



Should the Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan treat the Economy on par with the Environment?

No.

by David Gibson

Staff partner with Adirondack Wild: Friends of the Forest Preserve

MARCH 30, 2015

The purposes of the Adirondack Park's State Land Master Plan are embedded in the law creating the Adirondack Park Agency. Section 816 of the APA Act concerning a "master plan for management of state lands" was added in order to protect the state-owned Forest Preserve through a land classification system with guidelines for its management and use. These public lands, all 2.6 million acres, are covered by Article 14 of the NYS Constitution which since 1894 states that they are to be "forever kept as wild forest lands."

In New York we have wilderness by law, and that law is the State Constitution. It's the Constitution that lies at the heart of the SLMP's "unifying theme," which is that "protection and preservation of the state lands...must be paramount." To expect the SLMP to treat the economic development of state lands equally with protection of their natural resources is not only at cross purposes with the APA Act, it is at cross purposes with the State Constitution. As the SLMP states, the paramount theme "is drawn not only from the APA Act and its legislative history, but also from a century of the public's demonstrated attitude towards the forest preserve and the Adirondack Park." Changing the "paramount purpose" of the SLMP implies a change to Article 14. That requires a statewide debate, votes in two legislatures, and a public referendum.

Those who wish to change the SLMP in the name of "economic development" are more accurately pushing more motorized and mechanized access. They want all-terrain vehicles, snowmobiles, trucks, float planes and bicycles to travel more widely within the Forest Preserve, including within Wilderness and Primitive areas. Doing so would defeat the reality of wilderness, places where man and machines do not dominate the landscape. Doing so would damage

the region's ecology, since expanding motorized networks severely fragments wildlife habitats. Further, actions to expand motorized activity beyond the thousands of miles of roads, lakes and rivers already open to it would deter those who value wilderness from visiting. Millions come to the Park, some to stay, work and raise a family, because it is not "anyplace USA," where mechanization dominates daily life, and because it has wild places to enjoy which are utterly different from places they are used to. That is the Park's quality of life difference, and economic edge.

Equally important are the millions paying taxes on the Forest Preserve who simply want to know that wilderness exists here. The more mechanized the Forest Preserve becomes, the more it will resemble life in 80% of the remainder of the state, and the less it will merit taxpayer support. Adirondack communities could risk losing millions in annual tax payments. An Adirondack Wild member has summarized the literature and conservatively estimates the annual economic value of wilderness in the Adirondack Park at \$150 million. It turns out that balancing "economic development" with resource protection on the Forest Preserve makes little economic sense. The debate about the SLMP is on non-economic grounds. It boils down to how one views the non-market values of keeping and maintaining wild lands – for their social, experiential, health, quality of life, ecological, existential values - which are difficult to quantify, but which are written into the law and Constitution and solidly embedded in public opinion. As Clarence Petty advised, any policy that weakens protection of the Forest Preserve is not an administrator's or even a governor's decision, as in amending the SLMP. It is a statewide decision, and the voters get the last word.