

# Can the Adirondacks offer residents a sustainable life?

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North Country Public Radio

July 19, 2012

The Adirondack Park is famous for its feuds and political controversies. From the Adirondack Club and Resort debate in Tupper Lake to the future of the railroad corridor through the Park, big and sometimes nasty fights often grab headlines.

But a growing coalition of Park leaders say they may have found a set of common principles that will allow more cooperation, while easing some of the tension between environmentalists, local government leaders and business owners. They've developed a concept called "the sustainable life" which would try to balance healthy towns with long term environmental protections.

As Brian Mann reports, the vision was unveiled at a meeting yesterday in Long Lake that was attended by more than 200 of the Park's most influential activists and leaders.

This story really begins with two men, Dave Mason and Jim Herman. They retired to Keene after a career working as consultants and management gurus to big corporations. Living in the Adirondacks, they heard all the fighting and strife over the future of the Park and they decided to apply their process here, asking what it is that the various groups really want.

They began holding a series of in-depth seminars and discussions, where people debated different scenarios, different futures for the Park. During those conversations, Mason and Herman made a discovery; it turned out that in session after session, groups across the political spectrum agreed on the kind of Adirondacks they want.

"We almost didn't believe it," Mason said. "There was a stunned silence in the room. This can't be right."

Mason and Herman delivered their findings yesterday at a gathering of the Adirondack Common Ground Alliance in Long Lake. They described a vision for the Park that they call the Sustainable Life. Under this model, more communities would rely on locally produced food and energy.

They say broadband and increasingly seamless communication technology could make living and working in the mountains far more common. Herman predicted, "The use of broadband [would] create the opportunity of people to be teleworkers or to be entrepreneurs in the emerging global knowledge economy."

Just as interesting in this planning process was what people didn't seem to want. Generally speaking, those who took part in the workshops didn't want a future where the Park becomes more and more wild with fewer and fewer people. They also didn't want a future where the forest preserve is broken up and forever wild environmental protections are abolished. Instead, the vast majority of people, from environmentalists to local government and business leaders, wanted a kind of sustainable balance.

Frank Mezzano is an Adirondack Park Agency commissioner and former town supervisor in Lake Pleasant: a veteran of decades of Park debates and feuds. He says the shared vision was unexpected. "It both surprised me and pleased me," Mezzano said, adding that the process left him feeling hopeful.

If this all sounds sort of too good to be true, Mason and Herman acknowledge that some big things need to get done to make Adirondack communities more sustainable. One goal, they say, is a dramatic reshuffling of local governments and school districts to make them far more efficient and affordable. Herman said, "More consolidation of school administration, towns working together to shared services, all those are considered somewhat doable."

They also think management of the Park's forestlands needs to be more flexible, eliminating bureaucratic rules and roadblocks

that they describe as non-productive. "The [environmental] protection that we have has done far more good than any kind of harm. But we got to stop saying, 'There's nothing we can do about these crazy things,'" Herman added.

One specific strategy, they suggested, might be creating a land bank in the forest preserve that communities can draw on. That would make it unnecessary for small towns to apply for a constitutional amendment whenever they need to build important utilities or infrastructure.

During yesterday's session in Long Lake, Senator Betty Little said the change would boost community development dramatically. "I was just delighted to see it be one of the strategies here," she said.

There was a time when that kind of idea might have drawn immediate fire from environmental groups, but the Adirondack Council has embraced the concept. And Neil Woodworth with the Adirondack Mountain Club says it's a good strategy. "The land bank is a very good idea. We're going to need some flexibility for community growth," he argued.

There are skeptics about this process and about the sustainable community vision presented in Long Lake. David Gibson heads a green group called Adirondack Wild. He said, "I think there are things being thrown around that are much too casual and not well researched."

Gibson says talk of increasing flexibility in the management of the forest preserve won't find political support outside the Park. But others who've been part of the Adirondack wars say they think this vision and this process could keep a lot of old enemies at the table talking.

Gerry Delaney from the town of Saranac is president of the Adirondack Local Government Review Board. He says he was skeptical at first, but then he attended one of the workshops held by Mason and Herman. "I'm really impressed with it," he said. "It's coming from the bottom up. It's coming from the residents. In the session I was in it was a really good cross-section of the Adirondacks."

This gathering in Long Lake played out against concerns that towns and villages in the Park are struggling with declining state aid, with an aging population and with a dwindling private sector economy. Senator Betty Little says a shared vision could help some communities bounce back. "I do have a lot of hope," she said, adding that "we do have a lot of empty buildings...we still have a lot of work to do."

Mason and Herman did this consulting project for free, donating their time and expertise over the last year. They say they'll now turn toward developing a more concrete roadmap for the sustainable life vision might be implemented.