

Addressing High Peaks overuse

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Keene is ground zero for High Peaks hiker frustration and impact. In particular, Cascade, Colden, Dix, Giant, Noonmark, and Pitchoff mountains are being loved to death.

Thousands of people are being attracted to the Adirondacks by a successful I Love NY campaign, Gov. Cuomo's festivals, ROOST (Regional Office of Sustainable Tourism) marketing, and word of mouth via social media. A result is increasing numbers at the trailheads of these mountains, all located in or near Keene. Other trailheads, like Adirondak Loj, the Garden, and Ampersand, have experienced a dramatic increase in hikers as well.

The outcome has been crowded trails, parking lots filled past capacity, and people parking along the highways, resulting in hazardous conditions for hikers, bikers and motorists. Trails are taking a beating, with many peaks becoming crowded. Tempers have soared. Indeed, two weeks ago Keene town Supervisor Joe Pete Wilson and a Canadian tourist seeking to park in a non-parking zone near the Roaring Brook Falls parking area exchanged strong words early one morning. Following, the tourist complained to the State Police, and the supervisor apologized to his community for not handling the situation better.

Added problems have been caused by the design of the trails themselves, more often than not situated along the shortest route to the top. While that may have sufficed a hundred years ago, when local guides created them and hikers were few, today their design encourages erosion. Needed are new trails cut with switchbacks and other features designed to strengthen their resiliency.

Over the past year, a bit of an ad hoc approach has been taken by several stakeholders such as the town of Keene, the Adirondack Mountain Club and the state Department of Environmental Conservation to address the impact of increased trail usage. Their actions have included locating stewards on mountain tops, a shuttle service from the edge of Marcy Field to the Garden, and closing the Cascade trailhead during Columbus Day weekend, shifting hikers to the Mount Van Hoevenberg parking lot.

Increasingly, voices are calling for a permit system in the most heavily used regions. The goal is to encourage hikers to spread out to other lesser-used trails and raise revenue to support hiker education and trail upgrades. Many longtime hikers love the ability to go anywhere, anytime and for free. They have pushed back hard against permitting. However, crowded conditions are causing several to rethink their positions.

To address these and related challenges, the DEC held a closed-door meeting of stakeholders. The primary priorities addressed were:

- assessing trails usage
- providing for safety in the interior
- a transit study and shuttles for taking hikers to trailheads
- permits for parking or hiking
- education and outreach
- sustainable trail construction and maintenance.

A diverse mix of people and agencies were invited. They included nearly three dozen agencies such as the state Adirondack Park Agency, state Department of Transportation and an array of environmental organizations such as the Adirondack Council, Adirondack Land Trust and Adirondack Mountain Club - also, elected officials from Keene, North Hudson and the Adirondack Park Local Government Review Board, along with marketing agencies ranging from Hamlets to Huts to ROOST, and representatives of the AuSable Club, Elk Lake Lodge and state Olympic Regional Development Authority, along with residents from the lead affected counties attended. About 60 people in all.

People pro and con on all issues were invited. Some have long felt there should be a permit system while others attending were not yet ready to sign on. An agreement was the need for an expanded presence by DEC rangers. Many feel the state's been adding land over the past two decades but not adding enough rangers to monitor public use, keep a tab on trail conditions and educate the public about Leave No Trace, staying safe, protecting the environment.

The big takeaway was attendees appreciated the diversity of voices, how well the DEC organized the meeting and that people felt heard. According to the Adirondack Daily Enterprise and Lake Placid News reporter Elizabeth Izzo, who attended in spite of the media being "closed out," attendees participated in a "dot poll." They indicated their most popular initiative was testing a pilot permit program, followed by creating a comprehensive plan, expanding parking, increasing research and updating trail standards.

Maureen Wren of the DEC did not provide me with the dot poll results as I requested. Instead, Wren responded that the DEC "is developing a summary of the breakout sessions to share with participants and the public." However, others attending conformed Izzo's reporting.

"I came seeking a substantive discussion on hiking and camping permits for the High Peaks," said David Gibson from Adirondack Wild. "The UMP (unit management plan) said they should be done over a three-year period. They were never done. Here we are 20 years later, and the department, to its credit, has put permits on the table again. We had a productive discussion."

"I thought it was a very productive work session on some important issues we've been dealing with for a very long time, such as sustainable trail development and permit systems," said Rick Webber of the APA.

Zoe Smith, deputy director of the Adirondack Watershed Institute, praised the diversity of voices and the shared agreement on the importance of education and

collective planning, data and increased funding. Bill Farber, chair of the Hamilton County Board of Supervisors, felt that it's time to start implementing recommendations prioritized decades ago that are accepted today. He gave examples as trail rerouting, sustainable trail design and addressing high levels of hiker traffic. At the same time, Farber feels we need to develop a comprehensive plan that takes in the advantages of new technologies and new knowledge of best practices. Ron Konowitz, who has served on Keene Valley backcountry search and rescue for decades, praised the mix and people's willingness to hear others and seek compromise.

Many others echoed Smith and Farber, but not all. Tony Goodwin, longtime director of the Adirondack Trail Improvement Society and the Jack Rabbit Trail, said, "I did not see a lot of specific, actionable items come out of the discussion. There was general agreement we have a problem, that we need to do something and that we need more data. There was agreement that we need a better plan, more parking, and we ought to have shuttles. But there wasn't a whole lot of specifics on how any of those will be implemented. Maybe the DEC was looking to get consensus from all these stakeholders and now they will get to work on figuring out how to do it. The DEC has promised to put all these suggestions together and report out. I look forward to reading their report."

The person at the center of the storm, town Supervisor Joe Pete Wilson, struck a positive tone, which he expressed to me and DEC Region 5 Director Bob Stegemann. "My expectations were far surpassed," said Wilson.