

Editorial: APA needs independence

July 2, 2019

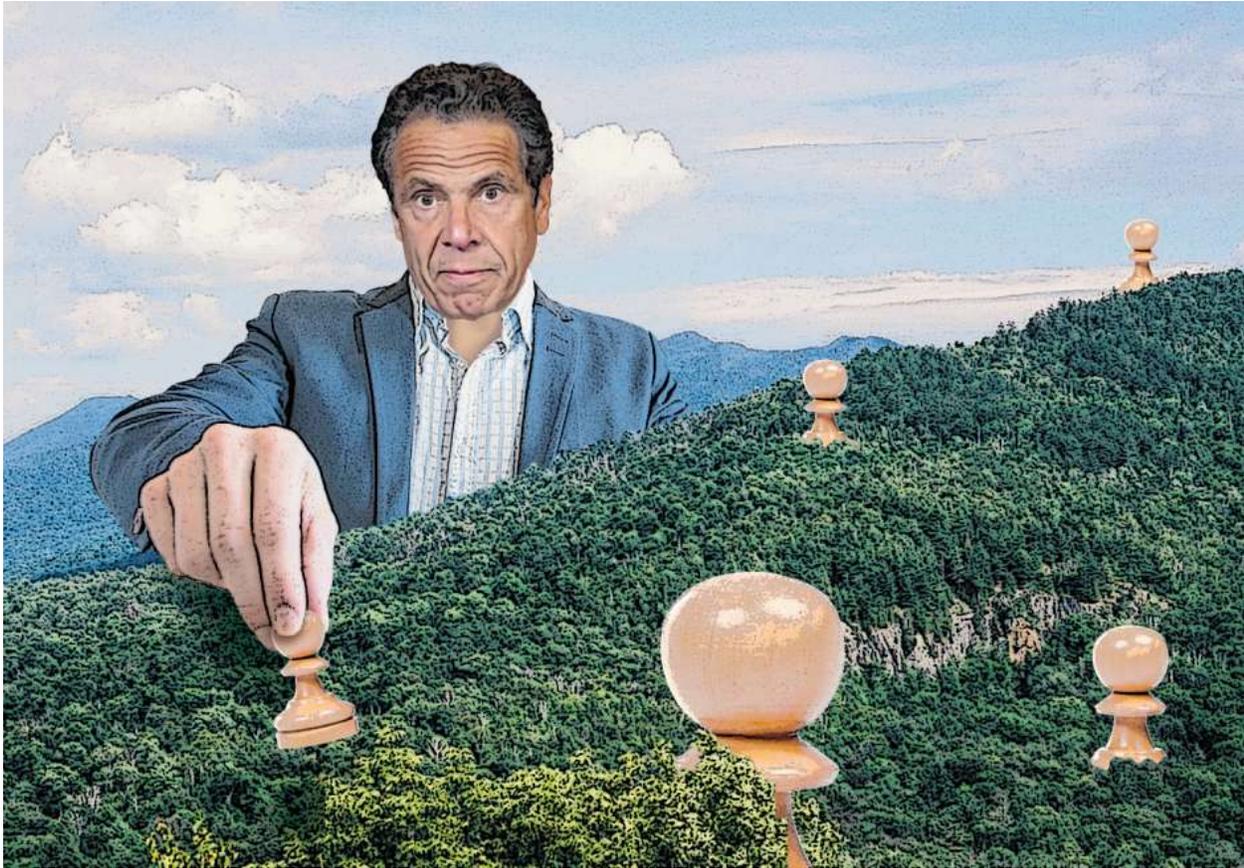


Photo illustration by Jeff Boyer / Times Union

THE ISSUE:

The Adirondack Park Agency should be an independent voice for the protection of one of New York's great assets.

THE STAKES:

Gov. Andrew Cuomo seems to want an APA that acts as a rubber stamp. The Adirondack Park Agency has a unique and challenging mission. It is charged with protecting one of New York's great assets while considering the economic needs of the struggling North Country.

To accomplish its mission, the APA needs a board that is both well qualified and free from political interference. Those goals do not seem to be shared by Gov. Andrew Cuomo.

Environmental groups are sounding the alarm over Mr. Cuomo's appointments to the 11-member board, saying the proposed commissioners lack significant

environmental experience and continue the governor's habit of stacking the agency with business and local government interests. The Adirondack Mountain Club, Adirondack Wild and other groups are asking for a more balanced slate.

They have a point. Certainly, under Mr. Cuomo, the APA board has lost some of the strength and independence it needs to display.

That's not surprising. The governor's micromanagement of state government is infamous — and the APA has apparently not been spared.

Three years ago, then-APA Commissioner Richard Booth, an environmental law professor at Cornell University, accused the governor of interfering with a decision to open a wilderness area of the park to motorized vehicles. Mr. Cuomo forced a less-restrictive approach, Mr. Booth said, by rigidly controlling what information APA's staff was allowed to present to commissioners.

For his latest appointments, Mr. Cuomo has nominated retired Department of Environmental Conservation lawyer Ken Lynch, now with an engineering firm in Syracuse; Johnsburg Supervisor Andrea Hogan; Mark Hall, a member of the local industrial development agency; and Brian McDonnell, an outdoor recreation organizer and canoe outfitter.

What's missing? Nominees with serious backgrounds in environmental law, ecological sciences and land-use planning.

The result is an APA that is "rudderless," according to David Gibson, a managing partner at Adirondack Wild. Peter Bauer, executive director at Protect the Adirondacks, says Mr. Cuomo's appointments have the agency "at the weakest point in its history."

That's unacceptable, and it's a threat to the remaining wilderness within the park — as the state Senate seems to realize. The Democratic majority did not act on the governor's recommendations by the end of the legislative session, a sign that it expects and wants better nominees.

And so the ball is in Mr. Cuomo's court. He should respond by replacing his nominees with a more diverse group that will be forceful and independent advocates for the park.

The APA's job is difficult but vitally important. It needs commissioners who are not merely extensions of the administration, but who understand the challenges facing the park and have the experience — and independence — necessary to confront them.