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EDITORIAL

Whose land is it anyway?

Recently, we've been telling you about various concerns we've had about its managers' ability to protect the Upper Delaware's water. It's time to find out whether the Upper Delaware resource protection concept is going to work on the land.

If you thought that issue had been put to rest over the past decade and a half, think again.

Hard economic times have made sheer survival the issue and put the rights of private property and the general public interest, often opposing philosophies, on the back burner for government and property owners. Since their union in the 1988 River Management Plan for the Upper Delaware Scenic and Recreational River, the two have coasted along together like a soap bubble above a quiet pond for close to 15 years now.

No one really had any money. No one especially wanted the land for anything else, so the experiment of running a national park (pardon the expression) solely on local zoning and property owners' good will floated along.

But times and economic situations change and a remote river valley located 100 miles away from the metropolis is not likely to remain remote forever.

The valley rode the general upturn in the national economy before the recessionary impacts of last September's terror attacks. The area had started to become "trendy," and we found our hamlets and boroughs named in those glossy magazines who determine just what trendy means.

But unlike much of the country, the valley's economy was furthered spurred by the September tragedy, when thousands of urban dwellers soon after decided a rural lifestyle might be interesting and Governor Pataki decided he could no longer live without casino gaming in Sullivan County. After a long dry spell, people had money again and they want the land in this valley.

There is money singing all over this valley these days. We've all heard the loudest voices, those of the performing arts center projects, casino and resort developers. Big money voices tend to take center stage, but you can bet there will be a swelling chorus of supporting singers in smaller subdivision projects, construction and business proposals to provide the

harmony.

And where will they go in our often narrow valley, where most of the good land has been settled for generations. These folks won't be buying the Jones' old place to fix it up for weekends, they'll be buying the grown-over Smith farm, subdividing it and putting up neo-Victorian clone houses... or they will buy the hunting club's side-hill piece and put up clustered townhouses to overlook the river.

Realtor Davis Chant said it recently when he predicted a housing boom like this area has never dreamed of. Money will raise a hallelujah chorus. Will it be a siren song that draws the Upper Delaware experiment down or will it adjust to the rhythm of the valley?

How will local governments, long strapped for growth in their tax bases, react to the enticing music? Will our zoning and subdivision ordinances protect the river?

Should they? Should the cost of protection of the resource be solely left on back of the property owner? Is there a public obligation to protect the qualities that got the river considered in the first place?

Should federal purchase of development easements be encouraged in sensitive areas like the ridgelines near the Hawks Nest or opposite the Zane Grey Museum and the Roebing Bridge, where we have already seen the results of leaving aesthetics "to the goodness of property owners," as the current river plan directs.

While most people familiar with the plan readily admit the need for updating its provisions, the Upper Delaware Council (UDC) is currently breezing through a mandated review of the River Management Plan, attempting to avoid the renewal of bitter 1980's conflicts.

The problem is the conflicts between private property and the public interest are still right where planners left them years ago, and now we have a local economy that will not hide these conflicts any longer.

If the UDC and the river's federal managers at the National Park Service do not seriously examine alternatives for protecting this resource during this review, they will not have the same resource to consider when it's time to review again.

David Hulse, News Editor

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