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OP-ED CONTRIBUTORS

A Development Test in Adirondack Park

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"THE Adirondacks are preserved forever," Gov. Nelson A. Rockefeller famously boasted after passage of the Adirondack Park Agency (A.P.A.) Land Use law of 1973. The A.P.A. law calls for precious natural resources of the park to be preserved and development of its private lands carefully planned to ensure compatibility with the adjacent, publicly owned Forest Preserve, which our state constitution says must be "forever wild."

Of course, nothing is preserved forever. Protective laws are not self-executing and require spirited people to apply and renew them. Rockefeller's agency did stand up for the law in the 1970s when massive second-home subdivisions with names like Horizon and Ton-Da-Lay planned for remote forests were stopped. In the late 1980s, Gov. [Mario M. Cuomo](#)'s A.P.A. prevented Patten Corporation from exploiting this magnificent mountain landscape — which is larger than the state of Massachusetts and larger than Yellowstone, Yosemite, Grand Canyon, Glacier and Olympic national parks combined — to make a fast buck.

Now comes a serious test for Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo. He, like his predecessors, says the park is a treasure that must be protected. His A.P.A. (the governor names the agency's chair, and all of its members are either gubernatorial nominations, requiring senate confirmation, or state agency appointments) has been handed the hearing record on the sprawling [Adirondack Club and Resort](#), the largest second-home subdivision application that the A.P.A. has seen in 35 years. During the agency's January meeting, this Wednesday through Friday in Ray

Brook, N.Y., the A.P.A. will decide whether to permit 706 residential units, 332 buildings and 15 miles of new roads, sewer, water and electrical lines spread over 6,235 forested acres with sensitive streams, ponds and wetlands on rugged terrain several miles from [Tupper Lake](#) — in the very heart of the Adirondack Park.

If permitted, the project would stand the 39-year-old A.P.A. law on its head and establish a dangerous precedent for the park's fragile, remote backcountry. More than three-quarters of the project site lies within [Resource Management](#) — under the law, the park's most protected private land zone — the legislative purpose of which is to "protect the delicate physical and biological resources ... and preserve the open spaces that are essential and basic to the unique character of the park."

This project would spread 82 large second homes, including 39 so-called great camps, throughout this zone, with a serious impact on sensitive habitats and wildlife, essentially replacing local hunters and foresters with private driveways and "No Trespassing" signs. A respected conservation biologist, Dr. Michael Klemens, testified at the public hearing last April that "the club and resort is classic sprawl on steroids.

"It spreads negative ecological impacts out across the landscape," he continued. "It is a train wreck resulting from a process that does not allow for understanding natural systems in the first place." A smarter alternative, he said, would develop a complete understanding of the project site and only then plan houses in a more compact design that avoids sensitive areas.

In exchange for risking such damage to the Adirondacks, some might expect a tremendous economic return. Yet the applicants have no track record developing land or selling lots inside the Adirondack Park. Nor do they have the money to construct the project on their own. The county Industrial Development Agency is being asked for \$36 million in private revenue bonds to fund the infrastructure.

During the hearing, the applicant's marketing and fiscal studies were shown to be incomplete, insubstantial and misleading. Evidence suggested that the resort's inflated sales projections are founded largely upon the speculative dreams of the applicant. One impartial expert in resort development, David Norden, said during the hearing last June that the market for such a remote project "is very limited ...

and as such the project carries a relatively high risk profile.

“This project does not possess the primary characteristics of resorts most likely to succeed as we come out of the recession,” he added. With sales likely to fall well below projections, tax revenues will also fall well below the mark, Mr. Norden and other experts maintained. Major investments in Big Tupper Ski Area, the most broadly supported aspect of the project, are delayed to its latter phases.

Other experts testified that if real estate sales are slow and the project stalls, local residents could be stuck with the operation and maintenance of miles of new roads and sewer lines leading to only a few new homes. Furthermore, the resort’s owners won’t pay taxes directly to the town or school district; they will make payments in lieu of taxes to private bondholders willing to invest in this risky enterprise. The taxing districts will get what’s left over after these payments are made.

Since 1892, Adirondack Park has been not only of state and regional importance but also of great national and international significance. The park inspired the national wilderness system and is designated an [International Biosphere Reserve](#). Standards for building on this scale in the park should be as high as its mountains, and the law says they must be. The Adirondack Club and Resort sets a glaringly low standard, and the A.P.A. should deny it. Only then might we see an alternative that actually makes sense for the park’s environment and marketplace and that concentrates redevelopment where it was intended — around Big Tupper Ski Area.

Will Governor Cuomo, like his father and Nelson Rockefeller, insist that the A.P.A. abide by its law? Or will he risk damaging a park beloved by millions and globally regarded as a model for sustaining people and wild nature?

The authors are partners with Adirondack Wild: Friends of the Forest Preserve, a membership-supported, nonprofit organization. They have worked for the protection of the Adirondack Park since 1987.