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Editorial: Adirondack compromise

The state's acquisition of 69,000 acres of timber lands in the heart of the Adirondacks reopens a perennial debate over the future of New York's rich wilderness: what "forever wild" really means.

The state wisely spent \$14.5 million to acquire the former Finch Pruyn property, known as the Boreas Ponds tract. Gov. Andrew Cuomo, who was in the Adirondacks this week to herald the acquisition, has directed the Adirondack Park Agency to determine the best ways to use the pristine land.

For decades, advocates for hikers, bicyclists, anglers and other low-impact park users have clashed over land-use issues with those who would rather speed through the wilderness on motorized vehicles. Others want large areas to be more rigidly restricted – free of almost any but the most primitive human interaction. In a park of 6 million acres, there should be plenty of room for compromise.

An example of such compromise came in a plan put forward last June by the state departments of Environmental Conservation and Transportation regarding the roughly 120-mile stretch of railroad tracks from Remsen, near Utica, north to Lake Placid. This hotly contested issue pits train enthusiasts who want to preserve all the tracks for seasonal tourist train excursions against a newer alliance that includes hikers, bicyclists and the snowmobile community.

The draft plan would remove 34 miles of track connecting Lake Placid, Saranac and Tupper Lake and convert the corridor into a multi-use trail for cycling, hiking and snowmobiling. Then, 45 miles of track from Tupper Lake south to Big Moose would be upgraded to support the tourist train business. Nobody affected was entirely thrilled by the plan, which is often the nature of compromise.

For now, the first 34-mile phase of the project needs to get underway, starting with planning to take up the tracks this year. An anticipated surge in use would demonstrate the rail trail potential. Local economies, especially in the financially struggling Tupper Lake area, could receive a much-needed boost from the new tourists, just as rail trails elsewhere have invigorated old communities.

But as train enthusiasts continue to resist, nothing is happening.

With its new charge of determining how to use the Boreas Ponds tract, the APA is in a position to broker a broader compromise. By getting the rail trail conversion started, snowmobilers will be accommodated in the winter. In return, the agency should move to protect the Boreas land from motorized vehicles, preserving the wilderness that is shrinking globally.

Then, with the first phase of the rail trail complete, the impact can be measured, defining the next move.

As in any compromise, everyone gives something. Hikers must share some trail with snowmobiles. Railroads would have a smaller route. And 69,000 acres of new state property could hold closer to the state's promise of "forever wild," free of the rumble and pollution of motorized vehicles.

That's a compromise lovers of the Adirondacks should embrace