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# LeBrun: Compromise needed on Adirondack tract

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Photo: Philip Kamrass

May 10, 2015-North Hudson, NY- Governor Andrew M. Cuomo announced the completion of the state's largest Adirondack land acquisition in more than 100 years, with the purchase of the 20,758-acre Boreas Ponds Tract. This is the final acquisition in a series of land purchases the state has completed under a 2012 agreement with The Nature Conservancy to conserve 69,000 acres of land previously owned primarily by the former Finch, Pruyn & Company paper company. The Tract is located primarily in the town of North Hudson in Essex County, south of the High Peaks Wilderness Area.

Gov. Andrew Cuomo seems to be grasping for legacies.

Completion of the Second Avenue subway in New York City and a totally unexpected advocacy of free tuition at some of our state universities are fresh news that come to mind in this regard. A big, new Tappan Zee Bridge is already well in play, at whatever the cost, and so is high tech economic redevelopment on a colossal scale for western New York, also at whatever the cost.

Now, how many of these big picture ideas pan out, which ones will turn out to be monuments to the reign of Cuomo the younger, or come up snake eyes, or live on as white elephants taxpayers and ratepayers will be subsidizing for generations — is far too early to judge. Legacies can go both ways.

Still, as a frame of mind, we can hope the governor will look at yet another land classification fandango in the Adirondacks with his legacy eyes. In terms of future generations — and I do mean taking the very long view, when someone will have to look up in yellowed pages, or tap into data, to find out who was governor at the time — it's a fair guess this issue will matter. Perhaps more than now.

It's again about preserving wilderness, as much of it as we reasonably can. Not primal wilderness — that's gone with the dodo — but the sort that is man-made, man-maintained, and legally defined. It's quiet, free of motorized access, abandoned to its natural state, where the feet of humans tread lightly and leave no trace.

The 20,758 acre Boreas Ponds Tract up for classification was part of the Deal of the Millennium, the acquisition a decade ago of the former Finch-Pruyn lands by the Nature Conservancy, most of which was eventually purchased by the state. Frankly, this tract is more important for where it is than what it is. It abuts the heart of the High Peaks Wilderness area, and offers stunning close-up views of some of the Adirondacks' best-known peaks. Proposed snowmobile use would be as close as four miles from the summit of Mt. Marcy. Three ponds, or a pond and two swamps, depending on whose history you want to believe, became a single body by the construction of a wooden dam a century ago, and more recently a concrete dam and spillway. I know; concrete and wilderness are hard to reconcile, but this is man-made wilderness, remember.

The location begs for special consideration. The environmental community assumed all along that most of the tract would be designated wilderness because of the location.

But when the Adirondack Park Agency last year announced various proposed options for the Boreas Ponds in terms of classification, surrounding the pond with a cushion of wilderness to bar motorized access was not one of them. That raised concerns then and still does. Eight public hearings around the state reinforced that concern and the APA got an earful — 10,000 comments. It's worth noting that especially millennials, through social media have been advocates for making as much wilderness of the Boreas Ponds tract as can be mustered.

The battle lines over land classification of Boreas Ponds have familiar armies in place. A coalition of towns and local governments seek as much motorized access, particularly for snowmobiles, as they can wrest out of the process to stimulate an always challenged economy in the smaller towns like North Hudson, where Boreas Ponds is, and nearby Newcomb. The DEC, which manages the lands, seems to want to keep the dam at the end of Boreas Ponds, and maintain it. Perhaps because the dam will keep up the water level, which would drive recreational use. A classification less restrictive than wilderness would make it less costly and easier to maintain, it is argued.

Environmental purists would have it all wilderness, but that's not realistic, or fair to local communities. A compromise, as usual, is the only way to go. A coalition of eight environmental groups called BeWildNY has come up with such a compromise — to create a wilderness buffer around the fragile Boreas Ponds that would halt access along Gulf Pond Road a mile from the water. That's reasonable access. Even fat old guys like myself can walk a mile on a road. Two-thirds of the tract would be designated wilderness and the truly grand — call it legacy — plan is

to ask the state to expand both the High Peaks and nearby Dix Wilderness Areas into a single, contiguous 280,000-acre wilderness area, the size of Rocky Mountain National Park. The plan allows for a snowmobile connector trail along the periphery of the Boreas Ponds tract, but not inland.

Three years ago, after arduous negotiations, the governor signed off on a complex of land classifications for the Essex Chain Lakes and Hudson Gorge, also part of the Finch-Pruyn deal. The lakes and 15 miles of the upper Hudson were classified wilderness, while a corridor between them was designated for limited, seasonal motorized use. It was a good compromise. That same spirit should prevail as the APA now considers would to do. A decision is expected as early as April.

So what does all this have to do with the governor, and his legacy? Only everything. The decisions, surprise, are really made in Albany. Will the governor play only politics, and throw a bone to his Republican friends? Or will he carve himself a monument and listen to the millennials and others thinking of tomorrow and tomorrow?

His choice. We'll all see.