

Essex County leaders respond to APRAP
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ELIZABETHTOWN — Essex County officials lauded a recently completed report that shows some troubling statistics for communities in the Adirondacks.

Jim Martin from Landscape Architecture and Engineering gave a presentation to the Essex County Economic Development Committee at their Sept. 14 meeting summarizing the Adirondack Park Regional Assessment Project, which outlines the economic and demographic challenges facing the region.

Using data from local governments and state agencies, researchers compiled charts and color-coded maps showing trends all too familiar to the Adirondack Park: a stagnant, aging population and stifled opportunities for growth.

Martin said that while communities around the edge of the park have shown increases in population, the core communities of the Adirondacks have been steadily losing people.

"The median age is increasing at an exceptionally fast rate," he said, noting the Adirondacks are rivaled only by the west coast of Florida for the oldest residents.

The rising age of people in the park is felt most heavily in the schools, Martin said. The number of K-12 students has fallen 31 percent since 1970. Meanwhile, the number of teachers has risen 43 percent, putting extra stress on communities to produce more revenue through property tax.

Adirondack schools are losing students at a rate of 354 every 18 months, said Martin, the equivalent of one average school district in the Adirondacks.

Martin also pointed to land use as another major issue in the Adirondacks. With more than 40 percent of the park owned by the state, another 20 percent under conservation easement, and another 15 percent already in use, only 15 percent of the land in the Adirondacks is available for development. forty percent of residential parcels are owned by residents with addresses outside the Blue Line.

Unemployment in the region rises to 30 percent during the winter months, said Martin, and even during the summer it is still higher than in the rest of the state.

"This assessment review is incredible," said Robert Dedrick, supervisor of Ticonderoga and chair of the committee. "If we can't use a lot of this data, we should be ashamed of ourselves."

Dedrick said one of the most startling statistics in the report is that less than one half of one percent of the land is used for commercial or industrial purposes.

"Those are the drivers of the local economy," said Martin, noting actively utilized commercial and industrial land requires 30 cents worth of services for every dollar they generate while residential land requires \$1.30. "Having a balance between the two is crucial."

Other supervisors praised the assessment project, saying it points out valuable information that should be brought to the forefront.

"The one number that is really astounding is that 30 percent of the population is in a government job," said Moriah Supervisor Thomas Scozzafava. "How do we get the state legislature to sit down and look at this report and see that the Adirondack Park is different than the rest of the state?"

Martin said Assemblywoman Teresa Sayward had organized a delegation of 25 state legislators to view his presentation in May.

"I think that's an encouraging start," Martin said, noting that the challenge will come in getting representatives to focus on a region with only 130,000 people.

Essex Supervisor Ron Jackson said the state should focus on maintaining a "critical mass" of people in the region.

"Are you going to want to be up on the mountain if there's nobody to come get you if you have a heart attack?" he asked. "It benefits the state to have people up here."

Carol Calabrese, co-director of the Essex County Industrial Development Agency, said enough has been done to ensure environmental conservation within the park, and that government should now shift its focus.

"In my opinion, we need that same commitment at the state and federal levels to preserve the socio-economic sustainability of the Adirondack Park," she said.