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In My Opinion: State purchases enhance land

By JOHN SHEEHAN

Gov. Andrew Cuomo's recent decision to purchase nearly 70,000 acres of former timberlands for Adirondack Forest Preserve has been criticized as unnecessary spending in a time of economic trouble. A closer look shows it is actually part of a larger, comprehensive plan to blunt the economic damage from the rapid exit by all of the Adirondack Park's major timber companies at the close of the 20th century.

This plan provides the means to build a brighter future for the Adirondack Park in the 21st century.

Between 1985 and 2005, Diamond International, Domtar Industries, Lassiter Corp., Champion International, Hancock, International Paper and others placed hundreds of thousands of acres of Adirondack timberland on the market. The companies either folded or fled to the Third World, where land and labor costs are far cheaper.

At the same time, Whitney Industries placed Little Tupper Lake on the market, carved into 43 building lots. Finch Pruyn & Company was the last domino to fall in 2007, selling its vast holdings in 27 Adirondack towns.

Governors Pataki, Spitzer and Paterson took the advice of both environmental and economic development advisers when they carried out a plan to purchase the development rights on most of these lands. The resulting conservation agreements will keep them from being subdivided and sold in thousands of tiny chunks that would never again be devoted to forestry.

Together, the governors saved more than 700,000 acres of commercial timberland for the use of future generations. They also found opportunities for motorized public recreation that is not appropriate on more sensitive public lands and waters. This will help nearby communities that welcome snowmobilers or ATV riders. More than 95,000 acres of Finch lands were conserved this way.

The other half of the state's plan is to preserve in a natural state a smaller portion of lands that rare wildlife, fragile plant life and breathtaking, natural beauty made better suited to become "forever wild" Adirondack Forest Preserve. Little Tupper Lake was one such place, as were the north-flowing rivers owned by Champion and Lassiter's boreal wetlands.

These new public lands and waters have brought tourists from around the globe who are seeking wilderness experience in one of the world's most spectacular settings.

The Adirondack Park is the world's healthiest example of the deciduous forests that once covered large parts of the northern hemisphere. Our vast waters and tall mountains add sparkle

and diversity to that landscape. Our park is to oak/beech/maple forests what the Amazon Basin is to rain forests or what the Serengeti is to African grasslands.

In August, Cuomo said he would buy 69,000 acres of the former Finch lands and add them to the Adirondack Forest Preserve — the largest and most impressive addition to our “forever wild” lands since the preserve was created in 1886.

Preserve additions will be Hudson River Gorge, OK Slip Falls (250 feet high) and Blue Ledges, three scenic recreational gems for hikers and paddlers. Add to that the Essex Chain of Lakes and portions of Cedar, Indian, Hudson, Rock and Boreas rivers, and there is an opportunity to create a new Wild Rivers Wilderness Area.

That would complement the nearby High Peaks Wilderness and relieve some of the visitor pressure from that over-used treasure. The purchase will bring new wilderness gateways to the doorsteps of communities that could use some economic stimulus, such as Newcomb, North Hudson and Indian Lake.

Because the state isn't eligible for the property-tax breaks Finch received, it will pay full taxes on these lands — about four times what Finch paid.

The purchase should also boost job opportunities. A 2009 survey by local governments showed 420 Adirondackers (out of 135,000 residents) relied on forestry jobs. This purchase will remove less than 3 percent of all Adirondack commercial forests from current production. It is likely that increases in tourism employment will far surpass any loss in timber-cutting employment.

In sum, Gov. Cuomo has found a way to boost the economy in 27 Adirondack towns while protecting New York's most environmentally fragile region for the entire world to enjoy.

John F. Sheehan is director of communications for the Adirondack Council, a privately funded not-for-profit organization dedicated to ensuring the ecological integrity and wild character of the Adirondack Park.