



Rensselaer Plateau Alliance
Rensselaer Plateau Regional Conservation Plan

Municipal Officials Meeting
May 31, 2012
Sand Lake Town Hall – 6:30 PM

Meeting Summary

I. Public Presentation

This was the second in a series of stakeholder meetings to be conducted in May and June as part of the development of the Regional Conservation Plan. Municipal officials - Town Board, Planning Board, ZBA, and Environmental Commission members - from all of the plateau communities were invited by letter to attend this stakeholder meeting. About 20 people attended the meeting which was facilitated by Behan Planning and Design. Michael Welti from Behan Planning and Design gave a PowerPoint Presentation that started with an introduction to the Plateau, the RPA, and the purpose and process for preparing the Regional Conservation Plan.

Following this introductory discussion, the focus of the presentation turned to specific areas of research for the plan - study of the Plateau's natural areas and an analysis of the economic importance of the Plateau. The natural area's discussion focused on the extensive inventory work being done on the Plateau's flora and fauna and how that work will be presented in the plan. The economic discussion highlighted the preliminary results of two studies that are being prepared as part of this project - the economic impacts for select industries operating on or near the Plateau, and the economic value of ecosystem services on the Plateau. The first study looked at the number of jobs and the fiscal impacts of several industries such as food services, forestry and tourism. The second study estimated the economic value of natural systems on the Plateau by analyzing how they offset the need for engineered solutions to environmental issues - for example how much would a water treatment system cost to treat X gallons of water in lieu of the natural water treatment provided by Y acres of wetlands on the Plateau.

The remainder of the presentation focused on some of the preliminary ideas that are being considered for inclusion in the conservation plan document. In addition to the background and the natural and economic information, the plan will have a section about the history of the plateau, a section describing the future of the plateau in the context of sustainability, and a section that will serve as a "Guide for Decision Makers". This section will provide a "toolbox" for landowners, municipalities and other organization and agencies to use to advance the goals of the plan. Finally the plan will contain an implementation or "next steps" section highlighting what the RPA and other involved groups can do to help move the goals of the plan forward.

II. Open Discussion

Following the presentation the audience was invited to provide feedback and ask questions about the preliminary ideas for the plan. To organize the discussion, Mr. Welti offered two questions:

- In terms of the ideas presented this evening - what questions, concerns, suggestions do you have?
- As a municipal official, how can the RPA and this plan be helpful to you?

The following is a summary of the questions/comments that were offered from those who attended the meeting; and the responses that were provided.

- **Question/Comment:** In terms of the economic impacts of selected industries, are there other regions we have numbers for that we can compare this to? E.g. Is that an appropriate make-up of business types (and municipal income distribution) as compared to other successful plans, and successful regions/communities. Benchmarking to other similar regions.

Response: We'll ask Brian Zweig about that. It's an interesting idea.

- **Question/Comment:** Mining provides a resource we all use. It's necessary for our roads, foundations, etc.
- **Question/Comment:** The sales tax numbers for mining were probably skewed because a large percentage of their sales go to municipalities (for roads) which are exempt from sales taxes. Having this resource locally is also a valuable benefit because transportation of this material is the largest part of its cost, so municipalities are saving quite a bit by having it produced locally.
- **Question/Comment:** Inter-municipal agreements can be a useful way to share the cost of something each town can't afford to do on its own. E.g. having someone provide information to famers and landowners.

Response: The towns around Canandaigua Lake did this for watershed management and it has been a successful approach/tool for communities around that lake.

- **Question/Comment:** Does DEC have to approve this plan?

Response: No. There is no requirement for the DEC to approve this type of plan.

Response: The Conservation Plan is meant to be strategic. It is meant for a municipality to pick up and use as appropriate.

- **Question/Comment:** It's basically a strategic planning exercise. As such, though, it's missing two things:
 - 1) Detail about benchmarking with other similar areas in New York State and beyond. Who's the competition? And for comparison - how does the Plateau compare to other places that have done it as well?
 - 2) Need a good discussion of opportunities and threats. List the biggest opportunities. And what are the major threats. This helps in your analysis.

Response: Some of these things we have intentionally not done yet because we wanted to see what would come out of the public/stakeholder engagement first.

Follow-up comment: The strategic document itself needs to have this. It needs a little more guidance from some good strategic planners.

Response: Good suggestion.

- **Question/Comment:** We noticed that 99.9% of the Town of Grafton is located on the Plateau. What are the impacts on municipalities for emergency services? E.g. Grafton Lakes State Park puts a big burden on the town in terms of emergency services.

Response: Yes, that's come up before because we're talking about possible additional recreational opportunities.

Follow-up comment: Grafton Lakes State Park is planning more campsites, which is going to impact our small emergency squads.

Follow-up comment: For Grafton, SEQR could help address the problem.

Response: We can follow up with NYS OPRHP about these questions too.

- **Question/Comment:** With respect to ecological services/cost avoidance - it is difficult wrapping the mind around this. It seems like it is stretching things a bit. Reality is that no matter what the future scenario is, these impacts are unlikely to be seen. When ecological services are quantified like this it appears that someone is really reaching for straws. Most people on or near the plateau get their drinking water locally - from wells.

Follow-up Question/Comment: Don't understand at all how it was calculated - getting numbers from elsewhere? How are these numbers derived?

Follow-up Comment: Agree that it may be a stretch in some cases. But when you look at the #'s that come from places like NYC where they had rock solid numbers about how much it would cost to build and manage a water treatment plan vs. the cost of purchasing the forested land around the reservoirs serving the city - these are more real.

Response: What was presented was just a really general overview and summary of the results. The full report, with all the details, is available on the RPA website. However, the comments do point out that we might want to be careful about overselling the ecosystem service numbers.

Follow-up Response: Another point that this makes is that other places outside the Plateau are benefitting from the forests on the Plateau. E.g. Troy is benefitting from the clean water in the Tomhannock reservoir, which is supplied (in part?) from the Plateau. Maybe in the future there will be a mechanism for Troy to recognize this and be interested in supporting this.

- **Question/Comment:** The previous comment about "Threats" - one person's threat is another person's opportunity. We want to avoid this becoming a "no" document. It should describe instead the things we can do, rather than be a list of things we can't or shouldn't do.

- **Question/Comment:** Why is it great that the Rensselaer Plateau is still a relatively contiguous piece of forest? Explaining that a little more in the plan is necessary.

Response: Good thought.

- **Question/Comment:** Need to find that happy medium between landowners and public access. As a kid we used to get 2 cars a day down Dyken Pond Road. Today it's 6-10 cars a day. And now with Dyken Pond open again for the season, it's been 2000 cars past the house in the past 15 days. (E.g. during summer camp, that's 20 kids * 4 car trips to drop them off in the morning and pick them up in the afternoon.) You'd be amazed at how many people stop and want to hike down into areas that are not public lands. And I'm torn, because you want them to see and appreciate the forest and land, but then it gets to be too many people. And sometimes they don't always respect the fact that they are on private land at that point. Basically, greater public access can be a problem when people are not respecting the private property along the way.

Response: Yes, we want to be careful that as we try to bring more access for recreation to the plateau, that people don't love it to death. Visitors need to know or be educated about the resources, private property rights, etc.

- **Question/Comment:** The toolbox? Would RPA serve as a resource for municipalities? (E.g. to do some planning?)

Response: We want the plan to introduce some of these tools. RPA does want to be a resource for people. (E.g. - perhaps make Dr. David Hunt available to landowners who want to learn more about ecological resources on their land, and help look for grants to fund that kind of assistance.) RPA can help you find information, provide links...Also, identify technical and financial resources for such things.

Follow-up Response: The Estuary Program is happy to help with planning efforts. There are also tons of free resources for landowners, and RPA can help point folks to these and help figure out which is most appropriate.

Follow-up Response: This meeting is a forum for you to say what you would like from RPA and from the plan. (E.g. This meeting is a place where you can suggest things like: "We would like the RPA to find resources to help us do more local planning.")

- **Question/Comment:** Okay - We're going to need help upgrading our land use regulations and zoning regulations. The more you can help communities go through that process, (e.g., so that we can allow both economic development and conservation). We're currently stuck in our old ways of doing things.

Response: Learning from each other's experiences is great too. For example, at the landowner's workshop Marcia Hopple offered her experience in putting a conservation easement on her land, and offered to talk to anyone else who was interested in or thinking about putting an easement on their land.

- **Question/Comment:** That raises another question- How do the Plateau landowners feel about this Plan?

Response: About 40 landowners came to the stakeholders meeting for landowners, and they were in general quite supportive.

Follow-up Comment: That's very good news. Municipalities cannot really do anything if the landowners aren't supportive and interested.

- **Question/Comment:** We have to be careful about retiring development rights...concern about losing the tax base. As towns/villages, how can we maintain our services with shrinking municipal funds?

Follow-up Question/Comment: Every municipality is struggling with a declining tax base, so any help with how to make the tax base grow will be very welcome.

Response: Properties with easements still pay taxes; but it may be reduced valuation. Some town assessors don't reduce assessed value at all. Conservation easements don't automatically translate into reduced local taxes. That decision is entirely up to the town assessor. [Brief discussion followed about the need to educate assessors about easements and property assessment].

- **Question/Comment:** What about inter-municipal agreements and compacts? Are you thinking about this? All these municipalities are in the Hudson River Valley Greenway program area.

Follow-up Question/Comment: What is a compact?

Response (from original commenter): A compact is something that the signing municipalities would agree to do (e.g. a land use regulation or guideline that all towns would adopt by local law). This could be an example of a tool available to municipalities. At one point there were state dollars to develop inter-municipal agreements. Every municipality in Rensselaer County is eligible.

Response: It might not be the right time to jump into something this formal. Start with small steps - start thinking that this is an area/resource that we share. Meetings such as these are a start.

- **Question/Comment:** Grafton is a town that has 4-5 small businesses, 2 quarries, and 1 eatery.

Mr. Welti asked the audience whether they saw this plan as valuable.

Response: The tool box alone will be very useful.

Response: The Plan provokes ideas - thinking about the plateau.

- **Question/Comment:** You cannot go through this whole process without identifying some failures. (E.g. Barberville Falls, and how The Nature Conservancy failed to manage it well. Management by ignoring the neighbors does not work.) If RPA can develop some tools for managing the public spaces we do have in the town. And managing people. It was a great plan for the property, but it didn't quite work...

- **Question/Comment:** The majority of people who go to Grafton Lakes State Park drive in and drive out [and don't use local businesses].

Follow-up Comment: Except for those of us who drive in and snowmobile out... And stop at the town store for fuel...

- **Question/Comment:** I think that what you're doing here is great. It's factual information that is going to be a resource for everyone to use without taking a political or environmental agenda alone.
- **Question/Comment:** How specific or personal is the information - e.g. identifying specific areas?

Response: The database will be down to small polygons on the land; so one should be able to overlay that information with other data. But we may not want to have it overlaid with individual parcels on the web. For example the rare plants information already posted on the web site disappears after you zoom in to a certain scale.

- **Question/Comment:** By identifying areas specifically, it will make it more personal for folks and easier to understand.

Response: Available information will include trails, public lands, ecological information, community values information, and with that you can overlay it and do additional analysis well beyond this plan.

- **Question/Comment:** It's a huge tool. Stephentown would never be able to have this GIS software in the municipality. So if you [RPA] have access to that expertise and data, we'll be calling you regularly. E.g. where are the aquifers, where is the best farmland, etc...
- **Question/Comment:** One thing that has been important for Sand Lake is to have a professional planner to address some of our concerns. If we could share someone like that in our region, that could be a huge help.

Response: Brief discussion about the idea of circuit rider planners like they have on the Tug Hill Plateau.

- **Question/Comment:** I think you're doing a great job. Public awareness is critical, and getting the information out is important.
- **Question/Comment:** There is some confusion out there. There seems to be a lot of organizations/things that we are now, suddenly a part of (E.g. Greater Stockport Creek Watershed Alliance, RPA, etc.). Why should folks care about the plateau and RPA more or at all? This should be in the document.
- **Question/Comment:** And why is unfragmented forest important to us? The plan needs to spell that out better.

- **Question/Comment:** I was part of a group that studied the Tug Hill Commission. Even though it was a state entity, it stayed very non-political.

Response: It is another area that has few municipal resources, and is thus similar to the Rensselaer Plateau. It is a nice program.

Response: We had John Bartow from the Tug Hill Commission come to one of our monthly RPA meetings and give a talk about their work.

Follow-up Comment: That could be a benchmarking area. They are a role model. The plan could talk about why that's important from an ecological and economic standpoint.

Follow-up Question/Comment: And are there groups that have not been successful? We should learn from these too.

- **Question/Comment:** You've got a great program. Have you gotten in touch with schools? Students always bring information home and spread the information even further that way. When you get kids involved it just spreads.

Follow-up Comment: Schools and other educational institutions could be part of that 3rd group of stakeholders - organizations/agencies.

Response: RPA has been involved in the schools with some service learning programs.

Response: There is one committee of RPA that's been working specifically on the topic of reaching schools - getting in more field trips, after school programs, figuring out how to contribute to the curriculum, supporting Envirothon teams, hooking up with existing resources and programs such as Grafton Lakes State Park, Dyken Pond Environmental Education Center, USGS in Troy, etc. We were able to connect with Averill Park's service learning coordinator when they had that position last year, and we've been able to do a lot with the Berlin school district this year with the support of the new superintendent there.

- **Question/Comment:** Would like to talk about the Plateau sign - maybe getting it approved by DOT so that it can go up to create a sense of place.
- **Question/Comment:** In terms of education of our young people, my camp (in Poestenkill) will go up to Grafton Lakes State Park. Camps are also good places, as well as schools, for educating kids about the outdoors. Can you provide educational materials for us to use at camps too? If we do nothing but give people a sense of place, that alone would be great!!

Response: Good idea.

- **Question/Comment:** Could have a contest for kids to design the sign.
- **Question/Comment:** The sign you have now is nice [which was just the current logo]. Signage would be great—along with the help of 5 places to “see” the Plateau. [I.e. it's a beautiful place but many folks have never had the chance to get a nice view of it and see it as a whole. A lot of people have lived their whole lives here without “seeing” it.]

- **Question/Comment:** Will the final plan include a summary of input from the stakeholder groups?

Response: Notes from the stakeholder group meetings will be put up on the web. Some of the information from the meetings will be incorporated in this plan, and other comments will become part of a set of recommendations for next steps. We will be making the plan itself easy to read so it's accessible; but with lots of additional information available in appendices and on the web.

- **Question/Comment:** I just need more time to think about it. How can we send comments in after the meeting?

Response: By email or phone - info@rensselaerplateau.org

- **Question/Comment:** I have a little pamphlet, "My bug book" that was done at one of our summer camps. I'm happy to share this with anyone doing environmental education. I'll make a copy and send it to Rachel.

III. Adjournment