

Adirondack Daily Enterprise  
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## Panelists discuss the Park's past, present and future

By CHRIS MORRIS - Staff Writer

LAKE PLACID - A panel of community activists, nonprofit officials and journalists discussed the future of the Adirondack Park with an audience of several dozen people Wednesday night at the Northwoods Inn.

The forum was organized by Adirondack Life magazine after an essay published in its October edition sparked debate across the Park.

"The Other Endangered Species," penned by North Country Public Radio reporter Brian Mann, argues that the state Adirondack Park Agency has fulfilled its role in protecting public and private lands, and now it's time to turn the attention to the human population.

"The article generated so much chatter on blogs and in diners, we figured we'd bring it on the road," said Betsy Folwell, creative director at Adirondack Life.

Mann said today's version of the Adirondack Park is ending. That version, he said, is a public employment mecca facing deep and painful cuts on both the state and local levels.

"The Park's communities never really adapted to the presence of this Park; it never really organically integrated," Mann said. "Instead, we built prisons, and we built Sunmount, and we built bigger Department of Transportation barracks, and we built huge highway departments, and huge school departments, to the point where when I moved to the Park 13 years ago, the level of public employment was off the charts."

In his essay, Mann says the 2010 census figures paint a bleak picture of the future in places like Hamilton County, where the average age is 14 years older than other parts of New York state. He also argues that declining school enrollment and a heavy dependence on state jobs are jeopardizing communities inside the Blue Line.

"We've hit a brick wall," Mann told the audience Wednesday. "More layoffs are coming. This is real: No one is saying it will go back to the way it was."

He and others said that while these seemingly daunting realities are cause for concern, they also present an opportunity to reshape the conversation about what the Adirondack Park will look like moving forward.

Joining Mann for Wednesday's discussion were Kate Fish, executive director of the Adirondack North Country Association; Jim LaValley, chairman of Adirondack Residents Intent on Saving Their Economy; Jim Herman, who partnered with Dave Mason to develop the Keene Valley broadband project; and John Sheehan, spokesman for the Adirondack Council.

Each panelist brought forth a variety of ideas about how to improve the Park's quality of life without altering its natural character.

Jim Connolly, deputy director of planning at the APA, told the panel that the agency used to play a bigger role in planning.

"People should understand there was a budget for local planning; that money disappeared in the mid-1990s," Connolly said.

The agency's original idea was for towns to adopt plans that met APA benchmarks so local planning boards could handle decisions the APA now fields. Relatively few towns did so.

APA Commissioner Lani Ulrich said this is largely because town officials didn't want to be seen as the "bad guys" in developers' eyes.

Sheehan and LaValley have been at odds over the Adirondack Club and Resort, a 600-home project proposed for LaValley's hometown of Tupper Lake, but they agreed that towns should step up and make plans to take this responsibility from the APA.

Mann said the APA has the tools in place - the staff, the resources and the know-how - to make a difference. He said one source of potential revenue for the sort of planning communities need could come from the state's \$65 million annual property tax payment.

As the meeting drew to a close, Adirondack Daily Enterprise Managing Editor Peter Crowley asked the panel how other publicly-funded groups geared toward economic development have fared.

"How much have those groups done to improve the economy?" Crowley asked. "And why do we think the APA could do better?"

Mann said Crowley's skepticism was "well placed," but he added that the Park has reached a flash point.

"It's time to try some stuff," he said, "time to take some risks."