

Making Things Happen

Collaborative Meeting Eyes New Efforts to Revive Catskills Interpretive Center

by Charlie Blumstein

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The recently completed Town Hall in picturesque Andes was the location of the March meeting of the Central Catskills Collaborative (CCC), a group of representatives from seven municipalities along the NYS Rt. 28 corridor. The CCC is an inter-municipal coalition formed under the encouragement of Peter Manning, Regional Planner of the Catskill Center for Conservation and Development (CCCD) in order to protect and promote the assets of the corridor and advance projects for the economic benefit of the Central Catskills region. Two members each from the Towns of Hurley, Olive, Shandaken, Middletown, Andes and the Villages of Fleischmanns and Margaretville have been meeting on the fourth Thursday of each month in the various member towns in order to advance a regional dialogue and take action to develop a regional identity which can be used to gain a stronger footing when negotiating various issues with the state or other large entities. The CCC has developed grant proposals and initiated action plans that will help the towns and villages along the Rt. 28 corridor develop in a manner that is appropriate and beneficial to this unique and beautiful region although some of the funding has been temporarily frozen due to state deficits. In response, the CCCD and CCC are seeking new ways to collaborate by sharing materials, services and resources that are already budgeted and can be directed towards achieving goals at a much lower cost.

Supervisor Martin Donnelly and some of his staff of the Town of Andes, a CCC member, graciously provided a pizza smorgasbord for the meeting which featured a presentation by several members of the executive committee of Friends of the Catskill Interpretive Center (FCIC), an organization founded in 2003 and now with over 220 members who are dedicated to the realization of the long deferred construction of the Catskill Interpretive and Visitors Center, first planned and funded by New York State Dept. of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC) in the mid-1980s. A collaboration of NYSDEC, community members, local business leaders, political representatives and the Catskill Center for Conservation and Development (CCCD) during the 1990s led to the idea and concepts for the Catskill Interpretive Center to be similar in function to the interpretive and visitor centers found at the gateway to many areas of significant geological, historical and cultural interest such as the Adirondack Park which features 2 visitor centers funded by NYS. As a result of the collaboration, plans were funded by NYSDEC in the 1990s and a 62 acre parcel of land on NYS Rt.28 in Mount Tremper was purchased by the CCCD and The Trust for Public Land and then leased to NYSDEC, which then funded significant site work including construction of the now

infamous Bridge to Nowhere leading to the project site on Rt. 28 in Mt. Tremper as well as providing ongoing funding for maintenance of the site which continues to the present day .

At approximately the same time the project site and plans were funded (1995), then Gov. George Pataki, facing a significant fiscal deficit, focused his then limited resources on encouraging the City of New York and the watershed towns west of the Hudson river to come up with an agreement to resolve some of the longstanding problems posed to the towns of the region by the presence of the NYC reservoir system. The creation of the Catskill Watershed Corporation (CWC) and the Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) took the bulk of the funding available for use in the region at that time and The Catskill Interpretive Center was put on hold until recently when NYS appropriated 1 million to revise the plans in order to ensure a more green environmentally responsible design, utilize modern information technologies to help update the interpretive exhibits and presumably revive the project. Recent NYS fiscal problems have put this appropriation in question and members of the Executive Committee of the FCIC are scheduled to meet with Willy Janeway, Director, Region 3, NYSDEC in the near future to receive an update as to when the funding might be restored and see if the process can be facilitated with help from the FCIC.

Jim Infante, Secretary of The Friends of the Catskill Interpretive Center organization presented a comprehensive and compelling slide show that details the history and current status of the project which can be viewed at the FCIC website, www.catskillinterpretivecenter/goals.org .

Included in the online slide show are portions of the renderings and plans of the proposed center made by the NYSDEC which features extensive interpretive exhibits highlighting areas such as The Forest Preserve, Making a Living, Water for the Big Apple, Americas First Wilderness, Byways of Commerce, Inventing Tourism and Forever Wild. A small theatre, auditorium, library, classroom, media gallery , book store and an office/ reception area figure prominently in the original plans from 1995. Brochures of local museums, attractions, food and lodging would also be featured, thereby serving as an entry portal to the many unique but often unknown and hard to find features and amenities found in the Catskill region.

Infante said that the primary purpose of The Catskill Interpretive Center is to celebrate the natural and cultural assets of the Catskills; interpret these, certainly for residents but especially for visitors and lastly and to my mind very importantly to be a public entry point to attract visitors to the Catskill Park and Forest Preserve. The Forest Preserve is three hundred thousand acres of beautiful land, beautiful trails, great facilities but there is no entry point where people can come to inform themselves about the trails, fishing, and amenities such as the unique but not well known small museums, historical

societies, restaurants and hotels in the area. I think the region is unique and unusual and there is a great deal to be said about it. He also noted that The Catskill Park is the second largest park in the state of New York and unlike most National and State parks, does not have a center to serve local residents and tourists.

Infante also emphasized that the Interpretive Center should be a public facility with free access, strategically located within the Catskill Park and Forest Preserve and be a provider of educational and interpretive programs for the Park and Forest Preserve. In comparing the potential usage of the proposed Catskill Visitors Center to the two Visitor Centers located in the Adirondack Park and Forest Preserve, Infante pointed out that the 2 Adirondack Visitor Centers receive 120,000 visitors a year and said that the original projections made by the NYSDEC were for 150,000 visitors per year at the proposed Catskill Interpretive Visitors Center. Infante also said that he believes that the proposed Center could draw even more than that due to the close proximity of the NYC metropolitan area. In closing his portion of the presentation, Infante emphasized the 3 major goals of the FCIC which includes demonstrating to the political leadership of NYS that the project is a priority for the region and that the surrounding Towns and the Counties of Ulster and Delaware have passed resolutions in support of the project to help assure NYS that it is indeed a priority for the region, convince the leadership to appropriate capital funds for the construction of the facility including funding for operations and maintenance and finally to raise 1.75 million of the budget through fundraising by the FCIC making it a public-private partnership that would be of great benefit to the region.

Sherret Chase, Chair of the FCIC said that My hope is that the Interpretive Center will not only serve all of the public functions that come to mind, but will also be very much a place that local people will treasure, a place that they could find pleasant to have small and large meetings and concerts in while at the same time also serving the economic function of facilitating people who come to the region from the outside. He added that Many meaningful jobs would result during the construction process. This project is essentially shovel ready and is as worthy of public monies as any project that I know of. We need political support to push it through and get it going. We will be meeting with NYSDEC Region 3 Director Willy Janeway next week to find out where we stand and whether the project can be revived

Olive Town Board member Helen Chase, CCC representative from Olive and an Executive Bd. Member of the FCIC emphasized the importance of retaining both the small and large auditoriums in the revised plans to provide meeting space for the local communities as well as the larger region.

Robert Selkowitz, CCC representative from Olive and an Executive Bd. Member of FCIC suggested the possibility of doing a smaller but complementary project in the meantime such as an information kiosk that could be made by the Shokan Boy Scouts, Troop 63 who are in the early planning stages of a timber frame structure project that will benefit a public space within the Town of Olive in the near future. He cited a similar project that was carried out with a very low budget using donated materials at the Community Center in the neighboring hamlet of Accord, Town of Rochester a few years ago. Selkowitz felt that locating the kiosk at the site of the proposed linear picnic park on Rt. 28 in Shokan or even at the Visitor Center site itself in Mt. Tremper would serve to direct both visitors and local residents to the areas many amenities. He felt it important that something be done concretely while waiting for the larger project funding to materialize.

All of the FCIC Board members expressed the idea that the State has already made a substantial investment of time, money and effort which demonstrates that the State believes that the project would be a good investment of State resources. Essentially, the State has been a committed partner, in the view of the FCIC board members in attendance at the meeting.

Membership in the Friends of Catskill Interpretive Center organization is free and more information about the group, its history and mission can be found at www.catskillinterpretivecenter.org

In other CCC news, Peter Manning said The CCC is moving forward in other areas of its broader mission and we are expecting a favorable outcome on the grant application submitted to the CWC for the preparation of a corridor management plan for the nomination of Rt. 28 as a Scenic Byway. Designation of St. Rt. 28 by NYS as a Scenic Byway will allow the CCC to apply for NYS funded community improvement grants only available to Towns situated along a NYS Scenic Byway.

The next meeting and presentation of the Central Catskills Collaborative will be held at the Olive Town Hall, Bostock Rd., Shokan on Thursday, April 23 at 6pm with details and agenda to be announced.