



## From Sketch to Substance: Making the Catskill Interpretive Center a Reality

by **Sherret Spaulding Chase**

Chairman,  
Friends of the Catskill Interpretive Center

"to interpret" - to explain the meaning of; to make understandable; to have or to show one's own understanding of the meaning of; to bring out the meaning of.

"interpretive" - designed or used to explain.

Why do the Catskills need interpretation? What is special about this region of New York State? What is to be gained economically, culturally, and socially by better understanding of the region?

The Catskill Region is that dissected upland plateau, an ancient peneplain, west of the Hudson, south of the Mohawk, northeast of the Delaware River between Pennsylvania and New York, and ill-defined to the west in the drainage basin of the East Branch of the Susquehanna river. It provides headwaters for the East Branch of the Susquehanna, the Neversink, and both East and West Branches of the Delaware, the southern tributaries of the Mohawk River, and many tributaries of the Hudson.

By local expression of sense of place leading to legislative decision, the Region comprises six and a half counties - these being Greene, Ulster, Sullivan, Delaware, Otsego, Schoharie, and the six southwestern hill towns of Albany County.



It is a region of mixed loyalties; of defensive "home rule" town by town; of substantial state ownership of Forest Preserve lands in the four southern "Catskill Park" counties - Greene, Ulster, Sullivan, and Delaware; of substantial New York City (Department of Environmental Protection) reservoirs and watershed lands in Greene, Ulster, Sullivan, Delaware, and Schoharie Counties.

The divide between the Hudson drainage and the Delaware once separated the Algonquin tribes on the south and east from the Iroquois on the north and west. Later, the same boundary separated settlers of Dutch and Huguenot descent from

those of German and New England origins. Today the region provides home and place for a multitude of religious and ethnic groups and free thinkers. The New York State Department of Environmental Conservation divides us between two regions, the state Department of Transportation among three. The Federal Government classifies us as partly in "Appalachia," partly out. We have many state senators and assembly representatives, most with districts that extend beyond the Catskills. There are in the region more than two hundred historical societies and local museums.

Of key importance is the Catskill Park.

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**Welcome to the comeback issue of the Catskill Heritage Alliance newsletter. We promise to publish it four times a year. You'll note that we've given the newsletter a new name. *MountainWatch* reflects our dedication to keeping a protective eye on the central Catskills as we simultaneously look for new opportunities that will keep life vital for the people who live here and visit here.**

## Development Lowers Biodiversity, Raising Risk of Lyme Disease

A recent biological study, with serious implications for land use policy, has concluded that breaking up wilderness by developing it raises the risk of Lyme disease, already highly prevalent in the Northeast. The study, first published in January, 2003 in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, found that the loss of biodiversity that results from development increases the proportionate prevalence of white-footed mice, the species that is "most competent" at infecting the ticks that bring Lyme disease to humans. Conclusion? To the numerous

health risks that can result when wilderness is developed - threats to clean air and water, for example - add that of direct infection by a debilitating disease. It's a sobering thought for a region of the country where open agricultural areas, continuous forests, and just about any other kind of open space are fast being broken up for high-end housing, hotels and resorts, and recreational facilities.

The study, "The ecology of infectious disease: Effects of host diversity and community composition on Lyme disease risk," was conducted by a team of scientists

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**Biodiversity** (from page 1)

from around the country under the auspices of the Institute of Ecosystem Studies in Millbrook, New York. The aim was to test the Dilution Effect model conceived by team member Rick Ostfeldt. Ostfeldt's model predicted that since the ubiquitous white-footed mice are the "best" reservoir of Lyme spirochetes, diluting the effect of the mice would lower the risk of the disease.

To test the model, the team studied 13 different tick-hosting species over two years, calculating how many infected ticks each species contributed. Some hosts, like squirrels, carried and fed a lot of ticks but rarely infected them with the Lyme disease spirochete. White-footed mice, on the other hand, proved to be "the most competent reservoirs" of Lyme disease spirochetes; they hosted a great number of ticks and infected virtually all of them. Where species diversity was low, these mice predominated, and the risk of disease infection was high. But when the community was rich in species diversity - with squirrels, shrews, possums, and raccoons as well as mice - the ticks responded by seeking a range of hosts, including those hosts "incompetent" at spreading the disease. The biodiversity diluted the effect of the mice, and the risk of Lyme disease went down dramatically.

**Fragmented Environments Pose Risk**

And what makes a community poor in species diversity? The answer is simple: the "degradation of the environment by fragmentation." In other words, sprawling, large-scale development.

In fact, according to study author Dr. Kathleen LoGiudice of Union College, the smaller the fragment, the greater the risk of disease. A densely populated town or village, says LoGiudice, offers less risk because the surrounding open acreage is home to many animals. By contrast, cutting up a continuous forest into five-acre lots chops up the animal habitat and subjects homeowners to "the very highest risk."

Scientists are not yet entirely certain as to why fragmenting an environment reduces biodiversity. The most likely reason is that the animals simply cannot disperse across the man-made divides to what are now isolated islands of habitat. The fragmentation cuts off their means of access and narrows their range of motion. When that happens in our part of the Northeast, it means that the animals that "make it" in the habitat will be white-footed mice and the ticks that feed on them - just before they head for human hosts.

- Susanna Margolis



# CHA: The First Five Years

## A Last Word from Adam Nagy

From the communal watering holes of long ago to the backyards of today, neighbors have always gathered to discuss issues of concern in their community - issues such as future growth and the responsiveness of local government. Five years ago and with critical issues looming, a handful of neighbors got together to discuss such issues. Out of those backyard conversations, the Catskill Heritage Alliance was born.

Since stepping down as chairman of the CHA last fall, I've had an opportunity to reflect on the organization's first five years. There's a curse that says, "May you live in interesting times." It's certainly been that for the central Catskills and for our group. From our modest start, the outstanding neighbors and friends I've had the privilege to work with believed that the sprawl-inducing, theme park vision embodied in the proposed Belleayre Resort was wrong for the central Catskills and that nurturing the organic growth that was already well underway in the area was a much better approach. To that end, we promoted concepts such as preservation of community character, smart growth, and open, responsive local government. Our message seemed to resonate within the community because soon that handful of neighbors had grown into an organization of over 300 members.

One would think that the noble cause of preserving the beauty of the Catskills and the wonderful quality of life its residents enjoy would have universal appeal. Instead, a handful of well-connected indi-

viduals have viewed the CHA and other champions of sensible regional growth as a threat to their special interests and have used Wall Street money from deep-pocketed investors to fund a high-profile campaign of malice and misinformation. However, throughout it all, the CHA has maintained its collective cool while continuing to provide the community with extensive information on the resort proposal, to promote smart growth alternatives, and to encourage public input on public visioning processes.

As the first organization to publicly oppose the resort project, we now work in concert with other concerned groups as part of the Catskill Preservation Coalition, which is striving to ensure that issues relating to the resort are properly addressed in its precedent-setting environmental review process.

I'm very proud of the CHA's efforts to date, and it's been an honor to serve as its first chairman. With the very capable Susanna Margolis now at the helm and with an influx of new members and fresh energy, I'm confident the CHA will continue to flourish and to serve an important role in the future of the region. If you believe, as we do, that we have something very special here in the Catskills - something we ought to cherish and protect - I hope you'll consider joining us.

The success of the CHA is a triumph of community empowerment and neighbors working together for a common good. Together, we *can* make a difference.

**How Does the Proposed Belleayre Resort Measure Up?**

Environmental scientists - and environmentally sensitive golf course developers - have recommended that golf courses should be located on sites that meet at least the following screening criteria before any disturbance by development. Here's how the proposed Crossroads Ventures golf courses measure up against those criteria:

Golf courses should be:	Sites of the proposed golf courses:
on medium-textured soils with high organic matter content	Test pits have shown shallow soil deposits
on ground with low erosion & runoff potential	Erosion & runoff potential high due to lack of cover & steepness of the slope
where water table & bedrock are at least 4 ft. below surface	The surface is bedrock in many locations
on slopes of less than 15 percent grade	Slope averages 28 percent grade
on sites with little forest cover	Entirely forested
where there is no potential to threaten sensitive aquatic species downstream	Downstream: Esopus & East Branch of the Delaware - major trout streams & anchors of the region's economy
where irrigation needs can be met without either (1) causing a decrease of more than 5 percent in the low-flow of any nearby waterway or (2) reducing the yield of existing wells in the area	Since there is no water at all atop the ridge, irrigation needs will have to be met by bringing in water from the valleys
far from congregating areas for raptors or other birds	Sites are home to many bird species, including Catskill Eagles returning to the region in some numbers
where no waterway crossings would be needed	Resort would change groundcover, alter courses of runoff streams, potentially cross at least one stream, and affect wells below the golf courses in Pine Hill and Fleischmanns

# Main Street Forum: Lessons from Successes

Attention to the vitality of our hamlets is part of the CHA's mission. Advice on how to do it, backed by successful examples, was the subject of the second annual Main Street Forum held in the Sullivan County village of Liberty last November. This conference drew together municipal leaders, developers, and planners from across New York to hear experts talk about Main Street renewal. It was organized by Main Street Sullivan and the Catskill Center for Conservation and Development.



Main Streets, the center of civic life before World War II, have been buffeted in the modern age but have proven hearteningly resilient. They have withstood threats from urban renewal, Walmarts, mallification, the proliferation of big-box stores, and sprawl. For the last several decades, there has been revived interest nationwide in the health of Main Streets, resulting in conferences such as this one.

The day's headliner was Norman Mintz, a guiding light of the Main Street movement nationally and author of the influential book, *Cities Back from the Edge*. The audience also heard from profession-

als working on the front lines of community renewal in the Hudson Valley, the Catskills, and elsewhere.

Overall, the forum showed how Main Streets today are fascinating experimental ground. The problems and opportunities they pose are stimulating a never-ending flow of creativity, energy, and commitment. They are a meeting ground where civic leaders, scholars, developers, businesses, and grassroots citizens can engage. Timelessly appealing, the main

street is essentially democratic-and ideologically at the far other end of the room from the corporate-controlled environment modeled by the proposed Belleayre Resort. Judging from the buzz in the air at the 2004 Forum, the future has a Main Street address.

Some interesting ideas and trends that came to light:

The trend towards infill rather than sprawl. Infill is the creative recycling of vacant or underused land within town centers and an alternative to conventional development that creates sprawl. Infill promotes vital communities instead of

weakening them. Close to home, the proposed land-gobbling Belleayre Resort typifies the conventional approach. In contrast, the rehabilitation of the Wellington Hotel, which will revive an existing historic building on Pine Hill's Main Street and bring new life directly into that hamlet's center, is an example of infill.

At the conference, speaker Robert Elliott, mayor of Croton-on-Hudson and a leader in Hudson Valley revitalization efforts, reported that he's noticed rising interest among developers in infill development. Commented Elliott, developers are finally beginning to "get it."

The need to redefine expansion. Norman Mintz talked about the need to reverse the thinking that expansion has to happen outside of town in pursuit of cheaper land and elbow room for big parking lots. He showed examples of libraries and other anchor institutions, including large ones, that made the choice to stay in town and found creative solutions to their expansion needs. One interesting example was a community college that opened an annex in vacant downtown space instead of relocating.

How to attract the right businesses onto your Main Street. Look for smaller operations in your area - maybe a business that runs one or two local outlets successfully - and ask them to move in, suggested Mintz.

And a word of general advice from the same speaker: "[No matter what your project,] make sure what you're talking about is of interest to the community. Let them know what is going on."

- Maureen Nagy

[www.catskillheritage.org](http://www.catskillheritage.org)

## Interpretive Center (from page 1)

New York State has two mountainous regions, the Catskills and the Adirondacks. Both contain "parks;" both parks are unlike our national parks or most state parks where all the lands within the boundaries are publicly held. Both the Catskill Park and the Adirondack Park contain within their boundaries both public lands - primarily the Forest Preserve lands - and private lands. We are rather like the Lake District in England where both public interests and private interests must be accommodated. This accommodation is a continuing challenge to us.

Accommodation and appreciation require understanding, and this is where a Catskill Interpretive Center can serve an important role both for Catskill residents

and for the vast flood of "outsiders" who come here for rest and recreation.

Plans were made more than a decade ago for an interpretive center building on State Route 28 in the Town of Shandaken near Mt. Tremper. The site was prepared at considerable cost, and the bridge, now known as the "Bridge to Nowhere," was constructed. Building plans were ready for the bidding process, but the local public did not adequately voice their need for a state-funded interpretive center and, in a tight budget period, this vital project was shelved to "save money."

The site on Route 28 is a good one, on the main artery to the central Catskills and west. A citizens' group has been formed, the Friends of the Catskill Interpretive Center, to revitalize the project, taking it up from where it was frozen years ago.

The Friends invite you to join this effort.

## Help Make the CIC a Reality

### Contact:

- Ettore "Jim" Infante  
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### Write:

- Governor Pataki, State Capitol, Albany, NY 12224
- Senator Schumer, 313 Hart Senate Office Building, Wash., DC 20510
- Senator Clinton, 476 Russell Senate Office Building, Wash., DC 20510
- your local representatives

### Check out:

- [www.catskillinterpretivecenter.org](http://www.catskillinterpretivecenter.org)



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**"... It has become widely recognized that the economic development of a region and the preservation of its natural resources and cultural values must proceed harmoniously if the region is to achieve long range prosperity."**

From *The Catskills* by Alf Evers

**Alf Evers**, truly the "grand old man" of the Catskills and the region's definitive historian, died December 29, 2004 at the age of 99.

The **Catskill Heritage Alliance** is a grassroots organization dedicated to preserving the harmony between the villages of the central Catskills and

the surrounding wilderness through community revitalization and open space conservation. We invite and would welcome your participation.

## We welcome your (continued) support!

Please find enclosed my donation to the Catskill Heritage Alliance.

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