

The Post-Star

APA has plenty of work to do

Posted: Wednesday, February 10, 2010 11:30 am

You can't have that many horror stories over such a long time and not have at least some of them be true.

And you can't reverse decades of well-earned distrust simply by being charming.

So forgive people of the Adirondacks for not being bowled over by the Adirondack Park Agency's recent attempts to remake its image by visiting editorial boards and going around holding meet-and-greet sessions with the public. There's a lot of damage to repair.

APA Chairman Curtis Stiles and Executive Director Terry Marino visited with our editorial board last week, putting their best foot forward to discuss reforming state regulations and the Adirondack Park Act; the need to make their own approval process more streamlined, transparent and easier to understand; their desire to distribute their power to local planning agencies, and their efforts at outreach to the Adirondack community.

The meeting was arranged long before Will Doolittle's series in January that showcased the kind of oppressive behavior toward citizens that has earned the APA its nasty reputation and fueled calls for the agency to either be revamped or disbanded entirely.

The Adirondack Park Agency's awkward attempts at contrition are a little difficult to believe. Actions speak louder than words.

So if you're sincere about changing, APA, don't say it. Prove it.

Prove it by not using incomprehensible justifications for positions, as with the new proposed boathouse regulations. The APA has cited concern over the environment as its main reason for banning new rooftop decks and limiting the size of newly constructed boathouses.

C'mon. It's not the environment, and everyone knows it. That kind of action only breeds suspicion and contempt. Why stick with that argument? If you don't have a good reason for a regulation, don't create the policy.

Prove it by showing you care as much about the Adirondack people as you do about the environment. Many Adirondackers believe that the APA is used as a tool of environmentalists and wealthy downstate residents to create their own private playground, to the exclusion of native Adirondackers who just want to live freely and make a living. Policies and enforcement actions support that. If you don't want people to continue to believe that, start allowing reasonable development of cell towers and alternative power sources in places where it won't overwhelm the vistas.

Allow greater access to Adirondack lakes when practical, such as by allowing seaplanes to carry veterans and other handicapped sportsmen into more landlocked lakes.

Prove it by using common sense in making some of your decisions, rather than sticking to a strictly absurd interpretation. Even Mr. Stiles found some of the rulings absurd. Yet it's his agency that keeps making those calls.

Prove it by putting applications in perspective and stop yanking people around for no good reason. An application to expand a small camp on a river should not take two years to get approved. Give people a checklist, and when they get it all done, honor it.

If a 10-minute visit to a property will answer 10 questions and save 10 months of paperwork, make the visit.

Prove it by following up on your pledge to give more local control over decisions. Only 18 towns inside the blue line have development plans approved by the APA. Find a way to encourage more towns to take control over their own destinies, by supporting multi-town boards, making the regulations clearer and simpler for small town planning boards, and by turning over more cases to local courts. Local governments can get the APA off their backs by demanding and then upholding local control.

Prove it by supporting legislation to give the citizens greater voice in approvals, not less. The APA Procedural Modifications bill that the APA supports would give the agency the right to deny a permit without holding a public hearing. And applicant would have the right to ask for a public hearing. That's backwards. The legislation should automatically assume that the applicant gets a public hearing unless he opts out of it. Either way, you'd streamline the process. But by giving the applicant the right to decide, you're placing power with the citizens where it belongs.

The Adirondack Park Agency earned the bad reputation it has. And it's going to take more than lip service to undo the damage.

If agency officials are truly sincere about changing, then demonstrate it with actions, not merely words.

Local editorials represent the opinion of The Post-Star editorial board, which consists of Publisher Rick Emanuel, Editor Ken Tingley and Editorial Page Editor Mark Mahoney.