

While Cuomo's legacy in the Adirondacks looms large, many hope Hochul refocuses investments

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December 30, 2013- Lowville- Governor Cuomo travels to the Tug Hill region in the North Country to launch “I [Snowmobile] NY,” the first part of a print, television, radio and digital, nationwide, \$4.5 million winter tourism campaign aimed at promoting snowmobiling, skiing, and other recreational activities in Upstate New York.

After more than a decade in office, Governor Andrew Cuomo will leave office next Tuesday. Kathy Hochul will be sworn in as governor after Cuomo resigned in the face of sexual harassment allegations.

During his tenure, Cuomo invested in tourist attractions and protected large tracts of wilderness in the Adirondacks, but some are critical of the way Cuomo did business in the park and hope Hochul can refocus the state's investments in the region.

Governor Andrew Cuomo has been a fan of the Adirondacks for a long time. During his 11 years in office, he traveled to the region to go fishing, skiing, snowmobiling in the park.

“There’s a reason why presidents and governors and all sorts of international personalities come to the North Country and visit the Adirondacks,” said Cuomo speaking in Saranac Lake in 2018. “There is a magic here that I hope you never take for granted.”

Since taking office in 2011, Cuomo has shown a lot of his love for the Adirondacks through huge investments. He’s poured hundreds of millions of dollars into revitalizing downtowns, upgrading hotels and factories, and overhauling water and sewer plants.

The Cuomo administration has also funneled hundreds of millions more in the Adirondacks through the Olympic Regional Development Authority. Cuomo touted new ORDA funding at an event in Plattsburgh in 2017. “Gore Mountain— \$2 million for expanded seating, \$5 million to add a third story, \$1 million to restore the original gondola,” said Cuomo

In addition, Whiteface Mountain received \$4 million for a new ski lift, \$3.5 million for a zipline, and \$5 million to build the longest mountain coaster in the United States.

Despite Cuomo's focus on the Adirondacks and all those investments, many environmental groups are fiercely critical of his leadership style and his legacy in the park.



The longest of its kind in the United States, the mountain coaster travels alongside the 1980 Olympic bobsled track and is the latest year-round attraction at the Lake Placid Olympic Sites. Photo: Office of Governor Andrew Cuomo

“The long-term investments that the Cuomo administration made in the park often left us scratching our heads,” said Peter Bauer, executive director of Protect the Adirondacks. Bauer acknowledged that some of Cuomo’s investments in the park have been vital, like \$500 million for clean water infrastructure.

While business leaders have praised Cuomo’s investment in Olympic infrastructure in and around Lake Placid, Bauer thinks spending millions on things like a mountain coaster is misguided.

“If we had \$5 million to invest in rebuilding the trails in the High Peaks, we could have had 200 people out doing trail work.”

Cuomo’s legacy does include adding an estimated 90,000 acres to the Adirondack forest preserve, the most notable being the Finch Pruyn timberland purchase that includes the Boreas Ponds tract.

But Bauer is critical of the way Cuomo went about that deal, promising local officials that the state would build snowmobile connector trails.

“The Cuomo administration made secret deal-making behind closed doors with a select few people the primary way that it went about doing business in the Adirondacks,” said Bauer.



August 05, 2012-Lake Placid: Governor Andrew M. Cuomo announced the State’s acquisition of 69,000 acres of the former Finch Pruyn and other Nature Conservancy lands throughout the Adirondacks. This acquisition is the largest single addition to the Adirondack State Forest Preserve in more than a century.

That deal blew up earlier this year when a judge scuttled the project, saying the trials violated the forever wild clause of New York State's constitution.

Dave Gibson from the green group Adirondack Wild describes Cuomo’s style of governing as ‘divide and conquer.’ “He saw winners and losers and tended to pick winners and put them in the room as he saw it and then exclude others,” said Gibson.

Gibson thinks that approach, meticulously managing who had power and who didn't, had real repercussions for the Adirondacks.

“Governor Cuomo has left a number of things hanging. One of them is the chair of the Adirondack Park Agency.”



Karen Feldman resigned in May 2019 as acting chair of the state Adirondack Park Agency Board of Commissioners. Photo: Justin A. Levine, Adirondack Daily Enterprise

The APA hasn't had a board chair since 2019 when acting chair Karen Feldman resigned because she wasn't getting paid what an appointed chair would earn. Feldman said Cuomo's decision not to name a new APA chair has made the agency less effective in recent years.

“That's not how good government works," said Feldman. "You can't get things done.”

Feldman said she never knew Cuomo well during her years on the APA board, though she did work closely with Lieutenant Governor Kathy Hochul.

Feldman has known Hochul since around 2005, when Hochul was an Erie County clerk. Feldman said she's hopeful that Hochul and her administration will appoint an APA chair and fill other vacancies.

"She's very aware of what's going on with the park agency," said Feldman, "and I've no doubt that they are going to look at agencies across the board and see what needs to be done and fill them as quickly as they can."



February 28, 2016-- Lake Placid, NY - Lieutenant Governor Kathy Hochul, left, and Congresswoman Elise Stefanik, right, listen to speeches during the awards dinner of the 2016 Adirondack Winter Challenge, in the Lake Placid Conference Center. Photo: Office of Governor Andrew Cuomo

Aside from filling the APA chair position, environmentalists also say they want Hochul to invest more in protecting the park.

“The Environmental Protection Fund could be more than \$300 million now,” said John Sheehan from the Adirondack Council. “It’s sort of stagnated at that point. And we’d love to see greater investment in the infrastructure of the park that helps to serve the public.”

That means not only building better trails, but also adding more parking lots and bathrooms to keep up with visitor demand. It also means more money for staff to manage the Adirondacks’ natural resources, said Jessica Ottney Mahar from the Nature Conservancy.

“We have hardworking people in our agencies now that are doing everything from implementing the new climate law, which is critical to our future, to forest rangers out in the woods, making sure that we’re having a safe experience,” said Ottney Mahar. “We need more of those people on the ground doing their work.”



February 28, 2016- Lake Placid, NY- Lt. Governor Kathy Hochul host The Adirondack Winter Challenge on behalf of Governor Andrew M. Cuomo. The Adirondack Winter Challenge was created to help bolster winter tourism in the Adirondack region through a series of competitive winter activities.

It's unclear what Hochul's priorities in the Adirondacks will be once she's sworn in as governor. Earlier this summer, though, she [spoke at an Adirondack Council event](#) and touted the region's green energy market and the state's commitment to expanding broadband coverage in the park. She also spoke about her own experience in the Adirondacks.

“Whether it's whitewater rafting during the Adirondack Challenge, making a big catch during the Adirondack fishing challenge, or meeting with the various business and conservation groups to responsibly boost this beautiful region.”

Hochul called the Adirondacks God's favorite place on earth. In the weeks and months ahead, environmentalists will be looking for Governor Hochul to follow that up with more money, staff, and resources to further protect the Adirondacks.