

Editorial

Economic reality: Resort numbers add up

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The economic future of the Central Catskills may well be decided in the next couple of months as the debate over a proposal to expanded state-owned Belleayre Mountain Ski Center and, at the same time issue permits to move forward with plans for the privately-funded Belleayre Resort at Catskill Park, takes center stage.

At stake are projects that would see an investment of \$74 million by New York State at its ski center at Highmount, an investment that would virtually double the size of the facility over five years and create 280 full- and part-time jobs in an economy that badly needs them. The state also estimates that the investment would give Belleayre the critical mass with which to operate profitably into the future and stem years of losses.

More importantly, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) is calling for public input on the proposed Belleayre Resort at Catskill Park. This privately-funded project, which has been under a torturous review process for almost 15 years, proposes to invest almost \$365 million in the towns of Shandaken and Middletown.

The two projects compliment each other perfectly and both should move forward as fast as possible. They are excellent examples of a public/private partnership where both parties benefit.

The time is now

I believe strongly that both projects may represent the last hope for a sustainable economy in the Central Catskills. It should be no surprise to anyone who has taken a hard look at what we've become and to put it bluntly, the Central Catskills are a mess.

We have not recovered from the national housing bust that crippled our real estate market, we have not recovered from the flood of 2011 and we will struggle forever with the onerous regulations of the Watershed agreement. Our populations are declining, our school enrollments are sagging and our Main Streets are a shadow of their former selves.

In a June 2010 interview with this newspaper, Catskill Center for Conservation and Development Executive Director Alan White said, "It doesn't take a rocket scientist to drive around and see that our economy is really starting to limp along. Protecting the environment is still a key part of our mission, but the main issue facing the Catskills isn't environmental degradation, it's economic progress." White went on to say that the economy of the Catskills faces a "tipping point," referring to the critical mass that the region must maintain in order to continue to provide amenities like schools, hospitals and fire departments. Sadly, it turns out that June of 2010 was "the good old days."

The tipping point is now staring us in the face like never before and there is only one shining beacon on the horizon and it's called an expanded Belleayre Mountain Ski Center and the Belleayre Resort at Catskill Park. Simply put, there is no other solution in sight. No one else has expressed any ideas about how to move the economy of the Central Catskills back from the edge of the abyss. Economic recovery is not going to happen because a handful of people paddle kayaks on the reservoirs or a few more people hike in our forests or walk along what used to be rail beds. We cannot sustain an economy making quilts.

Those who worry about the environmental impact of the resort don't seem to see the impact of grinding rural poverty, abandoned buildings, closed schools, failed businesses, unpaid taxes and the population exodus that goes along with a failed economy.

Benefits are substantial

Early in the process, critics cleverly tagged the project "mega resort" and it stuck. Unfairly. Even in its original configuration the resort would have occupied a piece of land that would have been dwarfed by any number of developments in Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine, all associated with ski areas.

I've been associated with the *Catskill Mountain News* for more than 40 years and I've experienced any number of ups and downs and booms and busts in the economy of the Central Catskills over that period. But I've never felt the sense of doom and gloom that exists in our region today. It is inconceivable to me that any area facing the challenges that we face today could look at someone willing to make an investment of more than \$400 million and say, "No thanks." It's inconceivable.

An expanded Belleayre Ski Center and The Resort at Catskill Park may not magically solve all of our economic problems, but there is no possible way that the two projects won't help. You simply can't spend \$400 million in an area the size of western Ulster and eastern Delaware counties without feeling it.

Will the two projects cause some problems? Of course. Will those problems be manageable? I think so. Other communities have done it very successfully and so can we.

I worry more about what happens if Belleayre doesn't expand and what happens if the developers of The Resort are finally ground down and lose interest. I keep thinking about the "tipping point." I keep thinking about empty storefronts and rural decay. I keep thinking about people who can't sell homes and businesses. I keep thinking that my children would love to live here, but can't because there is no way for them earn a living. I worry that our public schools are losing critical mass as people leave seeking economic opportunity in other areas. I wonder how much longer a declining population can sustain a hospital in our midst?

The proposals for an expanded Belleayre Mountain Ski Center and The Resort at Catskill Park may not be perfect, but few things in life are. It's time we support them both. They are the future.