

## Study shows park population getting older, smaller

BY JIM MCGUIRE Gazette Reporter

Speculator, its main drag flanked on one side by the shoreline of Lake Pleasant and on the other by the village-run Oak Mountain Ski Center, could easily make the cover of any brochure promoting the Adirondacks.

It probably has. But as Speculator Mayor Neil P. McGovern knows all too well, the postcard image hides some worrisome trends that few Adirondack communities have escaped. If McGovern and other Adirondack officials are drawing the correct conclusions from a new demographic study, there really is some trouble in paradise.

The Adirondack population has an average age of nearly 43 compared to 37.4 statewide and skewed downward because of prison populations. The region is aging to the point where it is No. 2 in the nation behind the West Coast of Florida, concluded a \$120,000 study commissioned by the Adirondack Association of Towns and Villages in collaboration with the Adirondack North Country Association.

The study, conducted by The LA Group of Saratoga Springs, found that the populations of many Adirondack communities have dropped significantly and along with that, the overall Adirondack Park school enrollments have declined 31 percent since 1970. They continue to decrease an average of 329 students a year — the equivalent of one Adirondack school district disappearing every 19 months. The study determined the K-12 student population constitutes 13.5 percent of the park's 132,000 residents, compared to an 18 percent student segment nationally.

According to the study, titled the Adirondack Park Regional Assessment Project, the population in many communities is declining significantly as it ages; further, as young adults are leaving for jobs they are having their children elsewhere.

The study speaks of “a growing exodus of residents between the ages of 20 and 35 and a significant in-migration of residents between the ages of 35 and 65.” In the last decade, the study found, more than 7,000 residents 35 and under left and 13,500 people 35 and older moved in, creating an aging trend three times the national rate.

The implications are obvious, said association President Brian Towers, supervisor of the southern Hamilton County town of Wells.

### PUBLIC SAFETY

The scarcity of young people has a number of community effects, but one of them is the shortage of help for the volunteer fire departments and ambulance services.

No one is knocking the continuing influx of generally more affluent seasonal residents who, the study said, now own about 40 percent of the private property in the Adirondack Park. But Towers said, “if the numbers continue to slide, all we're left with is a community of early retirees and older retirees . . . we're left with a friendly place, but who is going to respond to the fire calls and the ambulance calls? That puts a large burden on the communities.”

Towers called it alarming that the age group 20 to 45 “has left in huge numbers over the last 30 years.” While he said it is obvious young adults departed “because there is no meaningful

employment here that would allow you to raise a family,” he said the consequent loss of children will have a significant longterm effect on the Adirondacks.

Towers advocates amending Article 14 of the state Constitution protecting the 3 million acres of forest preserve land in the 6-million-acre Adirondack Park.

“We’re living in probably the greatest natural resource east of the Mississippi and we’re not doing anything with it,” he said. If certain sections of the state land were approved as working forests, Towers said, it would create needed jobs.

“We’ve done an incredible job of taking care of the environment in the park but we’ve done a poor job of taking care of the people who live in the park.”

Until recent decades, life in the Adirondacks was driven by lumber and tourism, said McGovern. As the lumber industry has waned in the park, communities have increasingly relied on tourism for what he said has become “a very heavy lift.” Tourism is now a word “used too much” in the park.

McGovern said the study, pointing out the trends and how little private land is available for development, confirmed what Adirondack officials already understood — that a gentrification of the park is occurring.

“We are out of balance,” said McGovern. In his village of 327 residents — down about 20 percent since a modern high of 408 in 1980 — the number of rooms at motels and small inns have dropped more or less in half in the past 30 years.

Though seasonal residents generally improve properties and in desirable locales such as Speculator actually stabilize the tax base, he said, the changing demographics are affecting the vibrancy of the community.

“Can tourism communities really survive without rooms for transients?” McGovern asked. Tourists generated needed sales tax revenue, he said.

## NEW ECONOMY

The dilemma has leaders such as McGovern pondering the introduction of new economic opportunities compatible with park regulations. He said more widespread access to high-speed Internet services would provide options for people to earn a living from home. “We need to diversify,” he said.

McGovern did not advocate logging designated sections of state forest, but he did suggest that communities — and not the state — should be first in line to acquire private lands adjoining hamlets and villages. The regulations governing land swaps with the state might also be eased in regard to adjoining lands suited for development, McGovern said.

“No wilderness back country need be lost.”

Speculator resident Jack Leadley, a well-known artisan who owns a sugarbush and makes Adirondack furniture and traditional pack baskets, said officials such as McGovern and Towers are viewing the study correctly.

“We’re shrinking . . . we’re being pushed back and out,” said Leadley of replacing local working families with seasonal residents.

Leadley’s wife, Joan Weaver Leadley, traces her family’s land holding in the Speculator area to 1794 when an ancestor acquired it from his cousin, the Crossfield mentioned in many deeds. Crossfield was an owner of a land grant of more than 1 million acres.

The Leadleys have three children and their son, Jack Leadley Jr., was somewhat typical of young educated adults, his father said. After graduating from Notre Dame he eventually left town for Albany, where he is employed by the Times Union.

“They can’t stay here and make a decent living,” the senior Leadley said.

Leadley blames the lack of opportunity on the regulations of the Adirondack Park Agency. “They took away our self determination and it has hurt us tremendously.”

Recalling an era when there were plenty of rooms available in Speculator and they were all rented and when float planes took fishermen across the Adirondacks, Leadley said the park has become an unreachable paradise where “you either hike or paddle or you keep out.”

## CONCLUSIONS DISPUTED

John Sheehan, of the protectionist group Adirondack Council, said he agrees with the data in the new study but not the conclusions being drawn by some local officials.

The same trend identified in the study, he said, is happening throughout the rural areas of the state. In the Adirondacks, affordable taxes and other factors are motivating “older folks [to move] back to the park and essentially treat it as a retirement home.”

Retirement age residents actually bring advantages to the community. He said they are usually more stable economically and thus are less affected by recession and the likelihood of foreclosure. He said they are more likely to have a college education, open a business and they generally do not commit crimes.

“The park is transitioning from a place where most people earned their living in flannel shirts and work gloves to a place where they earn a living in dress shirts and ties,” Sheehan said.

He said there are still plenty of economic opportunities in the park capable of supporting a family. He mentioned a number of landmark stores and businesses that closed only because there was no one left in a family to run them.

Efforts might be made to recruit entrepreneurs to the park, he said.

Sheehan said Article 14 should not be tampered with and said it provides a reasonable path to land swaps. He said the council and other protectionist groups are not opposed to development in hamlet areas.

Critics may insist the APA regulations for development are too strict, Sheehan said, but he argues there are more building restrictions in the suburban towns around the Capital Region.

“I think there is much more opportunity in the Adirondacks than folks give it credit for,” he said.