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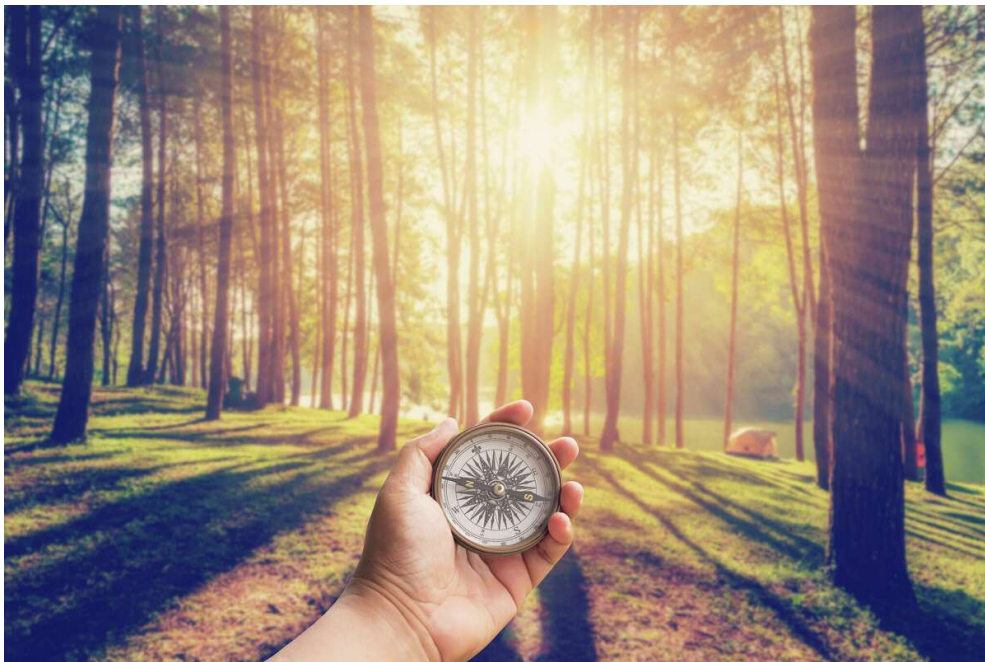
OPINION

Editorial: APA gets off trail

Proposals to limit public input lead the Adirondack Park Agency away from open, accountable governance.

Times Union Editorial Board

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Gov. Kathy Hochul took office in 2021 with a promise that she'd launch a "new era of greater transparency and accountability." If that goal is still on her list, she might want to head up north to see what's going on at the Adirondack Park Agency.

WTDN

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The APA is tasked with protecting state-owned forest lands while also overseeing private development inside the blue line. Its board wants to limit public comment and shorten the review period for draft policies. That ill-conceived plan would be a blow to transparency and open government – and a snub of the people they’re supposed to be working for.

As [Gwendolyn Craig reported](#) for the Adirondack Explorer, the board is weighing several moves to limit public input to its work. Among others, they include:

- Shortening the time in which constituents may send in public comments on material covered at the APA’s monthly board meetings.
- Dropping the public comment periods that begin those meetings (but designating a comment time at the end of the hours-long affairs for those who stick around).
- Doing away with a requirement that when developing a policy, the board must network with constituents; instead, the board can come up with “an understanding of the interests” of the affected parties.

It was just two months ago that the APA got in trouble for cutting corners on its own review process. In March, a state Supreme Court judge [scolded the board](#) over its handling of a request to use herbicide in Lake George, rubber-stamping the plan without a required public hearing — and as it turns out, the APA has been neglecting to hold these required hearings for years.

What’s more, the judge wrote that APA staff had given commissioners a “one-sided” presentation: “Of the 110-page PowerPoint presentation, only 9 pages were devoted to the 325 public comments in opposition — with these comments minimized during the presentation itself.”

In other words: The APA should have listened to *more* public comments and held *more* public review.

And while we’re looking at recent history, consider this: In 2021, the APA [published a transparency plan](#) as part of Gov. Hochul’s open-government mandate. One of its goals: to broaden online access to live and archived hearings, and to extend the public comment period to better accommodate commenters who cannot follow the meetings live and in person. That’s no longer a priority, apparently.

In that plan, the APA also wrote that “increases in public comments and participation in public hearings” would be seen as a “measure of success.” Well, these anti-transparency proposals received more than 500 negative public comments, so maybe they can take that as a win.

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The APA's work – to manage development and preservation in a 6-million-acre patchwork of public and private lands – is no simple undertaking. Even before the pandemic, the Adirondack Park was seeing a surge in visitors that has created challenges on both sides of that mandate. New York needs a strong agency to meet those challenges, and a diverse board that reflects expertise in each aspect of its role.

Currently, there are 10 members seated on an 11-member board, with two of those appointments expired and another sunsetting next month. That makes this a great time for Gov. Hochul to reset the board's focus.

And in keeping with her "new era" of transparency, she should nip these anti-access proposals in the bud.

Written By
Times Union Editorial Board

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