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LAND MATTERS

Help Bring Down The Cost Of Medical Care: Take A Hike!

Two articles on the front page of the Register-Star's weekend edition for February 20-21, 2010 caught my eye. One announced widespread closings and service restrictions in parks and historic sites throughout the state, including Columbia County, as a result of the severe budget cuts currently under discussion in Albany. The other described a recent study of the health of New York residents by the University of Wisconsin's Population Health Institute and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, which ranked Columbia County 45th in overall health (and Greene County 59th) out of 62 counties in the entire state.

At first blush, these issues may seem unrelated, and they are indeed distinct in many ways. But there is at least one way in which these stories have to do with each other.

An important cause of poor health today among people of all ages is lack of exercise. One of the simplest and least expensive ways to address that is by encouraging people to actively enjoy the outdoors. It is counter-productive to be cutting back on public park space and recreational opportunities at a time we are facing a serious public health challenge rooted in important part in poor physical fitness of many people.

These stories also serve to highlight important assets the Columbia Land Conservancy

provides to this community – a county-wide park system that's going to be here this year whatever happens to the state budget, strong programs to encourage young and old alike to get out into and make connections with the natural world and numerous opportunities to do just that.

The Threat to Columbia County Parks Sites

I devoted last month's column to a discussion of Governor Paterson's proposed cuts to the Environmental Protection Fund (EPF). I noted that cuts in parks funding could directly affect Columbia County's state park resources, with negative impacts to our economy in lost tourist dollars and to our quality of life.



Since then, as the recent front page article made clear, the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP) has published a list of the facilities slated for closing or cuts in services, and we can see the stark reality. The Olana State Historic Site, a premier Columbia County attraction that draws substantial tourist trade to the community, will close two days a week. There is as well a serious prospect that the swimming season at one of our most popular beaches, Lake Taghkanic State Park, will be reduced and that the Clermont

State Historic Site will be closed. Taconic State Park at Rudd Pond, an excellent canoeing and kayaking destination on our immediate border with Dutchess County, is also slated to close, as are Schodack Island and Hudson River Islands State Parks, immediately contiguous to our north and west.

Although Columbia County has a very high amount of open space per capita, we have less publicly available park land than any of our neighboring counties. Given our relatively limited amount of public land, the prospect of cutting back on those state parks we do enjoy poses particularly hard burdens. It's apparent from the list of scheduled and threatened cut-backs that if they are all implemented, we stand to lose a meaningful chunk of the limited but really wonderful public park land and recreational facilities that are available here, not to mention an important portion of our tourist trade.

The Need to Encourage Physical Fitness

The University of Wisconsin Health survey is thought provoking. It reports, among

other things, that 27% of Columbia County residents are obese. Moreover, we ranked 58 out of 62 counties in premature death rates, a reference to deaths before the age of 75. The article reports that the County Health Department has done its own study and made similar findings.

The conveniences of modern life have brought many blessings, to be sure, but they have led to a drastically diminished level of physical activity for almost all of us. There's no question that lack of exercise is a primary factor in poor health statistics.

One very simple and pleasant way to address issues of excess weight and lack of exercise is to get out into the beautiful world we inhabit here and take a long walk – and do it often.

It works.

Two years ago, a young man in Chatham was told by his doctor that he was morbidly overweight, needed gastric bypass surgery, and had to change his diet and lifestyle or risk a very premature death. He decided to punt on the surgery, and set out instead on a daily mile-and-a-half walk at Sutherland Pond, one of CLC's

great Public Conservation Areas on Rock City Road. In two years, he's missed only four or five days.

At first, it took him more than an hour, with several stops along the way, to make the circuit. Two years, later, and 143 pounds lighter, he now does three laps covering six miles, in the same amount of time. (He's also given up fast food and cooks fresh and healthy food for himself now.) In the bargain, he's developed a strong interest in and love for the natural world he now enjoys every day, and he's saved a bundle and a lot of aggravation by foregoing the surgery.

Resources Provided by the Columbia Land Conservancy

CLC operates what is in effect a public park system here in Columbia County. We have nine sites, which we call Public Conservation Areas (PCAs), almost 2,000 acres in all, open to the public without charge dawn to dusk, 365 days a year, to get out into and make connections with the natural world. We also sponsor a number of programs to introduce people to these sites and to provide instruction on a wide range of topics relating to

nature and the environment. Whatever happens to the State parks this year – and we are hoping and working for the best in that regard – our PCAs will be open for business as usual. It is our hope that they will become important recreational resources for more and more people, including those who are working to improve their physical health.

More information about each of these sites, together with directions and trail maps, as well as information about our programs can be found at www.clctrust.org. When you get to the parking areas, there will be a kiosk with trail maps and other information to make your visit more enjoyable.

Go on, get out there and take a hike!

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