

**Rensselaer Plateau Alliance**  
***Rensselaer Plateau Regional Conservation Plan***



**Public Workshop #2**  
**April 30, 2012**  
**Averill Park Fire Hall – 7:00 PM**

## **Meeting Summary**

### **I. Public Presentation**

This was the second public workshop for the Rensselaer Plateau Regional Conservation Plan project. Approximately 40 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 the elements that will make up 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 plan forward.

### **II. Open Discussion**

Following the presentation the audience was asked to provide feedback and questions on the plan. The following is a summary of the questions and responses from the meeting, as well as suggestions and other comments that were made.

- Comment/Suggestion:** Like the idea of including a history section in the report. Might want to include a section that looks at what the future could hold in terms of climate change and how some of the changes predicted in NYSERDA's state-wide report (<http://www.nyserdera.ny.gov/en/Publications/Research-and-Development/Environmental/EMEP-Publications/Response-to-Climate-Change-in-New-York.aspx>) could potentially impact the resources of the Plateau.
- Question:** How successful have you been in working with state agencies such as DEC and Parks? For example there are plans in the works for Cherry Plain State Park, and how do those plans fit with the conservation plan? Believe the master plan for the park is in progress.

**Answer:** There have not been specific conversations with Parks or DEC at this time. There have been some big picture discussions with DEC about the project, but nothing specific.

**Comments:** There is a "Friends of Grafton Lake State Park" that is authorized to create and maintain trails, but it is a small group with limited resources. Saratoga Mountain Bike Association maintains trails in Pittstown State Forest for biking and equestrian use - have had a positive experience working with DEC. Parks and DEC did provide information to assist with the economic study for this project. Some concern that not all divisions of Parks and DEC coordinate with one another, so if you talk to one division, another may not be involved at all.
- Comment:** the 480-a program is for active forestry - allows for 80% tax reduction on land, not improvements. Large commitment, if you withdraw from the program early (less than 9 years) there are large tax penalties.
- Question:** Is the idea to use the priority areas to create connections between state lands for recreation?

**Answer:** There is certainly an opportunity to look at ways to create those connections, as shown by RPA's annual hike that traverses the Plateau utilizing permission to cross many private land holdings in addition to the large areas of parkland.
- Question:** Would it be possible to install a dam on private property, for example on the Poestenkill, to create a "micro-hydro" plant?

**Answer:** Many permits would likely be required, but it may be possible, consultation with DEC would be a good first place to start.

**Follow-up Comment:** Would like to see a discussion of potential future issues for the Plateau - example wind power and micro-hydro. Perhaps a position paper could be developed on these topics?

**Comment:** May be good to look at what the towns on the Plateau are doing in terms of these topics. RPA likely would not want to have a position paper that takes one side or the other, but perhaps a fact sheet on these technologies could be developed that does not come across as pro or con, but just provides information for municipalities and landowners to learn more.
- Comment:** Could see the RPA serve as a brokerage of information for municipalities and organizations to look to for various topics concerning the Plateau.
- Comment:** Like that there is a focus on tools since a lot of plans don't provide info on how to advance the goals and recommendations of a report.

- Question:** Why are landowners willing to allow snowmobilers access but not necessarily access during the other three seasons? It seems like snowmobiles would have a greater impact.

**Answer:** The snowmobile clubs are well organized and have a formal set-up with the state that covers issues such as insurance and trail maintenance.

**Comment:** In the toolbox can we explore resources and strategies that might facilitate a similar model for hiking and biking?

**Comment:** Possible that landowners aren't as concerned about snowmobilers as they aren't necessarily using their land otherwise in the winter, but they may not want the public on their land during warmer weather when they would be making use of their property.

**Comment:** The Taconic Crest Trail (<http://www.renstrust.org/affiliated-projects/taconic-crest-project>) could be a model for a successful public-private trail system.

**Comment:** Northern Vermont has a nordic ski and mountain bike and hike trail system that is ~80% on private land - Kingdom Trails Association (<http://www.kingdomtrails.com>) - which could be another model to look into.

**Comment:** For the Plateau traverse hike, which covers approximately 33 miles from north to south, the RPA received permission from 21 landowners to allow access - so there are relationships being built.

**Comment:** Important to make sure that results of allowing access are always positive and trust building.

**Comment:** This plan can be a vehicle to begin the trail implementation - access, signage, etc.
- Question:** Any consideration of historic resources or cultural heritage as part of the plan?

**Answer:** To a small extent it is being incorporated, but it may become a larger piece as there does seem to be opportunities. Cultural tourism, for example, is a growing area and could be important for the Plateau.

**Comment:** Need accommodations for tourists if you're going to promote tourism, and currently there are not a lot of options available.
- Suggestion:** Creation of watershed associations for each of the streams on the Plateau, similar to the Hoosic River Watershed Association in MA.

**Comment:** The Kinderhook does have a watershed association.
- Question:** Has there been outreach to the local historians?

**Answer:** Yes, and the summary that has been written up so far has been sent to them for review.
- Question:** Route 22 has the potential for a scenic byway and there is a historic rail line that could be a rail trail, both of which could highlight the cultural resources of the Plateau as well as provide access points to the Plateau - has this been considered in the plan?

**Answer:** It is being considered, and certainly could be part of the report.
- Concern:** There's been a lot of discussion of tourism and bringing people to the Plateau, but is there a concern about damaging rare and endangered habitat - there needs to be a balance.

**Response:** While that is certainly a concern, we're far away from that being a problem given the current and expected number of users on the Plateau. Also we're not going to

be pointing out where rare and endangered species are specifically - for example the species map on the RPA website does not show information beyond a certain zoom level so as to not allow people to pinpoint precise locations.

- **Comment:** Would like to see species data built upon to look at the different sensitivities to various activities, so we're not just looking at where things are, but how sensitive are they to things such as trampling or flooding.
- **Comment:** Would like to see a focus in the local schools to provide education on the forest industry, how forestland is managed, etc. This could be led by representatives from the industry.  
**Comment:** There has been some outreach to the schools in the past, but nothing industry led.  
**Comment:** Merck Forest in Vermont (<http://www.merckforest.org>) is a good example of a forestry education program.
- **Comment:** Promoting sustainable development is very important - glad to see it's part of the plan.

In addition to the verbal comments provided during the discussion period, attendees had the opportunity to submit written comments on index cards that were provided. These were collected at the end of the workshop. Comments that were submitted included the following:

- I would like to emphasize the importance of working with large landowners/ municipalities/developers to inform them of alternatives to "big box" developments. Sustainability is key. Development is inevitable, but there are ways to minimize negative impacts on flora and fauna, and also preserving rural character and culture.
- Concise and eloquent presentation! No questions at this time.
- FYI - new (?) research from the Cary Institute (Dutchess County) indicates that reduced biodiversity increases the potential for increased infection from emerging infectious diseases (simplification). For example Lyme disease - increased infection with decreased biodiversity. Another reason to support the Rensselaer Plateau.
- NYS Natural Heritage Program's Conservation Guides - <http://www.acris.nynhp.org/> - are an excellent resource. Should link this to the natural resources inventory work that is part of this plan.

### **III. Adjournment**