

BeWildNY sounds off on their plan for Boreas Pond

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The state purchased the Boreas Ponds and MacIntyre Tracts from the Nature Conservancy in May.

Widely considered to be the final in a series of large-scale land acquisitions, the former timberlands in Newcomb and North Hudson are awaiting classification by the Adirondack Park Agency (APA), which is accepting public comment until Dec. 30.

The APA has offered four official proposals on how the Boreas Ponds Tract, which has generated the most discussion, can be classified.

That classification will determine how visitors can use the land for recreational purposes.

Alternative 1 splits the 20,543-acre parcel in two, creating an even split between Wild Forest and Wilderness. The remaining proposals offer varying formulas, with each successively adding more Wilderness than the last.

Following classification, the state Department of Conservation will draft a Unit Management Plan to determine the exact recreational usage.

Since the details of the proposals have widely been reported on, we discussed several issues that have largely fallen by the wayside, including misconceptions, the classification process, the economic impact for local communities, the role of money in the debate and what the process means for future discussion in the Adirondack Park.

Comments from both Access the Adirondacks and BeWildNY are published inside the Dec. 17 edition of The Sun.

BeWildNY is a coalition of environmental organizations led by the Adirondack Council and the Adirondack Mountain Club.

The background:

The coalition supports none of the four Adirondack Park Agency-offered alternatives, believing all to be flawed because they adequately fail to protect Boreas Ponds, leaving them vulnerable to motorized uses and invasive species.

Their plan, introduced this past spring, calls for Wilderness expanded south to include the ponds and the sensitive wetlands surrounding them. This will act as somewhat of a buffer zone to protect what ecologists say is an astonishing array of wildlife located on the parcel.

BeWildNY sees their plan as a compromise solution that has something for all stakeholders.

While the exact path hasn't yet been determined, snowmobiling will be permitted at the southern end of the tract, an olive branch to an activity that sportsmen groups, businesses and local government officials believe will stimulate the local economy, which remains sluggish.

Their big tent approach is based on one main underlying premise:

“How can we balance these things while being true to the State Land Master Plan (SLMP), and making sure the most sensitive areas are protected?” said Willie Janeway, executive director of the Adirondack Council. “Where can we accommodate other interests even if they don't endorse our plan in the end?”

Aside from minor details, most of the debate is over the last mile of Gulf Brook Road, he said.

On motorized use:

BeWildNY wants to prohibit electric motors on Boreas Ponds, not only because they believe they would be injurious to the waters, but also due to broader ramifications.

A Wilderness designation is critical for the area surrounding the ponds, says BeWildNY, because the classification is the only way to definitively prohibit motorized activities from ever taking place in the future.

Uses permitted by the state Department of Conservation on Wild Forest may drift over time, they argue.

“Another DEC commissioner can add motorboats to Boreas Ponds, and it would not be difficult,” said Neil Woodworth, executive director of the Adirondack Mountain Club.

Nothing in the SLMP would prevent the next commissioner from changing those uses, he said, and the APA doesn't have the tools that would be necessary to remedy those mistakes.

Furthermore, he said, classifications do not have sub-categories.

If electric motors are allowed, perhaps a small outboard motor could be next, for instance, leading to a slippery slope.

As such, classification must be wielded as a “blunt tool.”

“What's the point of a Boreas Ponds Wilderness if the center is not motor-free?” Janeway said.

For the APA to not classify those internal tracts as Wilderness, and to not look at the ecology first, would be an “abdication” of their responsibility, he said.

BeWildNY and Access the Adirondacks, a pro-access group, have sparred over the use of the DEC’s CP-3 permitting system.

Access says they simply want to accommodate disabled guests, but BeWildNY says that opens the door to future ATV use.

In fact, that’s already trying to be done elsewhere, Woodworth said.

The DEC’s draft of the Grass River Unit Management Plan, for instance, may open up sections of the St. Lawrence County tract to ATV usage, a development BeWildNY finds worrisome.

On access for the disabled:

BeWildNY agrees with Access that the tract must be made available for use by the disabled, but disagrees on the best way to accommodate the user group.

The coalition is calling for a gently sloped path around LaBier Flow accessing the ponds using a stone dust component, which makes an easy stable surface — more so than gravel roads.

A number of potential sites for portage trails are also being explored, and will be hashed out in the UMP, they argue.

The group says one of the biggest misconceptions is that they’re anti-access, which they find offensive.

“We believe there are ways to get people physical access and not open it up to 19 million people at the same time,” said John Sheehan, a BeWildNY spokesman.

On practicality:

BeWildNY says they are mindful of alleviating the overuse which has jeopardized some of the High Peaks’ most popular destinations.

That mindfulness, and sense of history, factors into their proposal for Boreas Ponds, leveraging what works based on past experience and what doesn’t.

BeWildNY is also mindful of what uses their members will find enjoyable.

For instance, the coalition does not support biking around the ponds because they believe there are places to do that — like in Wilmington, for instance, or Ragged Mountain.

Their proposed parking lot is just up from LaBier Flow, about 1.2 miles from the ponds, which would offer a balance between access and protective safeguards, they said.

Parking spaces would be limited to 15 to 20 cars, with perhaps more allocated by a permitting process.

“We call that the Lake Lila factor,” said Woodworth. “That 1-mile buffer is enough to protect the resources.”

The ponds themselves are never going to be a camping destination because the shores are too wet, said Woodworth. But the property is great for canoeing, which would allow for new access points around the High Peaks.

A number of campsites on Casey Brook could make it a perfect backpacking trail, he said.

Keeping the road closed for seven miles is not a reasonable proposal, agrees the coalition. But a mile is pretty doable, which is also a distance that is accommodating for guides.

BeWildNY’s preferred snowmobiling route will lock into the Newcomb and North Hudson connector trail.

Their proposal for a connector trail is one that will not get caught up in the courts, Woodworth said.

Furthermore, the DEC-approved route is problematic, said Woodworth, because it does not have the full support of key landowners.

Economic development:

BeWildNY says Wilderness acts as a draw for outdoor enthusiasts, citing Keene as a successful example of an economy that caters to outdoor adventurers.

A similar scenario is possible in North Hudson and Newcomb, they said.

While the exact recipe for economic success has historically been tricky, local merchants need to create businesses that hikers wish to frequent by providing goods and services appealing to them, said Woodworth.

Those that find that magic sweet spot tend to build up a customer base, he added, citing a boat manufacturer in Olmstedville who is clearing \$1 million annually and employs six people.

BeWildNY said it is a misconception that hiking does not generate economic activity for local communities.

“It’s a shibboleth that hikers don’t spend money,” Woodworth said.

The Adirondack Mountain Club’s facilities are located either in Wilderness, or adjacent to Wilderness, and hikers are a fairly affluent group, he said.

“We make quite a bit of money catering to that business,” Woodworth said.

Data, he said, doesn’t show a Wild Forest designation helps small businesses economically.

Furthermore, Woodworth said, it’s difficult for businesses to discern how much of their visitation comes from hikers who do not always identify themselves as such.

But data does support more and more visitors are coming to the Adirondacks to hike, and less are coming to snowmobile and visit Olympic venues, he said.

BeWildNY said there needs to be better regional management of tourism assets: Perhaps more signage could generate economic activity in the region, for instance.

The coalition floated additional ideas, like a parking facility and a town-state partnership that would provide a shuttle service from Exit 29 to the parcels.

Part of the problem facing the Five Towns, Woodworth said, is that they’re not receiving the same level of support from the state’s marketing platforms, including I LOVE NY, as Lake Placid does.

The Adirondack Park also needs a long-term financing system that will give start-up businesses more readily access to capital, Woodworth said, like a revolving loan fund.

Banks, for instance, might be loath to lend a startup bed and breakfast in Newcomb funds, Woodworth said.

“It’s really access to capital.”

Post-classification, the group will continue to challenge the stereotype of hikers as “granola-eating folks who gas up fuel-efficient cars and don’t leave anything behind.”

“We really are going to challenge supervisors to get beyond the fallacy that hikers and paddlers don’t spend money,” Woodworth said.

The group also argued that snowmobiling isn’t a panacea for the economy, citing climate change.

On the classification process:

This is one area in which both Access and BeWildNY agree the process is flawed.

“This was probably the worst way to do the process,” Woodworth said. “This whole process was rushed for some reason.”

Woodworth noted the parting comments by former APA commissioner Richard Booth last spring, who called the SLMP process regarding major amendments “badly broken” and that the

governor “rigidly controlled” what analysis the agency staff was allowed to prepare and present to the agency.

As such, full discussion was stymied.

Woodworth also noted the comments by Chad Dawson, the newest commissioner, who said there was a poverty of appropriate proposals.

The agency also failed to chose a preferred alternative.

But the APA had already voted on the public hearing schedule, resulting in what Woodworth said were a number of procedural errors from which the agency could not recover.

“I don’t think they expected thousands of people to come out to this thing,” Woodworth said.

Like Access, BeWildNY says the lack of official data, including maps, poses a vexing predicament because there is not a universally-supported baseline of facts.

“When you saw the four alternatives come out, they didn’t have scientific substantiation; no roadmaps, they didn’t have the wetlands accurately — and they didn’t explain the differences,” Woodworth said.

Woodworth added: “This process did not have the document and cost-benefits of alternatives. That just wasn’t provided, and in a way, the various advocates and viewpoints had to come up with their own.”

All sides must be aware of what they’re refuting, said Janeway, who called the process “botched.”

The APA, he said, did not “take a more fully inclusive science-based full range of alternatives to this.”

And that has led to a sense of distrust that has pervaded the process, and has awoken young enviros calling for a more restrictive classification, Janeway said, which then created a pushback from snowmobilers.

The state, said Janeway, has the opportunity to put this back in the bottle by providing another set of alternatives — at least seven.

“I think a lot of the acrimony would have been abrogated,” Woodworth said.

On existing infrastructure:

BeWildNY disagrees with Access on the status of existing infrastructure.

Some roads are no longer there, or have deteriorated, making them unfeasible for the bicycle use on the tracts Access is proposing. Others haven't been used for 20 years, especially those further back on the parcel.

The group says at least half of these are "phantom roads" and is pushing to create better, more accurate data.

"I think there's a growing agreement that there isn't good data on the property," Janeway said.

But even that discussion is a red herring, says the coalition.

Just 5 percent of the Adirondack Park is old growth forest, or 300,000 acres of a total of 6 million.

"If existing roads prevented Wilderness classification, we would not have had half of the Wilderness we have today," Woodworth said.

Wanakena, for instance, used to be a railroad lumber town, and the William C. Whitney Wilderness Area in Long Lake was once heavily logged and contained a vast network of roads.

"It's amazing how quickly nature has taken those roads," Woodworth said.

On public outreach:

BeWildNY has outnumbered Access on many fronts in the war of public opinion, from packing public hearings with Wilderness advocates, facilitating letter-writing campaigns and coordinating email and social media campaigns.

Last month, the group held a press conference in Albany before presenting 22,000 signatures to Gov. Andrew Cuomo in support of a large-scale motor-free Wilderness.

Many were from out of the state, drawing criticism from Access.

While BeWildNY said they hadn't broken down the exact split of the signatures — a "majority" are from within the state — the sheer number demonstrates broad support from people who view the Adirondack Park not just as a state asset, but also a national one.

These are, the group noted, the same people who bring dollars to the region — perhaps even more under the Wilderness designation, which will provide new opportunities for adventurers, like paddling in the High Peaks... or for exploring views only currently available from luxury private landholdings.

"A New Jersey customer is just as valuable as anyone else," Woodworth said, noting snowmobile groups also delivered petitions with many out-of-state signees.

On the decisiveness:

Janeway said the eight public hearings, which concluded last week in Albany, demonstrated that many people love the Adirondacks.

“And I think those are things worth celebrating,” he said. “I don’t see that degenerating if we should have an Adirondack Park in 100 years.”

But, he admitted, signs have arisen that the new culture of cooperation has been slipping:

The divisions are still there; they’re just sharpened, and over a smaller area, he said.

The discussion over motorized use, said Janeway, is appearing to wake up an element of the environmental community to BeWildNY’s left.

“I think we’re at risk, but we’re going to get through it,” Janeway said.

But there are also more tasks ahead.

After Jan. 1, the Adirondack Council will start to work with local leaders on the second passage of a state constitutional amendment that will allow local governments to coordinate public infrastructure projects on state land while also being protective of Article 14.

“We have different positions. We try to keep those viewpoints respectful,” Janeway said, citing additional work on the Common Ground Alliance and other regional issues.

“This has tended to polarize some, but if you look at the BeWildNY proposal, it really is a compromise between the two perspectives,” Woodworth said.

The groups also plan on working with the DEC to address the overuse issue, and new waves of users are also placing a strain on Forest Rangers, who continue to be underfunded. Many of these users have little outdoor experience and are vastly unprepared — like those in sandals and shorts.

On claims of drumming up donor base:

Access criticized BeWildNY for using the issue to drum up their donor base, and suggested the coalition was misrepresenting their positions.

BeWildNY brushed off the criticisms.

The campaign, said the coalition, is funded by major donors who feel as if they have a chance to influence a discussion that will ultimately see the governor approve a decision that accurately reflects public sentiment.

“They tend to be folks who helped the Nature Conservancy buy the property, and they don’t want to see this lost,” Woodworth said.

It wasn't until the APA introduced their alternatives in October did the groundswell come out, BeWildNY said.

What really captured the attention of his donors, Woodworth said, was the opportunity to combat invasive species.

"We are mounting a campaign to fight the Hemlock Woolly Delga before it gets to the Adirondacks," he said, noting 1 in 7 trees in Adirondacks is a Hemlock, and thus susceptible.

Donating to that cause, he said, makes people feel as if they can combat a real, tangible threat.

"Finally, we can fight back." Woodworth said.

Furthermore, compromise solutions like their Boreas Ponds proposal are traditionally not the best for drumming up their base, he noted.

If the Adirondack Council wanted to galvanize their base, they would highlight the aforementioned draft Grass River UMP, Janeway said.

"Nothing incites a donor base more than ATVs," Woodworth said.