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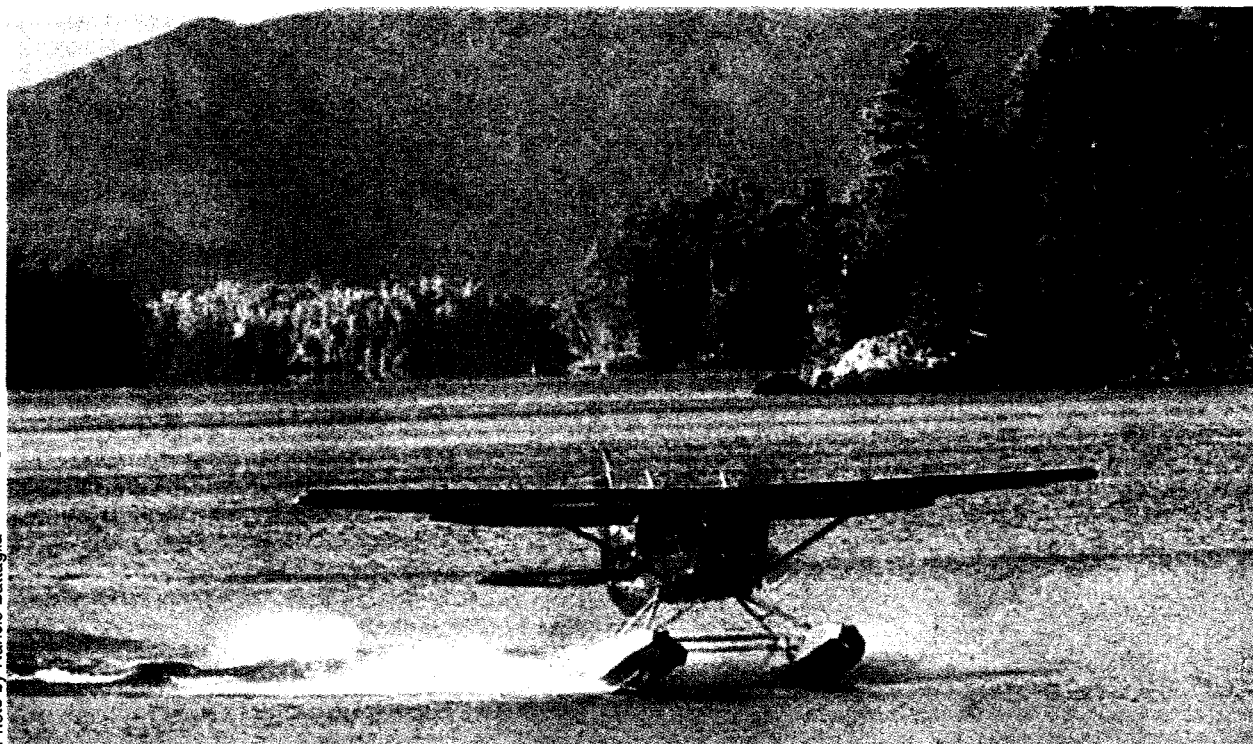


Photo by Nile Baker

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APA flexes its muscles

■ *New chairman doesn't shy away from controversy or debate.*

BY BRIAN MANN

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at the APA. Where his predecessors put a premium on consensus building and backroom deal-making, Stiles seems to relish public debate and argument.

At the APA's monthly meetings, Stiles often clashes with other board members and with members of the public. "Just because we're debating an issue in public or don't agree doesn't mean it's a bad thing," he said. "I think the public debate is good."

Most environmentalists have been thrilled with the APA's more aggressive posture. But the shift has created tensions with local leaders and among members of the APA board. "I don't remember a time when this board has been so clearly divided since I've sat here," Commissioner Lani Ulrich, from Old Forge, said after the Lows Lake debate in October.

Board member Frank Mezzano, town supervisor in Lake Pleasant, was so angered by the floatplane decision

the end of what might be called the Era of Détente in the Adirondacks. From the late 1990s until 2006, a kind of truce existed. There was a sense that the big battles had been fought and the outcome was effectively a draw.

On the one hand, the Adirondack Park Agency had carved out a certain amount of institutional credibility, with calls from locals for its dissolution fading to the margins. But through much of that period the political landscape was dominated by state Senator Ronald Stafford, a pro-development Republican and longtime foe of the APA.

In the 1990s, the *New York Times* reported that Stafford enjoyed "virtual veto power" over Adirondack policy. In the same article, Neil Woodworth—now the head of the Adirondack Mountain Club—gave voice to widespread frustration in the green community.

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The changes establish new wetland protections, set strict limits on construction of hunting camps and extend the APA's influence over shoreline development. The last move requires owners of shoreline homes built before the APA was established to obtain a variance before expanding—a reversal of longstanding policy.

"The Adirondack Council thinks this is an important loophole to close," spokesman John Davis said of the shoreline rules. "I think very few of us want to see megamansions along our lakeshores."

But a broad coalition of local government leaders and lawmakers described the move as an illegal power grab by the APA. "This is an expansion of their jurisdiction," complained state Senator Betty Little. "The legislature [has the power] to expand their jurisdiction and they're just trying to do it on their own."

Under Stiles's leadership, the agency also sought to assert its influence over construction of new worker housing built on farms. And last fall, he led the effort to kill a proposal from the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) that would have extended floatplane tourist flights to Lows Lake.

"This is not something that should be positioned as APA versus DEC, or enviros versus local government," Stiles insisted. "It's a broader Adirondack Park issue with a core principle of the State Land Master Plan at stake."

Still, a little more than a year after his confirmation by the state Senate, it's clear that Stiles has redefined the tone

at the APA. Where his predecessors put a premium on consensus building and backroom deal-making, Stiles seems to relish public debate and argument.

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Board member Frank Mezzano, town supervisor in Lake Pleasant, was so angered by the floatplane decision that he made a point of censoring himself to avoid inflaming the situation. "I probably better not make a public comment today," he said.

The more aggressive tone set by Stiles would be noteworthy in itself. But the APA's muscle flexing could signal



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"It's a very bad public-policy precedent," Woodworth said, "to give one man, and one man only, veto power over a sixth of the state, the sixth with a majority of the state's natural resources."

Environmentalist concerns eased somewhat after Gov. George Pataki took office in 1994. The Republican turned out to be a surprisingly ambitious conservationist, throwing his weight behind a massive program of land acquisitions and conservation easements in the Park. Despite their substantial policy differences, Stafford and Pataki developed a close friendship.

For the better part of 12 years, the two politicians kept a lid on things, conducting much of the Park's business in Albany behind closed doors. Often, decisions at APA headquarters in Ray Brook hinged on a single phone call from the governor's office.

This nervous balance of power began to erode in 2002, when Stafford retired at 66 (he died in 2005). Four years later, Pataki announced that he, too, was stepping aside. He was succeeded by two Democratic governors, first Eliot Spitzer, then David Paterson.

The shifts in Albany were mirrored by a changing political climate within the Adirondacks. In 2006 and again in 2008, far more of the region's voters supported Democratic candidates than is usually the case, twice helping elect Rep. Kirsten Gillibrand in what had been considered a solid Republican district. Also, more public officials in the Park



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began praising the APA as a positive force.

But with the change has come new conflict and a sense that old rivalries could be reignited. The first salvo was fired in 2007 when then-Governor Spitzer appointed Cornell Professor Dick Booth, from Ithaca, to chair the APA. Booth is a widely respected environmental theorist with close ties to green groups. The environmental community was ecstatic.

Republican state Senator Betty Little—the Glens Falls lawmaker who succeeded Stafford—pushed back. She argued that the APA chairman has traditionally been someone who lives inside the Blue Line. With the backing of Senate Majority Leader Joseph Bruno, she asserted a Stafford-like veto authority.

“The senators in my conference look to me [on Adirondack issues], and they agree with me,” Little said, after putting a permanent hold on Booth’s confirmation hearings. “Hopefully the governor will reconsider this.”

Spitzer backed off and Booth settled for a rank-and-file seat on the APA board. But even as Little claimed victory, the final pillar of the old Republican power structure was crumbling. Less than a year later, Bruno had retired and the GOP lost its majority in the state Senate, leaving Little with far less power.

“Obviously it’s disappointing,” she said. “I think that going forward I have to work a lot harder, making these challenges that we have in the North Country known [in Albany].”

“The political climate is obviously changing,” acknowledged Fred Monroe, head of the Adirondack Local Government Review Board and a frequent critic of the APA. “In the past, Adirondack residents could see their [state] senators as defenders. But now with the change in Albany we think the stopping power of our representatives has been substantially weakened.”

Stepping into the political vacuum is Curt Stiles. The former corporate executive can be charming and humorous, but he has a reputation for bruising relationships. He also has a record of getting things done.

Almost single-handedly, Stiles led an ambitious campaign to clear Eurasian watermilfoil from Upper Saranac Lake.

He now appears intent on establishing the APA as an unapologetic regulatory force, one that can shape the environmen-

tal debate in the Adirondacks and the political tone in Albany. Where other chairmen eschewed controversy—to the point of occasional timidity—Stiles seems unfazed when tempers flare.

“Grown-ups will disagree on an outcome,” he said. “If it was all black and white,” he added, “you wouldn’t need 11 people [on the APA board] to make a decision.” Nevertheless, Stiles insists that talk of deepening rifts has been “blown out of proportion by those who like to fan that discontent.”

But local leaders are ready to challenge the APA. In December, several North Country counties announced that they were banding together to sue the agency over the new regulations. In November, a state Supreme Court judge ruled that the APA overreached in attempting to regulate farm-worker housing.

Even some environmental leaders worry that a more confrontational tone in Ray Brook could disrupt efforts to bridge divides. “It’s driving wedges between the communities and the environmentalists,” said Brian Houseal, executive director of the Adirondack Council, “at a time when we were really getting to some common ground solutions for big issues.”

Houseal was referring to the debate over floatplanes on Lows Lake, but he made it clear that much bigger questions are on the table. Broad cooperation will be needed to sort out the zoning of huge swaths of forestland that the state has recently acquired or plans to acquire soon. Cooperation also is needed to sustain a high level of state funding for the Park.

Whether that kind of partnership is possible remains unclear. It’s possible that the debate over the Adirondacks’ future will grow noisier and more rancorous. “As this thing goes out of control, we might have to go back to putting trucks on the Northway,” said Newcomb town supervisor George Canon, referring to a protest in 1990 that blocked traffic on I-87.

But it’s also possible that Curt Stiles is on to something. The Adirondack Park faces serious environmental and economic challenges, from global climate change to inappropriate development and the erosion of local communities. For too long those problems have been hidden away. Maybe the political culture inside the Blue Line has matured enough that a more open and honest debate is now possible. ■

