

Published August 23, 2008 09:17 pm - Adirondack Action conference shines light on discrepancies in state land tax payments inside the blue line.

Seeking a fair tax equation

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HARRIETSTOWN -- If a single, clear move toward property tax equity rose from a hundred ideas Friday it was: one market, one park.

Adirondack Action, a citizen political action group, called a property valuation conference drawing input from 130 Adirondack taxpayers counting 30 town supervisors and two-dozen Adirondack assessors.

En masse, the room scrutinized Adirondack state land valuation equations many said are broken.

The issue is complex, vetted in town-by-town numbers and in different town and state assessment practices.

The figures are played across a complicated patchwork of Adirondack lands.

Still, a consensus emerged over common ground. That common ground is three million acres of state-owned land listed "forever wild" by state law.

It is only half the Adirondack Park. But it surrounds and connects thousands of parcels of private land valued sometimes three and four times higher, even without "improvements" like roads, houses or camps.

Residents here are searching for a better system that could be applied by town assessors park-wide to revalue state property propped up against equations set in the 1960s.

They seek private valuation balanced fairly over the state land mass.

And they believe the entire park's intrinsic worth as a global carbon sink and North American watershed should be factored into the new equation.

ADIRONDACK ACTION

The tone of Friday's meeting was thoughtful and sustained.

Marsha Stanley, part of an Adirondack Action steering committee that organized Friday's conference, encouraged careful scrutiny.

Despite laws requiring state land to be "valued as though privately held," the cost equation continues to fail, she said.

The ratio continues to splinter over skyrocketing private property values

Where the state owns 75 percent of land in Harriestown, it pays 25 percent of the total tax base.

"Slowly almost imperceptibly, the tax burden is being shifted to private owners," Stanley said.

SCATTERED VIEWS

Pictures from around the park came through in panel discussions.

In Keene, Town Councilor Bob Biesemeyer said the state owns 70 percent of the land and pays "14 percent of the warrant."

John C. Dillenburg III, of Arkwright, offered perspective of one town outside the blue line that receives nothing for more than 2,200 acres of state land.

Dillenburg's legal challenge in state Supreme Court has called for a halt to the "hodge-podge" state taxation payment system.

"Whoever has political pull gets paid, those who don't, don't," Dillenburg said.

On the shiny side of the coin, Bill Hotaling, Hamilton County Real Property tax director, said where the state owns 67 percent of their county, it pays nearly 50 percent of the taxes.

The tighter ratio works in that county.

"You need a sales database to prove a value," he said.

The Town of Clifton has sued the state over variations in shoreline assessment values on Lows Lake and Cranberry Lake.

Bill Farber, Town of Morehouse supervisor and president of the Association of Adirondack Towns and Villages, suggested they reactivate a park-wide assessor's convention.

Any changes in assessment have to be accountable back to recent sales, he said.

"We have to make sure it has a basis in law when we end up in court."

TOP CONCERN

Rising Adirondack property taxes remain the No. 1 concern of both residents and business owners in research done by local Chambers of Commerce, the Common Ground Alliance and other groups.

David Wolff, a native of Saranac Lake and retired IBM executive, presented Adirondack Action committee facts as raw data culled from real property figures.

The state land inventory is well documented, he said.

"But some key assumptions made are not accurate, so the resulting valuation is not accurate."

Wolff showed how state land values are defined in four different markets assigned by the state Office of Real Property Services for bare land in the Adirondacks.

Values in parcels of similar acreage drift from \$250 per acre in the northwest to \$850 per acre near Lake George, and from \$400 per acre to \$1,265 per acre.

"What about the concept of making it a single market area?"

As he parsed numbers, Wolff listed four ways the state pays \$69,074,798 in taxes for Adirondack lands.

Variables produce ghost values, but preliminary data shows state land in North Hudson is assessed at \$724 per acre, where state land in North Elba is valued at \$1,732 per acre, nearly two and a half times more.

Building toward consensus, Lee Keet, founding member of Adirondack Action, outlined potential next steps.

High on a list of goals is setting a fair tax equation.

And among possible solutions is finding a way for Adirondack towns and villages to come together to evaluate assessment of state lands.

Financial fragility is a threat to the Adirondack Park, everyone agreed, approaching a tipping point.

It could end up, someone warned, sold on the open market to a place like China who can afford it.

Keet, who is also co-chairman of the Property Tax Review Committee for the Common Ground Alliance, was elected to carry information to that group.

For now, Adirondack Action will continue to crunch numbers and play a transitional role in moving a tax initiative forward.

Conference data and reports are available online today at: www.adkaction.org.

Further questions or ideas can be submitted on the Web site.

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