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## LAND MATTERS

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### **In Albany, It's Open Season on Open Space Protection**

On January 19, Governor Paterson introduced his proposed budget for the 2010-2011 fiscal year, which starts on April 1. The Governor and our legislators face a daunting task in cobbling together a budget facing a \$7.3 billion deficit, and the Governor's budget inevitably proposes widespread pain across virtually every sector that depends in any measure on State funds. It is nothing short of draconian in its treatment of environmental and open space protection.

Surely, in times like these every good citizen and every interest group must be prepared to take on a fair share of the burden. But why is it that, time and time again, despite fulsome lip service to the importance of conservation,

farmland protection, and a clean environment, our political leaders are so quick to throw these programs overboard whenever cash is short – and even when it's not.

The State's history of miserly support for conservation is incredibly short-sighted, and it places the long term health of New York – economic health as well as environmental health – at serious risk.

### **The Proposed Budget Will Gut Key Conservation Programs**

Most programs face cuts in the single digit range, cuts that will have severe repercussions throughout the state. Just ask our municipal and school leaders about the multitude of problems the cuts threaten right here in Columbia County.

By comparison, the Governor proposes to cut the Environmental Protection Fund (EPF) by one-third. Within the EPF, the Governor proposes to cut funding for farmland protection and waterfront revitalization by 50%; and he proposes to eliminate altogether funding for the acquisition of new forest or parkland.

This proposal threatens to devastate a number of critically important programs that not only work to ensure a clean environment and healthy natural resources, but have a direct impact on the health of the State's economy and its economic future.

The proposal is not entirely surprising. Even in flush financial times, the Governor and the Legislature have a history of raiding funds dedicated to the environment and "borrowing"



from them to meet other needs. Over the years fully \$500 million has been siphoned from the EPF in this manner.

### **Why Is This So Shortsighted?**

What is sadly lacking in Albany is an appreciation of the fundamental importance of conservation and environmental protection to the economic health of New York.

It should be obvious that clean drinking water, clean air, and healthy natural resources are essential to a healthy and vibrant community. Billions of dollars expended to purify or remediate contaminated resources can be

spent on other things if the resources aren't contaminated in the first place.

Agriculture is one of the largest industries in the State, generating \$23 billion a year, employing thousands and stewarding some 7.5 million acres – about one-quarter of the State's land. Plainly, there can be no agriculture without good farmland. There can't be any dispute that the farmland protection program is among the most direct and effective means to assure such land will remain available for farming. In addition to saving good farmland, farm families use the cash generated from the sale of development rights to strengthen and build their operations, thus growing their businesses without taking on debt.

Open space and parkland acquisition also functions as a powerful economic driver. Here in Columbia County, as elsewhere in the State, attracting new businesses is universally acknowledged to be the top public policy priority. One critical factor is establishing that Columbia County is a beautiful and attractive place to live and work. I was told of a major business that recently chose to locate its headquarters in Saratoga. When asked about it, the CEO cited, among other things, the extensive

system of walking trails and bicycle trails, which, in his mind, made the community a really wonderful place to be, affording a high quality of life to employees.

Here at home, we know that the City of Hudson has high hopes for the economic impact of its revitalized waterfront, to make the city more attractive for residents, businesses and tourists alike. On a larger scale, the Columbia Land Conservancy currently has projects that could add more than a thousand really spectacular acres to the State's park and forest holdings, projects that are in the doldrums for lack of EPF funding. We have also for years worked in support of the Harlem Valley Rail Trail and numerous other trail systems under development. Such projects are seriously threatened by inadequate EPF funding.

Many people are talking these days about the importance of tourism as a potential source of economic growth. I like to say that Columbia County compares favorably with any number of world class countryside destinations. People travel to Ireland and the Lake District in England from all over the world to hike, bike our motor through these incredibly beautiful areas. Our ability to capitalize on Columbia County's potential will be directly proportional to the amount of

open space, parkland, farmland, forest land, rail trails, hiking trails, and the like that we are able to develop, as well as our ability to maintain the character of our exceptionally scenic rural countryside.

Don't underestimate the potential of tourism. It's said to be a \$4.7 billion industry in the Hudson Valley as a whole, responsible for some 80,000 jobs. A lot more of these jobs and this money could be coming to Columbia County. Consider this, since October of 2009 – just three months ago – when the spectacular Walkway Over the Hudson between Poughkeepsie and Highland first opened, some 415,000 people have come to experience it, almost all of whom doubtless bought gas, ate dinner and patronized local stores in connection with their visits.

### **It's Not Too Late to Change the Outcome This Year**

Now that the Governor has presented his budget proposal, it's up to the Legislature to review, modify and approve it. The conservation community is urging three things:

- Restore the EPF to the level at which it was funded at the outset of the last fiscal year - \$222 million.

- Remove several "offloads" – i.e. items not historically part of the EPF the Governor proposes to add, by way of further weakening the impact of the fund;
- Develop a long-term plan to repay the \$500 million that has been inappropriately borrowed from the EPF over the years.

Even in hard times it does not seem too much to ask that the State continue to spend less than 1/3 of one percent of its entire budget to keep programs moving forward that are vital to the long term health of our economy and of our natural resources.

If you would like to make your voice heard, be in touch with one or more of our county's legislators: State Senator Stephen Saland (<http://www.nysenate.gov/>); and Assemblymen Marcus Molinaro, Pete Lopez and Tim Gordon (<http://assembly.state.ny.us/>). Contact information is easily available at the listed web sites.

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