Mailbag

Not equity and not ethical

To The Editor:

The town-wide Roxbury assessments have raised concerns about the changing community dynamics, the equity of tax bills, and the sustainability of the area farms.

Many properties in Roxbury are owned by second homeowners, land has been bought by New York City, the Roxbury Motel is flourishing and expanding, and these dynamics contrast greatly with long-time residents who fear being taxed off their homesteads because of the new assessments and the accompanying tax burden. With an aging population within the town and fewer students in the district, the costs of the town and school weigh heavily on the remaining residents.

New York State requires towns to move to 100 percent assessments. Assessments of comparable properties are based on properties that have been sold. Much of the assessment work is done through computers that are pre-programmed to find similar properties and "value" each property. Some of this reassessment has been done on individual properties over the years, but it has been a long time since Roxbury had a townwide assessment.

For the current year, approximately 540 properties had their estimated taxes go down significantly (more than $500) and about 540 properties had their estimated taxes go up significantly (more than $500). This new assessment is supposed to bring equity to taxpayers, but instead it is pricing property owners off their properties. Some residents will see a $6,000 increase in their taxes. That is not a typographical error, $6,000 for this year alone!

This will force owners to sell their properties. With all that new real estate on the market, the owners won't be able to sell their properties, will sell at far less than their new valuations or will go into default.

According to the town's assessor, area farms were assessed using a formula very similar to residential properties. This means that some farm assessments went from $200,000 to $600,000 and their estimated taxes jumped an extra $7,000 or more. Many of these are working farms. Some are owned by retired farmers, now on social security. These farmers cannot afford these additional taxes. They don't have any more time to work to earn an "extra" $7,000. The 'retired' farmers want to live out their golden years on their farms and are past the years of bringing in more income. In Delaware county, a right-to-farm county, these assessments are taxing the farmers right off their farms and lifetime investments.

This is not equity and it is not ethical. I have asked the town board to find a way to delay new assessments until properties are sold, to limit to three percent the amount a property assessment can go up in any one year and to explore all options available to find some waver or provision to help the property owners of Roxbury.

Thus far, I have not received any response.

Elizabeth Estelle,
Roxbury

Lure of farming a powerful draw for Alan White

Stepping down as CCCD director for new career

By Joan Lawrence-Bauer

Goats are bleating. A peacock is wailing. Dogs are barking and the guinea hens chirp. The alpacas just munch and stare. All of this greets you long before Alan White appears at his farm in Halcott Center.

The Executive Director of the Catskill Center for Conservation and Development (CCCD) will retire some time this year to spend more time at Two Stones Farm and when you get there, you quickly understand why. White, and his wife Robin, have taken sustainability to a whole new level with the development of their farm and a heard of "meat goats bred for Catskill Mountain meadows." And though he has made a huge impact on the region during his five years at the helm of CCCD, White is ready to do even more.

RETIREMENT CAREER — Alan White will soon retire as executive director of the Catskill Center for Conservation and Development and pursue his love of farming. — Photo by Joan Lawrence-Bauer

Strong legacy

White's legacy at the Catskill Center is significant. Regional advocacy and cooperation, increased funding, saving the hemlock heritage of the Catskills, introducing solar power to the agency and pushing the City of New York for recreational use of city-owned lands have all been in White's portfolio. And while that would have been enough for many, White can also note with pride, that a Catskill Interpretive Center, on the drawing boards for more than 30 years, is actually being built on his watch.

Seeks agreement

"I have always been concerned that we invest too much in our disagreements," said White on a day of reflection earlier this month. "I tried to get people to pick out a couple of things they could agree on, and work on those things." Getting reservoirs open for recreational use was a major accomplishment, but White sees the need to do more.

"We've worked really hard to advocate for the region," White added. Noting that the Adirondack Park receives significant attention and funding from the state, White said getting that sort of attention for the Catskill Park has been an uphill battle. "We all had to get on the same page here," said White. His efforts paid off well enough that the Catskill Region was recognized with a $500,000 line item in New York State's budget this year.

"It's a first for the region with its Catskill Park and New York City Watershed designations, despite the fact that the Adirondacks has had similar funding for years. White expects $100,000 of the funding to go toward tourism promotion. With the rest, more forest rangers could be hired, a comprehensive recreation plan could be developed, and some land acquisition might also be covered. White hopes there will be spending on better signage and parking at access points to state land, and that areas where hikers are required to cross private land to get to a state trail can be acquired to guarantee access.

White has been among those working to try to get New York City to amend its land acquisition practices in the region. "The results of the acquisition program don't seem to have as much focus on water quality as we might like," said White. "If the city would just buy streams and immediate streamside properties on which they could allow recreational use only, then the water would be protected while at the same time, keeping much of the land adjacent to the streams open."

Though he downplayed it in conversation, anyone driving past the CCCD's offices on Rt. 28 can see solar panels installed on the barn there in 2012.

"I think we have to live our mission," said White of the project.

Extra power

The solar installation not only provides energy for the buildings, but provides enough energy so that the CCCD's electric car can be charged by using solar power. White said the solar installation project actually had two components, one being pragmatic and one being artistic. "One objection people have to solar is the feeling that it doesn't look good. So we worked with a very creative solar installer to create an installation that is fun to look at in addition to being a reliable source of energy.

White doesn't know yet when his replacement will be selected and he's agreed to stay on as long as necessary. But his farm is clearly calling. As he continues to develop the perfect goat for the Catskills, White is now planning an installation for making artisanal cheese in addition to the goat-milk soap and alpaca hats and scarves now produced on the farm. "We're experimenting now with different cheese recipes," said White as he showed where the cheese house will go.

He talks about grass as a never-fail crop the Catskills should be developing and dreams of watching other small farms thrive in sustainable ways. "The big farm concept just doesn't fit the Catskills," says White, who approaches every challenge from a scientific perspective. "But the little farms; we can do that and do it well." He adds, "there is a market for what we have if we can successfully tell the story."

White's storytelling skills are well honed and he's happy to share his philosophy and experience with everyone who visits Two Stones Farm. Though he may be leaving the Catskill Center, he's deeply rooted in the Catskills. To see pictures of the place White calls home, visit twostonesfarm.com and check it out.

County supervisors push for Delaware bed tax funds

Majority approve measure to start taxing visitors

By Cheryl Petersen

Not letting a sleeping dog lie, the Delaware County Board of Supervisors has raised the bed-tax issue again. Approximately a year ago, a majority of the board resolved to implement a two percent hotel occupancy tax in Delaware County. The home rule legislation died at the state level. "Last time the board approved to move forward with a bed tax, my phone was ringing off the hook with people screaming against the tax," said Andes Supervisor Marty Donnelly.

Undaunted, Middletown Supervisor Marge Miller, said, "A bed tax does require more work. Businesses need to track, collect, and pay the tax. It's an issue that makes some hot under the collar, but as supervisors, we have to be able to withstand the heat. We have to be responsible and this tax is needed to promote tourism."

Last year, the Town of Middletown held a forum to educate the public about a bed tax.

Don't want more taxes

Colchester and Deposit supervisors, Art Merrill and Tom Axtell, respectively said they would vote against a bed tax because their constituents were opposed to another tax.

Hancock Supervisor Sam Rowe said, "The language in the resolution lacks a 'whereas.' It should state that most all counties in New York State have a bed tax. This isn't a new tax in the state."

Bovina Supervisor Tine Mole' said, "What Sam Rowe said is correct. The senate majority does feel this is a new tax."

Economic Development Director Glenn Nealis said, "Out of 62 counties in New York State, only a few do not have a bed tax."

Stamford Supervisor Mike Triolo said, "The bed tax is in line with long-range planning for Delaware County. Most of the bed taxes will be paid by people outside our county. The money raised in a bed tax is money we don't have to get by raising property taxes."

"Tourism is what Delaware County has as a source of income, it's our past, present, and future, so we need to be advertising to draw tourists here," said Miller. "Other counties spend up to $1 million in advertising. Delaware County budgets $95,000. We need more money to be competitive and a bed tax is the way to go."

Nealis added, "The estimated return on a two percent bed tax is between $200,000 and $250,000, which helps pay for advertising, but still falls short of what other counties spend."

The vote, on a resolution with the added language that most counties have a bed tax, brought a yes from all towns except Bovina, Colchester, Davenport, and Deposit. Roxbury Supervisor Tom Hynes was absent, recovering from surgery.

The resolution will go before the state committee asking for legislation authorizing Delaware County to propose and pass a bed tax law imposition of two percent.

Coalition news

On a different subject, but still concerning tourism, Alan White, director of the Catskill Center in Arkville, told the board, "A Catskill Coalition has been formed to lobby at the state level for a funding line in the budget. We've received $500,000 this year to be spent on parking lots and signage to enhance and encourage more tourism in the Catskill Park."

The coalition asked the board of supervisors to support a request of $4 million for next year's state budget and received unanimous approval.

Nealis updated the board on a new enterprise zone promotion. "Videos were produced to show and encourage part-time residents in the county the benefits of starting new businesses here locally by using the internet as a marketing tool," said Nealis.

Towns outside the New York City watershed are joining the Friends of the Upper Delaware River Tailwaters Coalition to support the intent to develop and implement science-based initiatives and policies that enhance the local economy, the cold-water fishery and mitigate flooding. The board approved to receive a grant from the State Department of State of nearly $74,000 to develop a voluntary stream corridor management plan.

DEP backs off stance on Shoken farm stand

Waste monitoring proposed solution

By Jay Braman Jr.

Thanks to an idea developed by an engineer hired by the owners of a Shokan-based farm stand, the New York City Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) has backed away from threats to close the business, instead opting to keep tabs on the operation and make sure no water fouling elements escape the property in any other way than by holding tank.

Last week it was reported that DEP warned Greenheart Farms owners Al and Alfie Higley that they were unable to have permission to have their venture at the site of the old Bank of America building on Route 28 just west of Dubois Road in Shokan.

The problem, according to DEP, was that the old bank's septic system was not built to handle the waste from a doughnut-making operation proposed for the premises. Not only that, further review proved the system wasn't really able to handle very much at all. Worse, the property was too small to build a new system that could handle new loads the farm stand would dispose of.

Therefore, DEP said, it was time to cease operations.

But instead, engineer Rex Sanford presented DEP with an offer they could not refuse: no harmful effluent would ever enter the septic system.

Instead, a dedicated area of the store, complete with dedicated plumbing, will be used for the doughnut manufacturing and the waste will be run into a holding tank that would be pumped out periodically. The waste would then be brought to an appropriate facility for disposal. The process is similar to the way automotive garages drain, store, and dispose of motor oil.

This method, known as "pump and haul," has been used in the region by businesses that have inadequate septics, but is usually a temporary measure until a new septic is installed.

"We found a constructive path forward," said DEP spokesman Adam Bosch. "They brought the idea to us."

But, Bosch reminds that with two watercourses flanking the property, it will be watched.

Noting that DEP has "absolute regulatory authority" over what happens on the premises, Bosch says that random water testing, which DEP conducts thousands of times each year all over the watershed, would be the enforcement approach and would reveal any pollutants that make their way into the groundwater.

"We have water quality experts that test the water 250,000 times a year," he said.

Al Higley had no comment on the matter Sunday.

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