

Our Back Yard

by Elliott Auerbach, *Village Manager, Ellenville*

(The following represents the views of the author solely, and not necessarily those of *Wawarsing.Net* or the *Chamber of Commerce*.)

The \$aga Of \$am's Point – First The Test, Then The Lesson

By the subtitle of this article, it probably sounds like it belongs in last month's issue devoted to our local school. This test, and its subsequent lesson, are from the school of life and is an exercise in patience and persistence. Today's assignment asks you to study the "saga of Sam's Point." It specifically offers an historical glimpse at the past decade (yes, that's ten years in human life) and a seminar in bureaucratic baloney. The chronology and ancient details are loosely based on personal recollections and notes. The present conclusion, however, is irrevocable.

In the early 1990s, the Palisades Interstate Parks Commissioner, Nash Castro, met with Ellenville officials in an attempt to gain control of approximately 4800 acres of Village-owned land in Cragmoor known as **Sam's Point**. How and why the Village ended up with this pristine tract of land is a lesson for another day. However, the Village's surface water source, **Lake Maratanza** (one of those mysterious sky lakes), and 150-200 acres of water distribution were part of the vast tract. The then Village Board indicated an interest in the transfer but the deal is clouded by a thirty-year-old agreement with Fred Grau, who is the lessee of *Ice Caves Mountain* (billed as the eighth wonder of the world).

In steps Open Space Institute (OSI), engineering a deal with Grau (for an undisclosed sum) and offers the Village of Ellenville \$3,000,000 (plus or minus) for "the mountain." In addition, OSI ensures the Village that the property would be "forever wild" and transferred to Palisades Interstate Parks Commission (PIPC) who will then pay yearly property taxes on this huge parcel.

(So now, if you are a Village official, you have just walked away with a cool \$3 million bucks to put in the bank, earn interest and be able to reinvest 75% of the earnings back into your community every year. You also thought you just put 4000-plus acres back on the tax rolls and generated a yearly income for the Village, the Town of Wawarsing, the Ellenville Central School District, the Ellenville/Wawarsing Fire District, and Ulster County.)

Of course, none of this came easily. A series of public hearings, dozens of workshops and meetings, special consideration and review by layers of agencies, and, finally, a deal is struck in the late 90s. OSI brings in The Nature Conservancy (TNC) to steward the property and begin a transition from the honky-tonk *Ice Caves Mountain* days

(remember Grau's miniature golf course?) to a park-like setting that would surpass **Minnewaska** and rival **Mohonk**. Concurrently, it was assumed that OSI was working feverishly to transfer title to PIPC.


The Village fathers (and there were mothers on the Board, also) trustingly believed that this was being orchestrated and expected, somewhere around 1999, to have this tax-paying entity added to the rolls. Four years later, can you guess what has happened (or what has not)?

Fast forward to 2003 and realize the Village, Town, School, and Fire District have collectively lost nearly \$1.9 million in revenue (according to figures supplied by John Stanger). Oh, and remember the \$3,000,000? With interest rates so low, and a 75% reinvestment factor, the Village's yield is somewhere around \$67,500.

Now OSI and TNC are not the bad guys in this deal. They sincerely portray themselves as anxious supporters of the transfer to PIPC. TNC, in particular, has proven itself to be a good warden of the property and an excellent protector of its fragile eco-system. OSI has feebly attempted to coerce the transfer, but has been more passive than aggressive. The true perpetrator is PIPC, with OSI and TNC each playing the unwitting accomplice.

In a recent response to the Village's early August "how are we doing" letter, present State Parks Commissioner Bernadette Castro (of Castro Convertible fame) did not offer much relief. She assured the municipality that the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation was "doing every thing possible to complete the purchase." She went on to say that "negotiations with OSI have been complex and are not complete yet" (after all, it's been only four years).

Commissioner Castro shared her understanding "that the delay has negatively affected the tax burden on the people of Ellenville" (that's almost \$2,000,000 in lost tax revenue). Finally, she closed by saying (don't feel bad, this will make it all better) "as proof to our commitment... we have approved a grant for the sum of \$350,000 to the new Visitor Center on the 800 acres being reserved for OSI" (and that does what for "the people of Ellenville" and their tax burden?).

So much for the test, stay tuned for the lesson. 

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