

Times Union
October 5, 2012
Commentary

Forever, ever wild

Purchase of Forest Preserve land a boon for N.Y.

By JOHN F. SHEEHAN

Kudos to Gov. Andrew Cuomo for bringing his Cabinet and the press to Boreas Ponds in Newcomb in late September, where they experienced one of the Adirondack treasures that will soon become part of the "forever wild" Forest Preserve. It is reassuring to again have a governor who understands that protecting wild lands and open space enhances our quality of life and helps spur economic development.

It's a particularly important time to understand how this purchase will help, not hurt, the park's economy — contrary to the claims of some local critics.

The Adirondack Park is a 9,300- square-mile preserve of public and private lands, surrounding 130 tiny villages and hamlets. It includes more than 11,000 lakes and ponds, more than 1,200 miles of wild rivers, and 30,000 miles of brooks and streams. Almost half of the park is public land, protected forever by the state constitution. The rest is private land.

In August, the governor pledged to add 69,000 acres of forest and waters to the park's 2.7 million acres of public lands. This includes one of the park's highest waterfalls, long stretches of the park's wildest rivers and a collection of pristine lakes, ponds and wetlands stretching from the High Peaks to the park's southern edge. It is the largest and most impressive addition to the preserve since it was created in 1886.

This was a once-in-a-century opportunity to protect rare wildlife and unique plant life, while improving the state's outdoor recreation opportunities. The purchase is the final phase of a complex and well-designed conservation plan for the entire 161,000 acres of timberland formerly owned by Finch, Pruyn & Co., of Glens Falls. Finch sold all its lands in 2007.

First, the conservancy worked with local officials in all 27 Adirondack towns where Finch owned land. It sold almost 1,100 acres next to existing communities to Newcomb, Long Lake, North Hudson, Minerva and other towns for affordable housing and community development.

Next, the conservancy marked off the most productive timberlands — about 95,000 acres — and found a timber company that agreed to manage those lands using environmentally sound methods.

Gov. David Paterson bought the development rights on these lands so they could not be converted to other uses and lost from timber production. He also bought recreational rights. More than 75 miles of new snowmobile and ski trails are contemplated here.

The conservancy also agreed to a series of contracts that guarantee the paper mill a steady supply of paper pulp from these timberlands for at least 20 years. The mill remains open.

Now, the governor and the conservancy are taking the final step of permanently protecting the remaining 69,000 acres of the Finch holdings.

Once they are purchased, the state will pay four times what Finch did in local taxes. The state isn't eligible for tax breaks provided to owners of commercial timberland. These lands require no municipal services, so towns won't have additional expenses.

Meanwhile, no one has lost, or will lose, a timber-harvesting job due to the sale. There still will be more than 2 million acres of commercial timberland in the park.

Before the sale, Environmental Conservation Commissioner Joe Martens negotiated a price of less than \$725 per acre for these lands. That is an astounding bargain for state taxpayers. The governor will pay for it with a dedicated fund created from real estate transfer taxes, paid only by those who have subdivided and sold land.

Cuomo has found a way to boost the economy in 27 towns while protecting New York's most environmentally fragile region. He is making the park a better place to live for 130,000 residents, and a better place to play for 9 million visitors a year.

John F. Sheehan is director of communications for the Adirondack Council, a private organization dedicated to ensuring the ecological integrity and wild character of the Adirondack Park.

Read more: <http://www.timesunion.com/opinion/article/Forever-ever-wild-3923977.php#ixzz28o8QyTxJ>