

Guest Editorial

Resort project brings hope

By Lewis E. Kolar

Retired Banker, M-ARK Project, Campaign Treasurer Margaretville Memorial Hospital, Chairman Andes Alliance, a Founding Member of the Catskill Center for Conservation and Development, Chairman Partners for Progress

In the late '60s, I started my banking career in Margaretville as a Branch Manager for NBT. One of my first major credit decisions was to make a payroll loan to the struggling Margaretville Hospital. Next, we worked to assist others in saving the more than 100 jobs at the hospital. This effort resulted in construction of a new Margaretville Memorial Hospital. Later Mountainside Residential Care, a long-term care facility, was added; and today over 200 are employed in this complex. For a time, this effort, along with a growing second-home construction market, stabilized the local economy and provided hope for a region in economic transition.

Sinking economy

However, multiple factors pummeled the local economy, including high interest rates following the Arab oil embargo, the purchase of land by the City of New York, and continued efforts to lower tax assessments on that land, and mortgage speculation causing massive equity losses. Through flooding, Mother Nature contributed to the area's distress with the loss of taxable properties. The effects were devastating as we witnessed the loss of more farms, the closing of four new car dealerships, the closing of over 10 restaurants on Route 28, the closing of most hotels, especially in Fleischmanns. We are now faced with many empty properties and the creation of few new jobs.

Especially significant, and perhaps the largest contributing factor to the downward spiral of our economy, has been our inability to come to terms with the urgent need to support and replace even a fraction of the modern accommodations needed to attract and keep visitors here for more than a day. The lack of modern accommodations is exacting an extraordinarily high price on our regional tourism economy in the form of lack of investments and jobs, declining population, property values, and tax revenue. These trends will now accelerate if decisive action isn't taken.

A change of heart

I believe that many of you, who previously did not support or were on the fence regarding the Belleayre Resort at Catskill Park and the full expansion of the Belleayre Ski Center, now realize how important these projects are to the future of our region. We need to think about the magnitude of these issues. Simply walk our streets, drive our roads and observe the deterioration. We need to recognize the fact that no other investor, plan or solution is on the drawing board, much less ready to move forward.

Here are a few reasons and benefits we could realize if the full build out of the ski center and the revised Belleayre Resort are approved. The first benefit is psychological, a renewed interest in this region, investment and hope.

The construction phase will take 2,100 man years. Put another way, 400 workers, working full-time will need over five years to build it. Up to 10 percent of those jobs are set aside for local, non-union labor. Many of the skilled construction workers traveling to the area to work on the project will rent underutilized lodging facilities and frequent our restaurants and stores.

Jobs and tourists

The fully built out resort will provide over 500 full-time jobs and 200 part-time seasonal jobs. The Belleayre Ski Center when fully built out will add another 32 full-time jobs and over 200 part-time seasonal jobs. Over time this will generate substantial real estate and school tax revenue for Shandaken and Middletown, sales taxes, federal and state income taxes, mortgage and bed taxes, and county taxes for both Delaware and Ulster counties. The annual impact on the regional economy is projected to be in excess of \$167 million.

The hotel guests, fractional time share owners and increased Belleayre Mountain skiers will explore our villages and hamlets, use our services, restaurants and stores; thereby, creating an additional \$10 million annually in off-site spending.

Take action to reverse the trend. Write a letter in support of these projects. Send it to: Daniel T. Whitehead, Regional Permit Administrator, NYDEC, 21 South Putt Corner Rd., New Paltz, NY 12561-1620.

Be sure to attend the public hearing at Belleayre on May 29 at 3 or 6 p.m.

The Resort at Catskill Park and the full build out of Belleayre Mountain Ski Center are the future, and our future depends on us.