

Shawangunk master plan is afoot

Eco-tourism as 'fabulous draw'

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State park preserves are not often associated with business interests, but in the lower Hudson Valley the Minnewaska State Park is both a unique ecological niche and a vital cog in the region's economic engine.

Now New York state is embarking on a new master plan for the 20,000-acre park atop the Shawangunk Ridge. As the plan advances, the state wants to hear from residents, business owners and visitors.

The business angle is clear. "Eco-tourism is a fabulous draw to this area," said Joyce Minard, president of the New Paltz Regional Chamber of Commerce.

She cited the seamless ridge-top cooperation of Minnewaska State Park and the adjacent 6,000-acre nonprofit Mohonk Preserve as key economic forces in the area.

"Their being there helps this region tremendously," Minard said. "Without them and our agriculture tourism and cultural events, this town would be very small. A lot of our local retail businesses I know depend on tourism for their existence."

From Gardiner, New Paltz and Rosendale on the east and Rochester, Wawarsing

and Marbletown on the western slopes, the dramatic Shawangunk Mountain ridge looms over the mid-Hudson, a geological entity twice-removed, so to speak. The ridge is a separate entity from the nearby Catskill Mountains and the Catskills are a separate rogue range independent of the Appalachian Mountains.

Three thousand-feet above sea level at its highest point, the Shawangunk terrain is rugged and rocky with spectacular rock formations, soaring ledges, streams, lakes waterfalls and stands of trees ranging from dwarf pines to hemlocks. But the ecology is extremely fragile, with poor soils that are easily eroded and not easily replaced.

Minnewaska State Park is in the center of the ridge. The facility is officially a state park preserve, so the state seeks to prevent damage that would undermine the mission of maintaining the park and its environs as a natural habitat. Though the park last year hosted a quarter-million visitors, the parking area is relatively small.

Thus, on many summer or fall weekends, the parking lots quickly fill up and visitors are denied entrance until enough cars leave. Minard advocates for a better system, using shuttle buses running on a frequent loop from the Thruway to alleviate traffic in the valley and disappointment on the ridge.

"We need buses from the Thruway

exit 18," said Minard, referring to the New Paltz exit. "But they need to publicize it well throughout the state as part of the I Love New York campaign. And they need to run it often, a continuous loop so that people aren't worried about being stuck at the parking area or on top of the mountain when they want to go."

Minard said such a plan has been discussed and was even tried once, but was not publicized and didn't generate enough riders to be economically viable. And she said that ideally, the bus "would have a couple of stops along the way, so people could get off and enjoy downtown, historic Huguenot Street, the restaurants."

"It's something we can look at," said Eric Humphrey, manager of Minnewaska Park. He said the advantages would be that no parking spaces would be needed for a bus, while acknowledging there would be some expense to create a viable bus stop. He said there would need to be discussion about whether a full-sized bus would be best, or a mini-bus and how often such buses would run, and at whose expense. But he said there is plenty of additional capacity for visitors at Minnewaska, if steps are taken to reduce the congestion around Lake Minnewaska itself. "There's miles and miles out there," said Humphrey.

The park is staffed by 20 full-time employees and a host of seasonal employees

who work part time throughout the busy spring to leaf-peeping season. Defying predictions of people coming to the area to get away without going too far, Humphrey said attendance is down "substantially" from last year a fact he suspects is related to gasoline costs.

Humphrey said the state is aware of the Shawangunk Ridge's importance to eco-tourism. "We need to look at how we are affecting all the local communities and develop partnerships with the local chambers of commerce and see what they need," he said.

At least one business owner doesn't want the state to change a thing. Art Rifenbary of Mountain Meadows Bed and Breakfast near the ridge said that of the B&B's roughly 600 annual bookings, three-quarters of them journey to Minnewaska. "And they absolutely love it," Rifenbary said. "Lake Minnewaska is doing a real fine job."

Humphrey said until August 11, the state is accepting written input on the so-called scoping aspect of its master planning process. Comments can be sent to Mark Hohengasser, Planning Bureau, Agency Building One, Empire State Plaza, Albany, NY 12238 or e-mailed to mark.hohengasser@oprhp.state.ny.us.

A draft master plan is due for release in January 2009.