Has conservation of the Adirondacks come to a halt?

By: Samantha Muratori

For the better part of a decade, there has been a movement to re-invigorate and re-imagine Tupper Lake, NY. There is no denying that the Tupper Lake community needs economic revitalization, for without it the town will continue to experience economic decline. One major economic development project that could revitalize Tupper Lake’s economy is the Adirondack Club and Resort (ACR), a proposed mixed-use development project that includes residential and recreational spaces. Despite the need to deal with the economic difficulties that Tupper Lake faces, the method that brings economic vitality to the town through the ACR is highly questionable on many levels. Several environmental groups, such as the Sierra Group and Protect the Adirondacks, have filed a lawsuit challenging the Adirondack Park Agency’s approval of the ACR. This action resembles the Moose River conflict of the 1940s, in which conservationists rallied the entire community and fought one of the most epic battles in Adirondack history. Decades later, the passion to protect the “forever wild” land of the Adirondacks has disappeared.

The Moose River conflict was an eleven-year battle to preserve the South Branch of the Moose River from inundation by the Higley Mountain and Panther Mountain Dams. The conservation commissioner and the NYS Water Power and Control Commission had approved the project, it was underway, and it seemed there were no legal processes that could stop it. Conservationists then launched legislative and political attacks on key players involved in approving the project and after two years of protest, Governor Dewey agreed to curtail the project based on political grounds. After a prolonged three-year battle, the New York State legislature and the Governor approved a bill banning all dams to regulate the flow of the Moose River.

However, the fight did not end there. The public wanted absolute protection for the statute. In fact, their determination resulted in legislative repeal of the constitutional amendment of 1913 that authorized 3% of the New York State Forest Preserve to be inundated. A goal that seemed unachievable became a reality after three years of relentless work. The New York State Senate later passed an amendment permitting construction of the Panther Mountain dam under specific terms of the previously repealed amendment. A coalition of conservation groups, from the NYS Conservation Council to local bird clubs to National Wildlife groups, all rallied to fight for the preservation of this area of the Adirondacks.

In the final referendum, the vote on the Panther Mountain dam was 613,000 for the dam and 1,622,000 against. This was not just a victory for the conservationists of the Moose River but there was an overwhelming impact on conservation issues all over the Adirondacks and the Catskills. According to Paul Schaefer, some believed that the South Branch of the Moose River became a River of Opportunity, for it was seen as the front line of defense against the commercial invasion of the forest preserve.

Now, almost 70 years later, the Adirondack Park Agency (APA) has approved the Adirondack Club and Resort. Environmentalists are outraged and filed a lawsuit in 2012 against
the APA for violating several regulations. "In the last few years APA has become a rogue agency that ignores the law for political ends," said John Caffry of PROTECT!. These environmental groups claim that the APA has failed to adequately protect the land under the APA Act. A main argument made by the Sierra Club is that the Act created this land classification category for the purpose of preserving open land by protecting the timber and agricultural management, not for multi-million dollar McMansions. It seems as if the APA has been cutting corners and doing everything it can to stretch the boundaries of the regulations, minimizing the importance of the state constitution and what used to be the “forever wild” clause.

The Moose River case once had an extraordinary influence on the development of Adirondack conservation, but the passion is now lost. It was not just the conservationists who rallied against the building of the dams, the public also had an overwhelming impact and truly cared about keeping the Adirondacks forever wild. The inspiration behind the Moose River action has faded; the conservationists are outnumbered by the ACR. While there are several other alternatives for economic development in Tupper Lake that do not completely exploit the land, the APA, businessmen and women and local residents continue to favor this extravagant operation. They are so desperate for change that they have become indifferent to the environment and blinded to the ramifications of the finished product. If this continues, conservation for the Adirondacks will be a memory.