the EPF is fully funded, anything leftover can be spent on other things. All of the money needed to fully fund the 2010-11 EPF will have been collected within the first three to six months of the fiscal year.

In order to prevent that money from reaching the EPF, the Legislature and Governor would have to agree to change the law that requires the first \$200 million or so to be deposited into the EPF automatically. Governors Cuomo and Pataki never attempted to rob the EPF of its funding source, even though Pataki several times raided the unspent funds from past years. Gov. Eliot Spitzer tried to take away the Real Estate Transfer Tax revenue from the EPF, but was stopped by the Legislature. Undaunted, Governor Paterson continues to press lawmakers to rob the EPF of both its current funding source and its unspent balances.

Anyone care to bet whether he will be out touting the state's weak environmental spending at Earth Day events this year? It may not mean much to a Governor who doesn't intend to run for re-election, but it is important to note that no one has won statewide office in New York without a strong environmental record in more than 20 years. Al D'Amato was the last one, and even he was an environmentalist every six years, at election time. The public cares about parks, clean water and clean air. Those who short-change these priorities risk their political futures.

Empire Page: In a press release your group issued January 19 of this year, you criticized the elimination of \$450,000 from the state budget for breast cancer research. Please explain why this is an Adirondack Park issue.

Houseal: People in portions of the Adirondack Park seem to have higher than normal cancer rates. Breast cancer is still among the deadliest forms. Prevention is the key, but requires a deeper understand of the risks than we currently possess.

Since health data is tracked county-by-county, it is difficult to isolate the portions of counties inside the park from those outside (the park includes parts of 10 counties and all of Essex and Hamilton counties). Some of the higher-cancer-rate areas appear to be around former metals mining communities (Mineville, Witherbee, Moriah), where regular exposure to heavy metals and radiation appears to be higher than in other places. There also appear to be a larger than normal number of people from these communities who develop MS as adults, including one of our longest serving staff members and the spouse of another. Here too, abnormal cell growth is a factor in the disease.

The boom and bust cycles of the mining industry don't help us in tracking long-term diseases in workers. Those exposed to risk factors in, for example, the iron and titanium mines of Newcomb and Tahawus would be hard to judge. They all moved away, scattering in every direction in the late 1980s, after the mines closed.

In addition, we have very few medical facilities capable of treating cancer patients inside the Adirondack Park and none that are known for their expertise in this area. So park residents who are stricken often leave the county or even the state to seek medical help, making it hard for their county health officials to track the number of patients or the outcomes of the treatment. Our population is so small, epidemiological studies are a very expensive challenge.

Other apparent cancer-risk factors include higher social tolerance for smoking in the north country in general, and perhaps some dietary habits. But the reality is that we don't know enough about the causes. Until we do understand the causes, cutting the research funding is just foolish.

Last question: It is likely that government at all levels will have less money to manage the environment for many years to come. Further, in my humble opinion when it comes to the environment, our government treats its citizens like children which results in their acting like children, requiring more and more rules and more and more policing to make sure they follow the rules.

Instead of asking the government to protect the environment, why not hark back to Theodore Roosevelt and the idea that protecting the environment is something that we as citizens should and can do ourselves. Instead of relying on DEC policing off-terrain vehicles, fish poachers and sloppy hikers, shouldn't the Adirondack Council focus on educating the public about how to use the lands of the Adirondack Park in an environmentally-proper manner? Isn't it time for the Adirondack Council to re-thnk its entire approach?

Houseal:

We don't believe it is true that there will be less and less money for the environment in the years ahead. Adequate environmental spending is so small a percentage of the overall budget of any level of government that even moderate increases place little pressure on other spending priorities. New York's Environmental Protection Fund, at its highest level, never made up more than 0.024 percent of state spending. It has been, and remains, a matter of pocket change.

As we have seen from the public's reaction to park-closure announcements and talk of a moratorium on land purchases, the public doesn't like those ideas and is willing to go out of its way to say so. Even your poll on the Empire Page confirmed this. Even in a recession, people told you they would pay more to keep the parks open this summer. In New York and across the nation, environmental spending is being given greater priority as the public's understanding of the need increases.

Our work with the media is our main public education effort. We are quoted more often than any other regional environmental organization. We have members in all 50 United States and on four continents. There is also evidence to suggest that our message is reaching those far beyond New York or even the U.S.

Did you know that New York City and the State of Alabama both have their own "forever wild" programs now? Were you aware there is a new national park in England (South Downs National Park) modeled on the Adirondack Park? Few people seemed to notice that a vast area of the Siberian wilderness has now been preserved under a compact nearly identical to New York's constitutional protection for the Adirondack Forest Preserve.

Under the Obama administration, New York can expect help in the form of Forest Legacy Act funding and money from the federal Land & Water Conservation Fund. New York just received

the first of what we hope will be several grants from the Forest Legacy program for the purchase of Follensby Pond. The pond was the site of the 1858 Philosopher's camp at which Ralph Waldo Emerson and William Stillman and their guests founded the American wilderness preservation movement. The state's ownership of this parcel could give Tupper Lake an outstanding gateway to the western High Peaks Wilderness and the state's tallest mountains.

When coupled with the \$695,000 in planning and community improvement grants that the Adirondack Council's hired consultant has brought in for the Town of Tupper Lake in the past two years, this presents the community with a splendid opportunity to create a local boom in tourism related to this soon-to-be wilderness.

Federal grants for water and sewage-treatment systems are also flowing again, which is vital to small towns such as Essex and Elizabethtown, whose residents want to protect water quality on the Bouquet River and Lake Champlain, but who don't have the resources to foot the bill alone. Both are due to receive federal water quality grants. Many environmental programs that suffered a lack of funding under the Bush administration are being reinvigorated by his replacement. These programs will provide jobs, both in construction and long-term maintenance, while easing the burden on local property taxpayers.

In the decades ahead, Americans will spend huge amounts of money changing the way we generate energy for our homes and businesses; how we conserve energy through new construction materials and methods; how we move people around our vast landscape; and, how we preserve the purity of our air and water. If handled well, these will be excellent investments that will save much more money than we spend and create millions of new jobs and solid new businesses along the way.

As for the mission of the Adirondack Council, I don't believe that will ever go out of style. It becomes more important with each passing day. The general public are not children when it comes to the environment, the masses are simply poorly informed. Few people take an earth sciences course after the early years of high school. Unless they are members of a group that discusses these issues, they will often remain uninformed.

It is, and has always been, up to organizations like the Adirondack Council to educate the public on how to care for their own lands and how to be environmentally sound neighbors. We do it in every newsletter and special report we issue. But we also seek to change the attitude of government, which can have a much greater and more immediate impact on policy than public education alone.

We have seen real progress in the attitudes of people toward the Adirondack Park in the past 20 years. Back in the early 1990s, we were constantly engaged in a war of words with local government officials across the park. They didn't like environmental organizations and gave their tacit support when local bullies and cranks vandalized our office building and phoned-in arson threats. They looked the other way when troubled individuals burned down the business of one of our trustees; hanged staff members in effigy outside our headquarters; spread roofing nails in our parking lot; dumped cow manure on the sidewalk outside our building; burned the barn of

an Adirondack Park Agency commissioner and shot holes in a parked APA car while an APA enforcement team was investigating a potential violation.

In 1990, there was a sign on the door of the Noonmark Diner in Keene Valley stating that members and employees of the Adirondack Council and Adirondack Mountain Club were not welcome. If you visit that fine establishment today, you will see an Adirondack Council poster-map of the park hanging proudly on the front of the building. Dozens of local businesses support our work and have become partners in promoting environmental stewardship in the park.

We are seeing rapid progress in some surprising places. Last year, the tiny Town of Inlet passed a law prohibiting the sale or transfer of a home unless the septic system is working properly. It is a brilliant advancement for water quality. We have been urging the Legislature to do something similar statewide, to no avail. But Inlet saw we were right and acted on its own. This would have been unthinkable 20 years ago.

As for self-policing, we see time and time again that this doesn't work very well -- especially where commerce and profit are concerned. Some people simply place profit ahead of all else and will not consider taking personal action that would curb that profit. If a few animals lose their homes, a few fish die, or some water gets polluted, so what? Most people try hard not to harm the environment in their daily lives. If we are aware of the consequences of what we are doing, most of us will be careful. Everyone can play a role in environmental protection, if given the information they need.

Often, our greatest challenge is defending the idea that Adirondack Wilderness is a place we ought to leave alone, in a totally natural state. It runs against many American cultural ideals. There is a constant, nagging temptation to fix nature, clean it up, make it prettier, "improve" it. This urge may have come to us from our European ancestors, who knew nothing of wilderness back home and saw this one as an impediment to their progress. The Iroquois and Algonquin knew better, but lacked the might to impose their will. Only now, with most of the American wilderness gone, are we beginning as a society to change our minds and habits about wild places.

Happily, large portions of Adirondacks escaped westward expansion and "civilization" because the mountains and wetlands made the landscape too remote and expensive to tame. That is why we have an Adirondack wilderness today. That is why the Adirondack Park is the largest intact deciduous forest left on earth. Places like the Adirondacks once stretched around the globe in the northern hemisphere. Now, it is one of a kind. Every day it grows more valuable.