



Rensselaer Plateau Alliance
Rensselaer Plateau Regional Conservation Plan

Public Workshop #1
December 6, 2011
Poestenkill Fire Department – 7:00 PM

Meeting Summary

I. Public Presentation

This was the first public workshop for the Rensselaer Plateau Regional Conservation Plan project. Approximately 45 people attended the meeting which was facilitated by Behan Planning and Design. Jim Bonesteel, President of the Rensselaer Plateau Alliance (RPA) started the meeting by introducing the members of the RPA present at the meeting. Following introductions, Mike Welti from Behan Planning and Design gave a PowerPoint Presentation that introduced the project, gave an overview of the Plateau and the RPA, and explained what makes up a conservation plan and how the plan will be developed.



II. Small Group Discussions

Following the presentation the audience divided into four facilitated discussion groups. The groups were led by Mike Welti, John Behan, and Rick Lederer-Barnes from Behan Planning and Design, and RPA member Lawrence Howard. The focus of the groups was to answer two questions - 1. What beneficial outcomes do you expect from a Regional Conservation Plan for the Rensselaer Plateau? & 2. What concerns do you have about the idea of a Regional Conservation Plan for the Rensselaer Plateau? A listing of the ideas from each group is attached, with the big ideas discussed below.



III. Report Back – Key Ideas

Following the group discussions, each group was asked to report back to the whole audience the key ideas their group came up with. Some of the key ideas were as follows:

Education seems to be a big issue - both making sure people understand what the role of the conservation plan and the RPA is and understanding what resources are available to learn more about conservation, history, best practices, etc. Equally important perhaps is making sure people are aware of what the plan is not - not a regulatory document, won't be telling people what they can and cannot do with their land, etc.

Interest in ways people can move around Plateau such as bikes, hiking, cross-country skiing, horseback or motorized vehicles like ATVs and snowmobiles. Can the plan lead to a formalized trail network and address landowner concerns about public access.

There is a lot of interest in the history of the Plateau - charcoal pits, old foundations and stone walls, water wheels, etc. Plan could lead to more awareness and understanding of these features, could also be a tourism draw.

Recognition that the Plateau has regional significance for both ecology and recreation, should make sure that is clear in the plan and ways to "market" the uniqueness.

Want to see a strong focus on the economics of the Plateau -both existing conditions and how changes could have fiscal impacts, whether positive or negative.

A concern is that the marketing/tourism has a negative side in that if too many people visit/move to the Plateau it could have a detrimental impact to the ecology and the residents. Need to make sure that potential impacts are planned for and mitigated or avoided.

Property rights will always be a big concern and cause skepticism about the plan and the RPA. RPA will have to overcome that throughout the process and educate the public that they truly respect private property rights and do not want anything that infringes upon them.

The end result needs to be a plan that is embraced by the majority (ideally all) of the towns on the Plateau and won't just sit on a shelf.

IV. Open House

Following the reports from the group the meeting transitioned to an informal discussion where participants could view posters prepared for the meeting, interact with members of the RPA, ask questions and provide additional suggestions for the conservation plan.



V. Adjournment

Group Notes

Group #1

Beneficial Outcomes

- Town of Nassau Natural Resource Committee
- Would like to know more about what else is going on in other towns
- Some consistency across municipal boundaries
- The resource cuts across those boundaries
- Have seen change in landscape on way to work in Troy -whole lot of change on Weatherwax Rd. Would like not to be sad in 10-20 yrs.
- It is a region -there are different elected officials
- Regional vision
- A lot of talk about economic development. Look at what we have -build from this unique resource, need to look at the whole.
- If the whole region is working toward this → can make most of what we have.
- People travel a long way to go to the Adirondacks -can do that here.
- Low impact/economic plan
- Context that growth can happen in
- Doesn't conflict with industries like forestry - that industry has role (when done properly)
- RPA has role to play in education - importance of good forest management, good stewardship. Town of Nassau could use this type of assistance
- Process may be a place to bring different ideas together - create a unifying vision, a place for conversation. There are conflicts/differences of opinion now
- Plan could generate ideas for how landowners can conserve their land
- Communities work together - more possibility for grants, consistent policies
- Concern about increasing fragmentation -plan can offer ideas for how to slow down that process
- Plateau impacts a much greater area -plan should recognize this
- Having a plan may give us some status/credibility, opportunities to engage with other initiatives, grants

Concerns

- There is a concern about government telling people what they can and can't do
- There tend to be two camps of opinion to balance
- Some people might see this as threatening. Need to be aware of this
- Don't want to polarize people -they might already be polarized without knowing this process
- Understands why RPA wants to be neutral (not alienate) but sometimes there are things that go on that are outside of their goals
- Be clear to the towns about RPA's objectives and goals
- Education is a constant process
- Where should the RPA focus its energy?
- Support things that are going on that are positive, not highlight negatives
- What would the RPA say about something like wind farms? What do individual communities do regarding this or another issue?
- Start with the young people - information in the schools

- Partnership opportunities with the CACs in individual communities
- Town of Nassau CAC would certainly like to be involved

Group #2

- Concern that regulations like that of the Adirondack Park Agency are not imposed on the Plateau.
- Want to be clear what the towns' role is in the final plan
- Success of the plan will be measured by landowners' willingness to voluntarily protect land - opposite approach from the Adirondacks
- Want to be clear that the plan will have no regulatory structure
- Towns "selfishly" want to see land stay private and not become parkland so that it stays on the tax roles
- Example of land use regulations - Poestenkill zoning has decreasing allowed density as you move west to east (toward the Plateau) - most of the Plateau is 2-acre zoning
- Looking ahead - as towns update their comprehensive plans and land use regulations they can see how they can integrate with the regional plan (or not if they don't want to).
- General sentiment in the region is "we like it rural"
- Want to see the plan have the broadest range of tools possible that give both landowners and municipal officials a clear picture of available options and an understanding of the land
- Concern over fire danger - as people move to the Plateau risk of fire (and the damage that could result) increases - will the plan address ways to contain fires, such as a network of fire roads?
- There are problems with people abusing the land, which leads to an unwillingness by landowners to allow access to the public - need to educate people about respecting the land and resources so they don't ruin it for future access availability.
- Concerns about landowners' liability if they allow people on the land. Contrary to popular opinion there is reportedly case law to suggest that short of allowing swimming, landowners cannot be prosecuted for injuries sustained by people that have been allowed on the land. An example was given of a gravel pit operator that allowed ATV use in the pit and due to moving of one of the gravel piles a rider was injured in a crash. The rider filed a lawsuit, but it was thrown out.
- Believe there will be a benefit of one document that covers the whole plateau so that towns can see that their neighbors have similar strategies and struggles.
- Hope that the economic analysis will be educational and useful - would like if it showed the cost-benefit of water protection versus having to treat the water due to poor land management.
- Having a better understanding of background conditions of existing resources will allow for better educated decisions on the impacts of future land changes - e.g. where's the best place for development, where are aquifers most sensitive to contamination, etc.
- Would like if the plan had a list of who to talk to get questions answered on things like logging regulations, wetlands, historic resources, etc. It's difficult to sometimes find the right person when you have a question.
 - In addition perhaps a group of local 'experts' could be formed with hours established that people can call when they have questions.
- Would like to see recreational resources institutionalized; creation of a formal multi-use all season trail system through voluntary land access agreements; would be good

if horse trails were included. Trails could connect communities, which would be a local resource, but could also be a tourism hook for hiking from one community to the next and/or have large loop trails. Will take a lot of effort and cooperation and will need to build confidence with landowners.

- Some of the preserved lands, like Dyken Pond do not allow motorized vehicles, that could inhibit regional trail linkages for snowmobiles and ATVs
 - There's an example in Maine of a group of ATV riders that got together and were able to negotiate access to a portion of the Appalachian Trail.
- When you fly into Albany at night, the Plateau is the only dark spot on the landscape. Would like to maintain that, keep the "dark skies" - want to be able to still look up and see the Milky Way in 50 years.
- Could possibly create a landowners association to help advance the plan - landowners may be more trusting of other landowners.
- Question on historic preservation, will the plan address that? For example many historic charcoal pits on property, not sure the best way to preserve them.
- Numerous "cellar holes" and historic forest roads spread across the plateau. Plan could identify historic resources and include ways to protect them - however this could lead to tourism and damage.
- There are numerous springs and underground streams - again some education would be helpful.
- Noted that the Poestenkill drains ~32,000 acres - would like to see watershed/sub-watershed mapping so people can see and understand where they are in the larger picture.
- Flood mapping could be useful
- Numerous water wheels, most no longer in use
- Might be interesting to see how water courses have changed over time
- What impact will climate change have on the plateau?
- Should have a long-range plan for flooding
- Aquifers vary widely across the plateau - relatively shallow aquifer in Poestenkill, some areas on the plateau have wells 900+ feet deep.
- Want to make sure the plan doesn't tell people what they have to do with their land
- Don't want the plan to sit on shelf after it is done.

Group #3

Benefits

- The plan can be a
 - Point of reference
 - Common vision
 - Resource for finding places to
 - Ski
 - Hike
 - Hunt, Etc.
- The plan can help provide
 - Clean Water
 - Clean Air
 - Unfragmented Forest
- The plan can help provide
 - Trail safety

- And Protect Trail quality (Erosion)
- Concerns about sharing trails and ATVs
- Trail network
- The Plan can Identify different kinds of Threats
 - Environmental
 - Ecological
 - Anthropomorphic

Concerns

- RPA is too business friendly, anti-conservation
- RPA won't be able to get buy in from such diverse groups
- Concern that RPA will become regulatory
 - And the inverse that the RPA plans will have no teeth, how can they be effective
- Lack of education about what RPA is doing
- Will RPA be able to implement
- Idea about having a designated board member from each town
- Plan should be a living document concern that it won't be
- Concern that the isn't enough involvement in RPA stuff
- Lack of government buy-in.

Group #4

Benefits

- There is a lot of interest
- Towns talking with each other
- Very interested
- Non-controversial umbrella
- Places of Historical Interest
- Native American archaeology (Don Rittner)
- Could it promote tourism?
- @30 mile hike - part on Post Rd.
- "This was the road" - Author Granville Hicks...
- No one knows about old foundations
- "This was old farmland"
- Stone walls in forest
- Extent fire tower in Grafton -working on it right now
- Unpublished - "road less traveled"
- Pull together
- having a regional identity is important -economic impact
- Alliance offers access to other organizations
 - from member organizations
 - extract from them the product from all of these organizations
 - E.G. with Audubon NY there are some birdwalks on the plateau (link back to Audubon & vice versa) and reports back -e.g. findings
 - Feed Audubon names of people interested in (would be a lot of work)
- Audubon is interested in preserving habitat - education, conservation & advocacy

- Protecting the RIDGELINES...any town manage to have RIDGE TOP ZONING
 - Houses on top of ridgeline
 - Cooperation of towns to have some kind of protections
 - If it comes at a broader context

Other issues:

- hard rock mining in Nassau
- best use of plateau (is that the best use?)
- very difficult as a town
- greywacke is big issue
- provide some guidelines or assistance
- from a regional perspective
- I hope one of the benefits -bring higher awareness of the natural resource values (not become apathetic & lose what we value through benign neglect - we won't neglect what we value)
- Riding bikes on trails - 3 years of trial & error to find trail between X & Y
- We could have an unbelievable historic recreation experience
- Trails are extensive but unrecorded
 - Example: Oblong Trail 100 miles in Pawling, NY -a huge undertaking
 - Brings a great number of people together at very little cost
 - Amazing deer trails
- Values sometimes become segregated -there are a number of values:
 - economic
 - cut-throat
 - aesthetic (e.g. birding generates economics -travel, hotels, restaurants)
 - E.g. Grafton Lakes State Parks -here's the trailhead, here's the parks
- Intrigue of the trails - history - the plateau was not settled first - plateau was old history, landscape too
- Landscape does not lend itself to tract housing
- You love those people -they are not difficult -they know how to do your own stuff

Concerns:

- As plateau gets more and more loved, appreciated, used, more will want to be here, move here - lots of new houses... that is the flip side of the story
- Saying what you want, like & value
- One speaker (before) did not want anyone taking away their property rights - e.g. not allow X