

# Essex Chain Lakes plan fuels debate

Economic versus wilderness values at issue

**By Stephen Williams**

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The Hudson River as seen from the Polaris Bridge in the Essex Chain Lakes region of the Adirondacks in July 2013.

**ADIRONDACKS** — Of all the 65,000 acres of former Finch Pruyn lands the state is buying in the central Adirondacks, the Essex Chain Lakes was among the most coveted by nature-lovers.

The remote region between Indian Lake in Hamilton County and Newcomb in Essex County was off limits to the public for a century, and is studded with little-seen lakes, ponds and rivers, including a long stretch of the upper Hudson.

The 19,600-acre complex, which the state acquired in 2013, is currently the topic of a heated debate over how easy it should be for the public to reach the interior, and whether economic or wilderness values should prevail in land use planning.

Last month, the state Department of Environmental Conservation last month released a draft land management plan and environmental impact statement that emphasizes the tourism potential, and goes beyond just encouraging hiking and fishing opportunities.

The draft contains plans for a major new snowmobile trail, includes a new snowmobile-pedestrian bridge across the Cedar River, as well as all-terrain bike and equestrian trails, and handicapped-access by vehicle to some interior lakes.

“The proposed plan helps to fulfill the governor’s goal that the Essex Chain Lakes become a tourism destination and an economic engine for the towns that host this magnificent resource,” said DEC Commissioner Joseph Martens, who announced last week he would be resigning to re-join the Open Space Institute, a private land conservation organization.

Public comment is currently being taken on the proposed plan. The DEC will be holding public hearings this Tuesday in Newcomb and on Thursday in Indian Lake.

Local government officials generally support what the DEC is proposing, as does one major environmental organization.

“Overall, the plan strikes an excellent balance,” said Willie Janeway, executive director of The Adirondack Council.

As an example, Janeway noted that while a snowmobile through trail will be allowed, motorized boats will be prohibited on all the lakes.

“I have hiked in there, skied, paddled on the lakes,” Janeway said. “It’s really special in there. It’s beautiful.”

Under private ownership, the Essex Chain lands were closed to the general public, although Finch Pruyn leased hundreds of acres to exclusive private clubs, including the Gooley Club and the Polaris Club.

Other environmental organizations say the DEC proposal allows too much development — and sets the wrong priorities for what they believe should be wilderness lands.

Most of the land is designated “primitive,” meaning it contains some man-made structures, but is otherwise like wilderness. A strip through the property is designated the less-restrictive “wild forest” to allow the proposed snowmobile trail.

“I think the [unit management plan] continues a trend of placing recreation as high, if not higher, than protection of natural resources,” said David Gibson, a partner in Adirondack Wild: Friends of the Forest Preserve. “Under the state land use master plan, protection of natural resources should be the highest priority.”

Gibson called the Essex Chain property “a magnificent landscape that has great importance to all New Yorkers.”

The lands that have been opened to the public include 10 miles of the Hudson, dozens of lakes and ponds, and the former Gooley Club. The Gooley Club camps are to be removed by 2018, but the new plan calls for keeping the Outer Gooley farmhouse on the south side of the Cedar River, for either its historic value or administration use. The farmhouse now offers a high-angle overview of the Hudson near its confluence with the Indian River, though DEC acknowledges vegetation growth will soon eliminate that view.

Another environmental group, Protect the Adirondacks, criticized the plan for allowing construction of the high-speed snowmobile corridor between Indian Lake and Minerva, crossing the Cedar, Hudson and Boreas rivers. All are covered under the state's Wild, Scenic and Recreational Rivers Act. That act generally prohibits bridges.

"These road-like community connector 'trails' simply do not have the character of a foot trail and violate both the wild forest character and the wild forest atmosphere of the area," Protect the Adirondacks said in a profile of the DEC draft plan.

The Adirondack Park Agency commissioners also have criticized the plans.

Richard Booth, chairman of the APA's land use committee, said he supports the DEC goals of establishing a snowmobile corridor through the region and allowing all-terrain bicycle use, but doesn't support how the plan goes about rationalizing the uses.

"I think DEC has made a number of choices that are the wrong way to go and there's going to be a lot of conflict out there," Booth said at the June 11 APA meeting in Ray Brook.

Most environmental groups think the Polaris bridge over the Hudson should be removed as a violation of the Wild, Scenic and Recreational Rivers Act. Finch Pruyn built the bridge in the 1990s for its logging operations, though leaseholders in the Polaris Club were also allowed to use the bridge.

DEC plans to keep it based on an argument that it was a previously established use, an argument both the APA and environmental groups question.

"The land use master plan doesn't allow 'grandfathering' of private uses," Gibson said.

The five towns around the Essex Chain, though, are united in supporting the overall plan that DEC has proposed, citing its potential economic benefits.

"For all practical purposes we support the plan that's out there," said Newcomb Town Supervisor George H. Canon. The Newcomb Town Board Tuesday passed a resolution endorsing the plan, including construction of the new bridge over the Cedar River and continued use of the Polaris bridge.

Canon said a new bed and breakfast and a state grant to support a local guide service show that public use of the Essex Chain is already having an economic impact on his tiny community.

"It's not as robust as we'd like, but you have to crawl before you can walk," Canon said.

With Newcomb also home to historic Camp Santanoni and the southern access to the High Peaks, Canon said he's hopeful the town will reach the critical mass of visitors to justify a visitor center-museum. "That's down the road," he said. "It would take quite a bit of money."

## **PUBLIC HEARINGS**

The public will have two chances to have a say on the draft plan this week, at public hearings in Newcomb and Indian Lake.

The Newcomb hearing will be at 7 p.m. Tuesday, July 7, at Newcomb Central School on Route 28N, while the Indian Lake hearing will be at 7 p.m. Thursday, July 9, in the Indian Lake Theater on Main Street.

Written comments are being taken through July 27, by writing to Corrie O'Dea, senior forester, DEC Lands and Forests, 232 Golf Course Road, Warrensburg, N.Y. 12885 or emailing [R5.UMP@dec.ny.gov](mailto:R5.UMP@dec.ny.gov).

Adirondack Wild has called for additional hearings to be held outside the park. Janeway said the Adirondack Council would also rather see hearings held outside the park, too.

APA commissioners, who in June complained they received the lengthy draft plan only hours before their meeting, are expected to discuss the proposed plan again at their July 9-10 meeting in Ray Brook.

The Essex Chain Lakes property is among the 161,000 acres of former Finch, Pruyn & Co. land acquired by The Nature Conservancy in 2007. The conservation organization and New York state are in the middle of a multi-year process in which the state is acquiring about 65,000 acres of that land.

The state owns or has conservation easements allowing public access on more than half of the 6 million acres in the Adirondack Park.