

Hochul could bring a 'new day' for Adirondacks

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Lt. Gov. Kathy Hochul participates in 2018 Adirondack Challenge in Indian Lake. Photo courtesy of Gov. Andrew Cuomo's office

Gov. Andrew Cuomo's resignation announcement on Tuesday had several Adirondack Park groups looking toward a future Hochul administration, rather than reflecting fondly on the past.

The 56th governor of New York has been in power for a decade and will pass the reins to Lt. Gov. Kathy Hochul, who will be the state's first female governor. Cuomo is facing an impeachment inquiry after a state attorney general's report concluded he had sexually harassed multiple women. Cuomo has denied most of the allegations.

"The best way I can help now is if I step aside and let government get back to governing," Cuomo said Tuesday.

Several advocacy groups and local government leaders in the Adirondacks look at Cuomo's resignation as an opportunity for the 6-million-acre public and private park.

Peter Bauer, executive director of Protect the Adirondacks, has often challenged the state both in court and in policy discussions, most recently [winning a rare state Court of Appeals case](#) about constitutional protections for some trees.

"The apparatus of state government takes on the personality of the governor, and we saw that very clearly for the last 10 years at the DEC and the APA where it was basically their way or the highway," Bauer said, in reaction to Cuomo's resignation. "We're hoping that with a change at the top there may be a new day for the Adirondack Park."

Stepping aside was the only thing Cuomo could have done, said David Gibson, managing partner of Adirondack Wild. He had been shocked by the findings in Attorney General Letitia's James report done by independent investigators, as were many others.

"We all have to applaud the fact these women were courageous enough to come forward under a very difficult circumstance and dynamic," said Bill Farber, chairman of Hamilton County's Board of Supervisors. "It's time for the state to move forward."

Fred Monroe, communications director of the Adirondack Park Local Government Review Board, called Cuomo's resignation "unfortunate," adding that he's "done a lot for the Adirondacks."

[Cuomo's mixed Adirondacks legacy](#) included a focus on economic development and tourism. He championed downtown revitalization grant competitions, installation of tourist and [Olympic attractions in Lake Placid](#), bike trails that ran both north-south and east-west across the state, [rail trails](#) and snowmobile trail networks in the park.

But he also helped protect thousands of acres through purchases and conservation easements, including [the purchase of former timber company lands](#). His administration touted the most funding of any other governor for the state Environmental Protection Fund at \$300 million, and the state Legislature passed a \$3 billion environmental bond act [under his oversight. The bond act will go to voters](#) in 2022.

Farber, who chairs a county government that is wholly encompassed in the park, said Cuomo's staff over the years has done great work for economic development. He hopes those people get credit and don't lose heart amid the governor's resignation, he said. But, there's also still plenty of work to do in the park.

Adirondack vacancies

Though he has two weeks left in office, Cuomo has many loose ends to tie, or to leave for Hochul, when it comes to the park.

Perhaps the most glaring is the Adirondack Park Agency, which oversees public and private development and long-range plans in the Blue Line. For more than two years Cuomo has failed to [appoint a chair to the agency](#). The board is also weakened with one commissioner vacancy and two commissioners serving on expired terms. The agency's staff has decreased over the years, too, with more than 70 employees under Gov. George Pataki's administration down to around 55 employees today.

"There's a huge failure of leadership in the park right now," Gibson said.

Monroe said Cuomo "has really controlled the APA," and wondered what Hochul would do as acting governor. Farber hopes Hochul will appoint a chair. The commissioner seats will have to wait until the state Senate is back in session and can confirm appointments.

"Theoretically, the commissioners are independent, but in reality, he controlled them," Monroe said, of Cuomo. "I guess that's one thing, we'll see if she would allow them more independence."

Bauer supposed Cuomo could make his final appointments to the state's road salt task force before he exits the state Capitol's second floor office. The task force was part of legislation passed last year and later amended, to study and address environmental, [public health and safety impacts of millions of pounds of salt](#) near water sources. The legislation calls for a task force to complete a detailed report by Dec. 1, but so far, [a task force has yet to be publicly appointed and convened](#).

The Adirondack Council also noted that Cuomo had yet to sign legislation the state Assembly and Senate [passed earlier this summer regarding boat inspections for aquatic invasive species](#). The law, which passed both houses unanimously, would give the state Department of Environmental Conservation the authority to inspect boats and order them washed.

“We’re still battling COVID,” Farber added. “We still have economic fallout, profound technology gaps, challenges around developing outdoor recreation resources so we can deal with the level of use we’re seeing. We have a lot of work that we need to continue to do.”

Kathy Hochul

Hochul and her press team have been quiet over the last several days, but following Cuomo’s resignation announcement, she issued a statement agreeing with Cuomo’s decision.



From left, former state Sen. Betty Little and Lt. Gov. Kathy Hochul at the Adirondack Challenge in 2018 in Indian Lake. Photo courtesy of Gov. Andrew Cuomo’s office

“It is the right thing to do and in the best interest of New Yorkers,” Hochul wrote. “As someone who has served at all levels of government and is next in the line of succession, I am prepared to lead as New York State’s 57th Governor.”

Willie Janeway, executive director of the Adirondack Council, said the transition from Cuomo to Hochul “offers an opportunity for the Adirondacks,” where federal and state leaders could reinvest in protecting the park. Later Tuesday evening, the Adirondack Council sent out a press release with Janeway adding that Hochul’s “ascent will help restore our faith in state government and its leadership.”

Hochul isn't as familiar a face in the Adirondack Park as she is in the western part of the state, though she has made appearances at summer and winter Adirondack Challenges and Regional Economic Development Council awards and meetings. Born and raised near Buffalo, the lieutenant governor's schedule has reflected much of her time in western and central New York. Lately she has made more appearances downstate.

Hochul has been lieutenant governor since 2015, and previously served in the U.S. House of Representatives from 2011 to 2012. She'll act as governor for about 18 months before the next gubernatorial election.

"We don't have huge expectations for Kathy Hochul," Bauer said. "She does not have a long policy history on a lot of issues. Her role in the Cuomo administration was largely ceremonial."

Bauer did look forward to a "vigorous Democratic primary next year," where he hoped a new agenda would focus on protecting natural resources and rural economic development.

Farber has interacted with Hochul during some of these winter and summer Adirondack Challenge events, touring Great Camp Sagamore and the Adirondack Experience Museum with her. He also admired her experience and local government knowledge.

"I couldn't be more excited," he said, of Hochul becoming governor. "It's clear she loves the Adirondacks. I think she's going to do a really great job for us. I think we're going to see a renewed passion."

Hochul has also participated in Adirondack Park lobbying days, including a virtual, recorded appearance at an Adirondack Council presentation earlier this year. In that recording Hochul talked about whitewater rafting during the Adirondack Challenge, fishing and meeting local businesses and conservation groups "to responsibly boost this beautiful region."

"I find any excuse to return to the place with the brown-and-gold signage (that) reminds you you're in a very different world," she said.

Monroe said Hochul has always been a "cheerleader" and "good friend of ours in the Adirondacks." He, Bauer and Farber said it was exciting that the state would have a female governor. Janeway called Hochul a "tireless advocate," adding that she is known for engaging all different groups so government can best understand how to help local communities.

Monroe had a long list of things he hoped Hochul and a new administration might address, besides advocate's concerns about the park agency and road salt. He would like to see her address full broadband and cell coverage, something he said Cuomo has been promising for years. A lack of affordable housing in the park is also of concern.

Michael Barrett, executive director of the Adirondack Mountain Club, said, "Hochul has a history of being engaged in Adirondack Park issues," in an emailed statement to the *Adirondack Explorer*. "We look forward to sitting down with her to discuss solutions for current problems that impact the Forest Preserve."

Gibson said he had 100 things to say to a new governor about the Adirondack Park, but he added that the park will not be Hochul's first priority when she takes office.

"She'll be getting to know the whole state better, and she's been doing that," Gibson said. "We wish her well and want to pass on some ideas at the appropriate moment."