

# On Edge

By Vanessa Geneva Ahern

## Will a proposed resort development in the Catskill Mountains threaten New York City's watershed?

As I drive along scenic State Route 28 on my way to the Emerson Resort and Spa in Mt. Tremper, New York, I see dueling signs: "Save the Mountain," "More Jobs, Less Taxes," and "Support the Belleayre Resort."

The duel started eight years ago, when Crossroads Ventures, the same developer that built the Emerson, proposed to build the Belleayre Resort, a five-star, 1,960-acre resort development in Catskill Park, New York, about 100 miles north of New York City—and on the edge of New York City's massive watershed.

Supporters liked the idea of boosting the area's struggling tourist-based economy. Detractors formed a coalition to oppose the massive scale of the project.

After six years of dispute, former Gov. Elliot Spitzer and Judith Enck, New York State's deputy secretary for the environment, brought all parties to the table to agree on a smaller alternative. After another nine months of tough negotiations, a compromise was reached in September 2007 in the form of an Agreement in Principle.

Joan Lawrence-Bauer, media relations director of Crossroad Ventures, explains that the parties are now analyzing environmental impacts. Once that is done, another public hearing will take place and, presumably, the permitting process can begin. Bauer says the developer hopes for a public hearing by the end of the year.

"The project still has to go through an extremely rigorous and stringent environmental review process," says Deborah DeWan of the Catskill Center for Conservation and Development. According to DeWan, who took part in the negotiations, the agreement made it possible to save an ecologically sensitive, 1,240-acre section in the eastern portion of the mountains. This area would be protected and incorporated into the Catskill forest preserve as

forever wild—off limits to all development.

Bauer says the only exception will be a small bit of land that is already developed. "The exact number of acres that will go into the forest preserve is 1,216, and this will be protected by the state constitution," she says.

"This is huge," she adds. "They had originally proposed, on that very site, a major development with golf courses, a hotel complex, hundreds of time shares on steep slopes, miles of new roads that would endanger the Esopus Creek." The downsized version of the proposed resort represents a 52 percent reduction in acres that will be disturbed.

### Location, location

The Belleayre property is located in the Catskill Mountains, where 90 percent of New York City's water comes from. The Pepacton Reservoir, which provides a quarter of that amount, is nine miles from the Belleayre development site.

In general, the city draws its water from three big reservoir systems that are located outside the city limits. This arrangement goes back to the 19th century, when the city began acquiring both land and water bodies and then built aqueducts to ensure a constant supply of fresh water.

Carolyn Zolas, watershed chair of the Sierra Club's Atlantic chapter, explains that Save the Mountain, a group that opposes the Belleayre agreement, wants to save New York City's watershed from encroaching development. Otherwise, the water originating in the Catskills may have to be filtered, she says.

New York City's water currently is treated with chlorine, and the portion in the Kensico Reservoir in Westchester County is treated with agents to counteract turbidity. The only part of the water supply that is under a filtration order is the Croton watershed, which is located just

north of the city and provides 10 percent of its water, Zolas says. The city is building a filtration plant, located in Van Cortlandt Park in the Bronx, at an estimated cost of \$2.8 billion.

Save the Mountain believes that giving Belleayre a green light will invite more development, and it fears that anything not designated "forever wild" could be destroyed.

If approved, as proposed under its current agreement with the state, Belleayre will cost an estimated \$400 million and require 640 acres of land. Features would include a 250-room hotel; a 120-room spa resort; an 18-hole golf course (which will require 135 acres); two parking garages; indoor and outdoor pools; a conference center, and a ski-in/ski-out entrance.

Gary Gailes, project development and management specialist for Crossroads Ventures, says this development will vastly improve the region's economy. "It's very difficult for local businesses to survive because there is very little activity between Monday and Friday," says Gailes, citing Census Bureau and tax records showing that weekenders own more than half the housing units between Middletown and Shandaken.

Statistics from the Ulster County Chamber of Commerce indicate that in 2006, tourism provided 13,384 jobs in the Catskills and generated \$58 million in local taxes and \$46 million in state taxes. Lisa Berger, director of marketing and group sales for Ulster County Tourism, reports that the county has seen slow but steady growth within the past two years. "Sales, employment, and tax revenue have been increasing at a very nice, steady rate of six to eight percent a year," she says.

Scott Shannon, AICP, associate professor in the Department of Landscape Architecture at SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry, says that water quality is always a hot



*New York City draws its water from sources beyond its borders—including those more than 100 miles away.*

issue, particularly in rural areas, where development often raises red flags. “The major issues tend to focus on three areas: increased sediment and turbidity due to erosion, elevated bacterial levels from a variety of sources, or fertilizer and pesticide runoff from both agricultural and domestic sources,” he says.

Shannon notes that good solutions to water quality problems do exist, but that it is difficult to get developers to use best management or design practices. DeWan agrees, saying that the coalition had a tough time convincing the developer to commit to LEED silver certification standards.

### Blank slate

On our way to the site of the Belleayre Resort and Highmount Spa, Gailes, Bauer, and I veer off Route 28 to drive through the town of Pine Hill (population 387), noting all the for sale signs. Would a five-star mega resort complex improve the quality of life here or create a myriad of new problems like traffic, an affordable housing shortage, light pollution, and water pollution?

My guides don’t like the word “mega.”

“The comparisons that are being made in

terms of ‘mega’ resort and ‘mega’ development are inappropriate because what is proposed here won’t even begin to replace what was already here in the 1950s and 1960s, let alone turn of the century,” says Bauer, referring to the old Catskill Mountain resorts that fell out of favor decades ago.

Bauer names the Winwood Inn at Windham and the Kaatskill Mountain Club at Hunter as examples of recently built luxury resorts that have bolstered their local economies. Both are located within the New York City watershed.

After a bumpy, 10-minute off-road ride in Gailes’s Jeep, we arrive at the future site of the Highmount Hotel and Spa. The site is raw and woody, and Bauer explains that many of the trees here are about 50 years old, not virgin timber, and many will remain. “The whole concept of this part of the resort is to maintain the serenity of the countryside. To try to turn it into a Disney would defeat your purpose,” says Bauer.

She also notes that of the 167 acres allocated to Highmount, 147 acres will remain undeveloped. Of the rest, about 10 acres will be covered by impervious surfaces—the hotel, detached lodging units, interior roads, and driveways—and

another 10 acres will be used for ski trails and chair lifts.

Gailes adds that the parcels Crossroads is targeting for development, including Highmount, do not front on any perennial streams and that precautions will be taken to safeguard New York City’s water supply.

### Urge to grow

Mary Beth Silano, president of the Delaware County Chamber of Commerce, wants to see hotel rooms come back. “One thing Delaware County lacks is the number of rooms to house our visitors,” she says. “We need more beds in order to draw tourists.” Silano says she believes visitors will go exploring, canoeing, and antiquing—spending their money throughout the area.

Zolas looks at the area’s history through a different prism. “In the 1800s, the logging industry cut down most of the virgin forest in that area. The tanning and charcoal industry took what was left, and wildlife disappeared. It was during this time that the huge hotels and spas were built. Do we want to create that environmental disaster again?” asks Zolas.

In recent years, the trees have grown back, the Catskills are now 70 percent forested, and the EPA has allowed New York City to avoid installing a new filtration system—at least for now. Zolas wants to keep things that way. “Groundwater is connected to surface water, the head waters of the Ashokan, the Pepacton. It’s all connected,” she says.

Shannon notes, however, that there are planning options. “Incorporating good planning and design using concepts like low-impact development can mitigate most of the more egregious impacts of even large developments like the Belleayre proposal,” he says.

### Going green

What does mitigation involve? DeWan answers by saying the coalition succeeded in protecting the watershed in at least two ways. “The eastern portion of the land that is off the table is critical in protecting the water,” she says. “What is going to be developed has stormwater management that far exceeds the city and state requirements.”

She adds: “Hopefully, if and when something is built, it will reflect something that does not overwhelm the Catskills. The Catskills is really a jewel sandwiched between two giants, New York City and the Adirondacks, and it really does need all our efforts to stay as special as it is.”

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