The Adirondack Council

A SPECIAL REPORT

STATE OF THE PARK
1990

A Look at Growth Trends Affecting The Adirondack Park
Some areas of the country have managed to escape the destructive hand of man but even these sanctuaries are now subject to the unrelenting pressures of an increasingly urbanized society. The Adirondack Park has long been such a sanctuary. Whether it will continue to be one depends on the foresight and resolve of all New Yorkers.

*Governor Rockefeller’s Study Commission on the Future of the Adirondacks, 1970*

The pace of land sales and the break-up of large parcels suggest that the final shape of the Adirondack Park will be determined before this century is over.

*Governor Cuomo’s Commission on the Adirondack Park in the 21st Century, 1990*
APPLICATIONS FOR BUILDING LOTS RECEIVED BY ADIRONDACK PARK AGENCY, 1984-90

(Most new building lots are not counted here because they do not require approval by the Adirondack Park Agency.)
The Adirondack Park Today

"The Adirondack Park is protected forever," Governor Nelson Rockefeller said when he signed the Adirondack Park Agency (APA) Act in 1973. At the time, such optimism seemed justified. This was the most comprehensive zoning and land-use plan ever devised for a region of this size and natural significance.

And yet, only a few years later, the inadequacies of this plan became clear. As bold and innovative as it seemed in 1973, the APA Act did not foresee — and could not cope with — the increasing development pressures of the 1980s.

The pictures in the following pages give an inkling of what has been happening in the park since Governor Rockefeller signed the historic APA Act into law.
Subdividing the Adirondacks

Sales of subdivided property tripled between 1982 and 1985, and by 1988 had doubled again. The number of lots on subdivision applications to the Adirondack Park Agency (which reviews only about half of the subdivisions in the park) increased from 492 in 1984 to 1,668 in 1989.

Most Adirondack subdivisions involve only a few lots. Perhaps more than anything else, it is the proliferation of these small projects — from two-to-six lots — that could fragment and seal off the natural open spaces of the park.

At the other end of the development spectrum are massive second-home subdivisions like “The Woodlands” between Wilmington and Jay. This proposal calls for a series of “alpine villages” totaling 1,200 vacation houses on about 4,000 acres of forested hills and ridges.

THE WOODLANDS: More than six square miles of wooded hills and ridges are the proposed setting for new “alpine villages.”
DEER TRAIL SUBDIVISION: 21 lots, 3,400 feet on Cedar River.

TWIN POND SUBDIVISION: One of two proposals involving small lakes near Old Forge.
AVERYVILLE ROAD: Subdivision of woods and meadows near northern terminus of Northville-Placid Trail.
GLENEAGLES SUBDIVISION: As one phase of a much larger second-home development, 108 lots would be created around a new golf course in this scenic vista from Rt. 86 near Lake Placid.

NORMAN RIDGE SUBDIVISION: Lots for sale in foreground of scenic vista of Whiteface Mountain and McKenzie Mountain Wilderness Area.
Adirondack "Townhomes"

Walls of condominiums have risen on lakeshores and hillsides in many of the popular vacation areas of the park, including the Fulton Chain of Lakes, North Creek, Lake Placid, Schroon Lake and, above all, Lake George.
Regulatory Failure

Between 1967 and 1987, according to conservative estimates by the Adirondack Park Agency, the number of dwellings in the Adirondack Park increased by more than 40%. Some 20,000 new homes appeared in and around villages, on roadsides and lakeshores, and in formerly undisturbed backcountry. In the past eight years, the pace of building and subdividing has accelerated.

What most distinguishes the Adirondack Park from the rest of the world are the variety of pristine lakes and ponds, surrounded by forested hills and mountains. The APA Act of 1973 established shoreline development restrictions to protect these lovely (and extremely vulnerable) waterbodies.

The failure of the development controls may be seen in hundreds of new structures that have been prominently sited on lakeshores throughout the park.
Regulatory Failure
High-Impact House

In a developed suburb or resort area, one more house doesn’t make much difference. On an undisturbed hillside, lakeshore or scenic roadside in the Adirondacks, just one conspicuous structure can change an entire shoreline or landscape.

With some cutting and pasting, the picture below gives an idea of what this shoreline looked like before a house was built there. The second picture shows the shoreline as it appears today. Though this house was built before the APA Act took effect, the current setback and cutting regulations would have done little to reduce the impact of such construction.
A Lake in Transition

Rainbow Lake in the northern Adirondacks is an important link in a public canoe route that traverses much of the park. One side of the lake is still largely undisturbed because it is either publicly-owned Forest Preserve or undeveloped private land.

In contrast, the opposite side of Rainbow Lake has been dramatically altered in recent years. Intrusive siting of new structures, and major modifications of the lakeshore to provide unobstructed views, lawns, beaches, boathouses and airplane hangers, reveal the failure of existing restrictions to protect the natural character of Adirondack shorelines.
A major selling point for the new houses on Rainbow Lake is the splendid view of the unspoiled opposite shore (see below). But high-impact development on the east side of the lake has compromised the public values of the state-owned “forever wild” shoreline across the way. Such development has also degraded the natural beauty of an historic Adirondack canoe route.
Rainbow Lake Continued...
One House Can Alter a Ridge or Hillside...
...Or Block A Scenic Vista

The pictures below show one of the 40 scenic vistas identified by the Adirondack Park Agency. In the absence of adequate protection, a house now sits squarely in the foreground of this view from Rt. 28, a few miles south of Indian Lake Village. The "before" picture was taken at the same time as the "after" picture, but from the view side of the building.
Vulnerable Vistas

Pictured here is what may be the finest roadside vista in northern New York State — the view of Indian Pass and the High Peaks from Rt. 73, just south of Lake Placid.

What Could Happen

This is a doctored photograph showing what could happen to this and other vistas under present zoning controls.
CONVENTIONAL

COMPATIBLE

CONTRASTS: WELL-SCREENED HOUSE AND PROMINENTLY-DISPLAYED BOATHOUSE
Conventional vs. Compatible Development

Much development can still occur without compromising the scenic qualities of the Adirondack Park. A house can be set back and screened by trees and other vegetation from a lake or road. A new structure can be made to blend with its natural setting through compatible siting, design, color, and building materials.

CONVENTIONAL: PRIVATE DEVELOPMENT TRANSFORMS NATURAL SCENE

COMPATIBLE: PRIVATE DEVELOPMENT FITS INTO NATURAL SETTING
The Choice Is Still Ours

Though the rate of change is accelerating, the Adirondack Park is still a largely-undisturbed natural sanctuary — the largest and wildest such sanctuary in the eastern United States.

If the recommendations of the Governor's Commission on the Adirondacks in the 21st Century are followed, some 360,000 additional houses could be constructed in the Adirondack Park. This compares to about 80,000 houses in the park today. But the future development would be channeled and sited to safeguard the region's scenic, open-space and biological resources. Additions to the public Forest Preserve, conservation easements, and transferrable development rights are other means of achieving lasting protection.

If the Commission's warnings are heeded, the Adirondack Park can be preserved for the benefit and delight of future generations.

STILL-UNSPOILED LAKE CHAMPLAIN — Three miles of Split Rock Mountain shoreline, on the Adirondack Park side in center of picture, are currently being considered for subdivision and development. Important public values are at stake.
The park's undeveloped roadsides and scenic vistas can be maintained in their natural state.

Undisturbed shorelines can be kept natural through better regulations, easements, or public purchase.
The Adirondack Park

The Adirondack Park is the largest American park in the contiguous United States. It contains six million acres and covers one-fifth of New York State. It is equal in size to neighboring Vermont and is nearly three times the size of Yellowstone National Park.

Some 42 percent of the Adirondack Park is publicly-owned Adirondack Forest Preserve, protected as "forever wild" by the state constitution since 1895. One million acres of these public lands, representing one-sixth of the entire park, is further designated as Wilderness, where motorized use is prohibited.

The remaining 58 percent of the Adirondack Park is private land devoted principally to forestry, agriculture and open-space recreation. The park is home for 130,000 permanent and 110,000 seasonal residents, and hosts an estimated nine million visitors annually.

The western and southern Adirondacks are a gentle landscape of hills, lakes, ponds and streams. In the northeast are the "high peaks," 42 of them above 4,000 feet, nine of them with alpine summits.

The Adirondacks form the headwaters for most or part of five major drainage basins: Lake Champlain and the Hudson, Black, St. Lawrence and Mohawk Rivers. Within the park are 2,800 lakes and ponds and more than 1,000 miles of rivers fed by an estimated 30,000 miles of brooks and streams.

What most distinguishes the Adirondack Park is its diversity. Within this vast natural sanctuary is a combination of wildlife, forests, wetlands, waterways and mountains found nowhere else in the world.

The Adirondack Park is a patchwork of public (black) and private lands. What happens to the private holdings in the way of incompatible development will degrade the adjoining public lands and affect the natural character of the entire region.
AN OBJECT LESSON: In the absence of adequate land-use controls, much of the Adirondack Park could suffer the same fate as southern Lake George.
A Sanctuary Worth Preserving

The Adirondack Park of New York State is the last large wilderness sanctuary in the northeastern United States.
The Adirondack Park as we know it today can be preserved as a unique natural legacy for future visitors and residents.
The Adirondack Council

Founded in 1975, the Adirondack Council is dedicated to protecting the Adirondack Park through public education, working with government agencies and lawmakers, and undertaking legal action when necessary.

The Council is a coalition of the National Audubon Society, Wilderness Society, Natural Resources Defense Council, National Parks and Conservation Association, and Association for the Protection of the Adirondacks.

While the Council receives moral support from these member organizations, its financial sustenance comes mainly from its 15,000 individual members and from private foundations.

Individual membership categories begin at $25. Membership benefits include regular newsletters, special reports, and action alerts.

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IF WE ACT NOW, MOST OF THE ADIRONDACK PARK CAN STILL BE SAVED

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