

Utica OD
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Our View - Revise rules for Adirondacks, but respect residents

One of the key challenges in the vast Adirondack Park is finding the right balance between preservation and development. The millions of annual visitors to the park — hikers, bikers, canoeists and other outdoor enthusiasts — want a pristine wilderness. But the people who live there year-round need to make a living, and that usually relies on development. Finding the right mix can be tricky business.

One effort to make it work came in 1971 with the creation of the Adirondack Park Agency. Its purpose was to help manage smart growth in the six-million-acre park by developing long-range land use plans for the public and private lands. That worked for many years.

But that was 40 years ago. Times have changed and those rules are weak and outdated. APA reforms are needed to make sure that the park remains the wilderness it was intended to be, yet a sustainable home for the 130,000 year-round residents.

Some of that can be done by the APA itself with public hearings and a few policy tweaks. But other reforms are more complex, and would require legislation. That needs to be examined.

For instance, under current law, the APA itself cannot stop development. If someone is found to be in violation of its land-use code, the APA cannot issue tickets or stop-work orders. To take such action, the state attorney-general needs to get involved, and that can be an exasperating process.

The Adirondack Council, an environmental group whose mission is to ensure the ecological integrity and wild character of the park, says that problem could be rectified by empowering the APA to issue tickets and stop-work orders where violations occur. Further, the Council points to scattered development in the park — most takes place outside villages and hamlets — which threatens the integrity of the park. Some communities, like the town of Webb, have land-use plans. But many do not. That's where problems can crop up.

Tougher APA rules requiring this backcountry development to be clustered into a compact area would help preserve unbroken forests, as would other measures to protect water and wildlife — upgraded inspection of septic systems, increased shoreline lot sizes and setbacks and tougher restrictions on cutting shoreline vegetation, which can be detrimental to ecosystems.

To be sure, land management here is touchy business because the Adirondack Park is like no other wilderness region in the nation. Unlike national parks, where there are no residents and consequently, no development, the Adirondack Park is a patchwork of public and private lands with 103 towns and villages. There must be regulations to protect this remarkable resource

because without them, rampant development would destroy it. But those regulations cannot handcuff people who live here.

This, the challenge: Allow the development necessary for people to maintain a livelihood in the park, but with firm guidelines to protect the wilderness. Remember, resident and visitor in this treasured region is a symbiotic relationship that cannot be compromised. There must be rules, but if those rules are too lax, it could open the door to unscrupulous developers whose selfish efforts could be devastating. If that were to happen, everyone would lose.