State group privately debates High Peaks crowd solutions that could affect this summer’s visitors

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Hikers make their way to the summit of Mount Marcy in 2019. Photo by Mike Lynch

Twenty–two people hand-picked by the state have been meeting behind closed doors to propose short- and long-term solutions to manage crowds in the Adirondack High Peaks.

Members of this High Peaks Strategic Planning Advisory Group meet about twice a month at the New York Department of Environmental Conservation’s Warrensburg office and spend hours talking over the conundrum and reviewing public feedback submitted through email. They are slated to deliver proposals to the state by June.

The group’s formation is a positive step for many who see it as the state’s acknowledgement of a problem ignored for too long. But with the No. 1 stakeholder—the public—not at the table, others are left to wonder and wait.
While members of the group say there is tension about whether the meetings should be open or closed, none have left the table over it and nearly all think the conversations have been productive. Most are not convinced they'll have a long-term solution by June, but they do believe they’ll have short-term recommendations that could be implemented as soon as this summer.

**The problem**

Driving down Route 73 in Keene on any day in the spring, summer or fall, one can see the problem firsthand. Cars line the roads on either side, causing a traffic nightmare and safety hazard.

Probably no one knows this better than Keene Supervisor Joe Pete Wilson and Town Board members. They have, oftentimes, expanded their governmental duties to parking enforcement, and it has not always been a pleasant experience.

“We were being crushed under the weight of happy visitors,” said Wilson, who is on the advisory panel. “When the state established no parking along Route 73, that was to address real, genuine safety issues of people parking on the highway.”

*Illegally parked cars line Route 73 near the Giant Mountain trailhead in Keene. Photo by Mike Lynch*

But where should hundreds of motorists park, then? “Especially at the beginning when ... it was just catching them by surprise,” Wilson said, “they were frustrated and angry.”
And it’s not just parking that’s a problem. There are the unprepared hikers that show up in penny loafers and flip-flops who need rescuing. There is a lack of public bathrooms.

Besides happy visitors, Wilson has seen his town crushed under heavier downpours. Flooding last Halloween nearly sent nine very full portable toilets down the river. Luckily, the town had them picked up just days before the storm.

A shuttle system and front-country stewards that the town hires are helping, but Keene’s approximately 1,000 residents cannot manage a tourist destination that attracts about 10 million on their own.

*Adirondack Explorer* talked to a majority of the members that are not state employees. These individuals were asked by a state employee to be a part of the group.

Most felt the group was a good representation of all the stakeholders involved, though some said they understood certain groups were left out. Some environmental groups in particular, like the Protect the Adirondacks and Adirondack Wild: Friends of the Forest Preserve, were not happy to be excluded.

A member of the Adirondack 46ers also wrote in an email addressed to the group that he thought that organization should be at the table.

“It must be acknowledged that a significant portion of backcountry visitors are pursuing the goal of becoming 46ers,” wrote Jae Burke, an Essex County resident.

**Open or closed**

It’s not clear who exactly decided to make these advisory group meetings closed, but some said it was the DEC’s idea, while others said it was other stakeholders in the room. It’s not clear who decided who would be in the advisory group, either.

Bob Stegemann, DEC’s retiring region 5 director, said it was DEC’s planners who decided the advisory group would be closed to the public, but staff would post meeting summaries online.

“There’ll be an opportunity for people to comment throughout on what’s going on about this,” Stegemann added.

Kristin O’Neill, assistant director for the state Committee on Open Government, said an advisory group does not have to have open meetings if it is not created by the Legislature and is only providing recommendations.

But the state’s Medicaid Redesign Team organized by Gov. Andrew Cuomo, for example, is holding public meetings and hearings in addition to soliciting public
feedback online. It, too, was not created by the Legislature and is only providing recommendations.

The state and members of the group pointed to how DEC is posting meeting summaries on the advisory group’s website, but these summaries do not attribute who said what and are, at times, vague.

Read meeting summaries

The state announced the creation of the advisory group in November. Its goals were to address public safety, protect natural resources, address a positive recreational experience, support local economies and make decisions using data, according to a news release.

Wilson said that while generally he is in support of open meetings, some of the discussion can turn to legal issues. For example, when discussing parking lots, tree-cutting becomes a topic of discussion, and a tree-cutting lawsuit involving the Adirondacks is still moving through the court system.

The Keene supervisor also said the vacuum atmosphere of the meetings allows for more productive discussion, and he’s already seeing partnerships form that had not occurred before.

“If there were members of the public and press in the room, every meeting, we literally would get nothing done because everything would be a fight, or people having to stick with whatever their constituencies’ accepted line is,” Wilson said.

Pete Nelson, of Adirondack Wilderness Advocates, said he thought the advisory group meetings should be open.

“The opportunities for things to get misinterpreted goes down,” said Nelson, who is part of the group.

But he also said he sees the meeting summaries and solicitation of public feedback as a medium ground.

“DEC is fully committed to this in a way I’ve never seen before,” Nelson added. “I get tired of language and rhetoric criticizing what the state does.”

Panel member Theresa Cheetham-Palen, of Rock and River Guide Co., said she knew of people who wanted to be part of the meetings and she tries “to think, ‘OK, what would this group want,’” and bring it to the table.

“It’s a very thoughtful group,” Cheetham-Palen said, “trying to take all the variety of opinion and ideas into account.”

Shaun Gillilland, chair of the Essex County Board of Supervisors, said he is against the advisory group’s meetings being open to the public.
“The ongoing success that I see happening there is the fact that people can speak freely and can have and work solutions and stuff without being worried that they’re necessarily making somebody in their constituency upset,” Gillilland said. “I don’t see that as being successful if it were a free-for-all for public opinion.”

**Public comments**

While members of the advisory group have the freedom to brainstorm ideas without their names attached to them, those who submit public comments do not.

*Adirondack Explorer* filed a freedom of information request to the DEC for all the public comments submitted to the advisory group so far, and received more than 70 email files.

Many of the comments center on whether permits should be used to keep hiker traffic manageable in the High Peaks. So far, the feedback is fairly evenly split between those against permits and those for them.

Most who said they would be in favor of permits suggested a tiered-cost approach with Adirondack Park residents paying less than out-of-state residents. The costs of such permits would be put back into trail maintenance.

To submit comments to the group, email info.R5@dec.ny.gov.

The comments also reveal just how suffocated some residents feel under the weight of the Adirondacks’ popularity.

Leane Brown, who identified herself as a New York resident, suggested out-of-state visitors should pay a rate “high enough to deter them. I feel as though I’ve been kicked out of my own backyard.”

James Appleton, creator of the Lake Placid 9’er challenge, wrote to say permits were “nonsense.” He created the 9’er challenge, he said, for the very same problem the advisory group is considering. He suggested that there needs to be more parking.

Tom Fairhurst, another commenter, suggested the state needs to create more marketed challenges similar to Appleton’s, the fire tower challenge and the Lake George 12ster, to help spread people out.

Several comments suggested the state have hiker insurance in case someone needs to be rescued, or to require the state to charge unprepared hikers for a rescue.
The group’s suggestions

So far, most of the advisory group members *Adirondack Explorer* talked to have said they are not in favor of permits until things like trail maintenance, front-country infrastructure and more hiker education have been tried.

One of the challenges the advisory group is dealing with is a lack of consistently collected data measuring hiker traffic. Logs are not always reliable because not everyone signs them. Groups such as the Adirondack Council have conducted studies on popular hiking weekends, but Nelson said there has been talk about a round of data gathering this summer that “is coordinated and appropriate.”

Most of the advisory group members think they will have some short-term recommendations for this summer, too.

Cheetham-Palen said she is hoping the group can address “low-hanging fruit” and, specifically, making parking safer in Keene along Route 73.

That’s what James McKenna, CEO of the Regional Office of Sustainable Tourism and part of the advisory group, hopes can be addressed, too.

“I think there’s certain things we can look at providing better information to folks in advance of their trip,” McKenna added, “concentrating on how we can be in a better position to deal with the future by having hiking hubs.”

McKenna said the group is looking at some of the more popular entry points into the Adirondack Park and where more information centers could be stationed.

The state and Essex County will try out a shuttle pilot program this summer. There will be more front-country stewards to help visitors with parking and education.

Seth Jones, of the Adirondack Mountain Club, said his organization’s focus is investing in more hiker education and having consistent messaging across all the different stewardship groups in the Adirondacks. Jones is also advocating for more data collection, investment in infrastructure and long-term planning.
A long-term plan should look beyond the High Peaks, Gilliland said, and encompass the whole park. Other towns and villages should have amenities to accommodate visitors besides Lake Placid and Saranac Lake where people tend to be concentrated, he said.

“I’m confident our recommendations will be taken to heart by the state,” Nelson said. “It’s beyond a quick-fix and beyond our knowledge collectively. Lots of places in the U.S. are suffering from overuse. We have a problem that we don’t fully understand yet.”

Who is in the advisory group?

- James McKenna, Regional Office of Sustainable Tourism
- Shaun Gilliland, Essex County Board of Supervisors
- Sandi Allen, retired DEC counsel
- Joe Pete Wilson, Town of Keene
- Rocci Acquire, Adirondack Council
- Pete Nelson, Adirondack Wilderness Advocates
- Seth Jones, Adirondack Mountain Club
- Theresa Cheetham-Palen, Rock and River Guide Company
- Rick Weber, Adirondack Park Agency
• Kris Alberga, DEC
• Rob Davies, DEC
• Robert Stegemann, DEC
• Karyn Richards, DEC
• David Winchell, DEC
• Mary Roy, DEC
• Laura DiBetta, DEC
• Peter Frank, DEC
• Kris Cheney-Seymour, Olympic Regional Development Authority
• Pat Barnes, state Department of Transportation
• Chris Morris, Office of Parks, Historic and Recreational Preservation
• Jill Weiss, SUNY Environmental Science and Forestry
• Charlie Wise, The Mountaineer