



The man in charge

Curt Stiles knows he's been making news, some of it controversial, as chairman of the Adirondack Park Agency. Unlike his recent predecessors, he doesn't duck controversy. He sees debate as healthy. He's outspoken, candid, strongly in favor of protecting wilderness and not afraid to take on state officials, local government or the general public if he's in disagreement.

After a year in the job, Stiles seems like a throwback to the strong personalities who initially shaped the agency in the 1970s.

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"I guess I tend to be quite direct," Stiles, 66, observed recently. "But I hope it's not seen as being obstinate or unduly forceful. I don't want to come off that way at all. It's about doing what's right for the Park, about following the law and being a totally transparent agency."

But here's the big question: Can a strong, outspoken wilderness advocate avoid being cast as a polarizing figure, one who could paralyze the agency? The old days, after all, were not always fun days.

For now, though, many find Stiles's candor and resolve refreshing. And his fans among the enviros are joyful.

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Courtesy of Adirondack Park Agency

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“I think Curt Stiles is the best chairman we’ve seen since John Collins,” said Neil Woodworth, executive director of the Adirondack Mountain Club. “He’s totally reinvigorating the Adirondack Park Agency and recalibrating its compass to what’s right for the Adirondack Park. He’s shown a backbone of steel in dealing with state agencies, notably the Department of Environmental Conservation. At the same time I think he’s done a good job at listening to local economic interests.”

He showed his backbone in taking on DEC and its commissioner, Pete Grannis, over floatplanes on Lows Lake. By a 6-5 vote, largely engineered by Stiles, the APA denied an effort by DEC to extend floatplane use on the lake for 10 years. DEC fought vigorously for the extension, even though the APA staff said it would violate the State Land Master Plan. In one swoop, Stiles reasserted the APA as an equal partner with DEC in the legal oversight of the Park and established himself as a tough leader who could work the bureaucracy to get his way.

Nor does he apologize for the agency’s recent move to restrict development on privately owned shorelines. “Shoreline protections in the Park have never been strong enough,” he said. “After all, what is the most valuable resource we have here? That’s water quality.”

So who is this guy? Where is he coming from?



Courtesy of Adirondack Park Agency

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APA CHAIRMAN

What does he hope to accomplish?

Here are some biographical tidbits that might help us understand the man. He grew up on Long Island, but he has spent nearly every summer in the Adirondacks since he was an infant. When it came time to retire, he and his wife, Susan, never hesitated. Stiles settled in the Park, on Upper Saranac Lake, “for all the obvious reasons that people want to live here. I’m an avid outdoorsman, skiing, hiking, canoeing, you name it.” As a young man, he spent five years in the Marines and, as a bombardier and navigator on F-4 Phantom jets, took part in 252 combat missions over Vietnam. Later, he spent 32 years at Xerox working his way up the senior management ladder. It seems to me that being decisive, direct and goal-oriented follows logically from those experiences.

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Many say the agency has been chronically understaffed and underfunded. The APA hasn’t had an executive director since Dan Fitts and isn’t likely to see one anytime soon. With the economic crisis, belts will be drawn even tighter. “We have to find ways to work harder, smarter and better, and redirect our internal focus,” Stiles said. “We have to accept that the one resource we won’t have is more funding.”

Stiles plans a thorough review and reform of the APA’s regulatory structure, and he wants the agency to become more accessible to local government and the public. He says the mission of protecting the natural environment needs to be promoted as a boon, not an obstacle, to the Park’s economic prosperity. In general, he adds, the APA needs to do more regional planning and concentrate on the overall vision of the Park.

“What we have to do is focus on the important things for the future of the Adirondack Park, and not just the urgent ones,” Stiles said.