

Guest Editorial

Time to build the darn thing

By Dr. Bill Birns,
Retired Margaretville & Onteora Teacher

Personally, I wasn't much of a fan of the Belleayre Resort when it was first proposed – how many years ago? The project itself seemed too big (*two golf courses!*) and some of the property was right down on the Esopus flat, and folks around here seemed to be doing all right without some big new *change*, right here in our beloved Catskills. Besides, the old Highmount Ski Center is right out Gayla-and-my living room window, and I like our view of the mountain, turning a gorgeous subtle red this time of year. Do I want to be looking at a hotel, a *spa*, for gosh sakes?

Well, yes, if it means jobs for my neighbors.

It's not the late '90s anymore. All we have to do is look around. Friends and family members gainfully employed when the resort was first proposed have been out-of-work for months. Out-of-work! With families to feed. With the dignity that work provides slowly ebbing away. It hurts.

For a year-or-so after I retired from public school teaching, I belonged to the Emerson Health & Fitness Club. I was treating myself. The fitness center, steam room, sauna and amenities seem first-class, like the country clubs many of my Westchester County boyhood friends grew up in. As you know, the folks who propose to develop the Belleayre Resort developed the Emerson. While the ownership of the two has recently been separated, the Emerson does give us a pretty good idea how the proposed place will be run. And my experience was first-rate.

More importantly, the employment experience of my former students seemed first rate. The entire Emerson workforce seemed to be comprised of my and my Catskill-Mountain-teacher-colleagues' former students, locally educated young people (though I go back far enough that they need not be young, these days). Talk about hiring local!

Making a career

I taught English as a Second language at Margaretville Central for years. I remember Maria, in fourth grade, struggling to break through into spoken English. How many years, now, has this highly competent woman staffed the Emerson's spa desk?

Those rumors you may have heard, that *they* hire "foreign workers"? All the Latin folks working at the Emerson I ran into graduated from Margaretville Central. Or, came in on parent night to discuss their child's progress.

Katie is an MCS grad, too, and got à college degree in Hospitality Services.

I don't know if she's still down there, but she got to start her professional career close to home. And let's not forget, one of the first President/CEOs of the Emerson operation was Mark Johnson, MCS '91 (recently seen selling his own products on QVC or Home Shopping, one of them). Mark got to start an executive career 20 miles down the road from his Todd Mountain home.

I taught at Onteora High School the last seven years of my career. The Emerson is crawling with kids who once sat in my Senior English class, good kids, some of whom went off to college or a technical school after high school, some who went right to work. Impressive were the customer service skills and polish that these 19 and 20 and 21 year-olds had picked up working at the hotel.

A Marine Vet, born and raised in Shandaken, has steady employment as house electrician. Lots of local people work there. Some, like the Marine, have found a place where they can ply hard-won skills, where college, technical school, and military training can pay off close to home. Others learn salable skills on the job, often their first full-time job. How valuable is that?

So when Crossroads Ventures says they'll provide so many *local* jobs, I believe them. Besides, Ken Pasternak, a Crossroads principal, is a local guy, grew up in Fleischmanns, graduated from MCS in '73. One of his early mentors was the late Dan Morse, MCS social studies teacher and resident wise man from the '50s to the '80s. Dan was a mentor to me, as well. Ken's parents survived the Nazis, built a life here in the Catskills, raised him and his siblings *here*. Why should I not trust Ken when his company says *these jobs will be local jobs*?

Creating good jobs

And we need the jobs. I used to sit on my high horse and denigrate the kinds of jobs they'd be. You know, more jobs waiting table and cleaning rooms and the like. My horse is no longer so high. Too close and too widespread have come unemployment and despair – not too big a word when we are talking about working-age folks left idle, losing hope.

Besides, have you walked down Main Street - Margaretville or Fleischmanns - on a Tuesday or Wednesday afternoon? Desolate. And identical. (Don't kid ourselves: take Freshtown out of the mix, and Margaretville is Fleischmanns).

And let's remember: this proposed Belleayre Resort is a much-scaled down version, *one* golf course, fewer rooms, the Spa built green into the hillside, the sensitive Esopus Flats swapped to the State to remain Forever Wild. Compromise has already happened.

I love the view of the mountain out of the big picture window in the front of our house. Across the valley, the light on a single red house twinkles human habitation. That house is up by Wildacres, site of the proposed hotel, at the end of Gunnison Road. Come full summer, I won't be able to see it till Fall.

Gayla and I have a regular income. Build the Resort or not, we'll be fine. It will only affect our view. But for so many of our friends and neighbors, the Belleayre Resort promises work, and, one of the many things mentor Dan Morse taught me was work's intrinsic value.

It's time to build the darn thing.