

## **Take Me to the River**

### **Thoughts on the Ausable River Flooding “Summit” held at the Town of Jay Community Center in Au Sable Forks, Tuesday evening, Nov. 1, 2011**

I attended the 11/1/11 meeting on how we can deal with flooding of the Ausable River. While the meeting was long on useful information, it was disappointingly short on solutions, especially for short-term prevention of future flooding. The takeaway I left with is that the people of the Towns of Jay and Keene cannot count on the state or Federal government to effectively focus on this issue and that local government, nonprofit organizations, and residents—including property owners, business owners, and environmentalists—will have to come together to generate local solutions and then really push New York State and the Feds to provide the needed help and funding.

The meeting featured an alphabet soup of representatives from federal, state, county, and local agencies and offices—including FEMA, DEC, APA, the Army Corps of Engineers, Essex County, and the Towns of Black Brook, Jay, and Keene—as well as Assemblywoman Teresa Sayward, a staffer from U.S. Rep. Chris Gibson’s office, and representatives of the Adirondack Council, Adirondack Wild, and the Ausable River Association. What emerged from the panel discussion/Q&A portion of the meeting is that, because of a range of factors—including overlapping jurisdictions, overextended agendas, and underfunded budgets—none of the governmental agencies represented is positioned to deal with the problem of Ausable River flooding head on.

For example, in response to repeated calls from audience members for the agencies to commit to developing a comprehensive river management plan, a member of the DEC stressed that the agency has lost personnel with the expertise to deal with the issue and has no money to “go into the river” or fund the actual work of flood mitigation—that this is not the mission of the DEC—BUT that the DEC can “convene a meeting”!

The centerpiece of this meeting—a slide presentation by river ecologist Prof. Timothy Mihuc of SUNY Plattsburgh—was very enlightening, but raised more questions than it provided answers. Tropical Irene created what is regarded by Prof. Mihuc and his colleagues as anywhere from a 200-year to a 500-year flood, but that assessment is derived from probability statistics based on past data. For example, current 100-year flood criteria are based on data from the past 100 years, but have not yet taken into account the effects of Irene, Prof. Mihuc explained. Such probability data “can’t predict the future...More precipitation in the future could turn a 200-year flood into a 150-year flood.” But there’s no way of knowing that.

Commenting that photos shown of Johns Brook and Styles Brook—before and after Irene, including the “channel modification” work that has been done in the aftermath—did not include photos of the brooks right after the storm, one audience member asked what the probability of future flooding would have been if no modification has been done. Answer: hard to say.

What about the islands that have been created in the river in the Au Sable Forks area, someone asked. That is a dilemma, Prof. Mihuc remarked. Does this increased deposition increase the likelihood of an ice jam, someone else asked. Prof. Mihuc said he couldn’t answer that. “Ice jams are very hard to predict,” he said.

Clearly, there is a need for a significant study of the Ausable River post-Irene. However, the most optimistic estimate for a time-frame was offered by the representative of the Army Corps. Citing the Lake Champlain Watershed authority and a similar study being developed for the Mohawk region, he said a study of the Ausable River could be done in 2 ½ to 3 years, rather than a more typical 7 years, at a cost of approximately \$3 million—half of which might have to come from local contributions (if I understood him correctly). “We’re not going to stop flooding,” the Army Corps representative said. “We have a better chance to address the erosion problem... We can’t control the weather, we can’t control the climate.”

Several members of the audience, as well as Supervisor Ferebee of Keene, said the time has passed for studies. They want something done now, including the suggestion by at least one speaker to undertake widespread dredging. But given the massive disruption caused by Irene, without some evaluation of the new conditions the storm has created, how do we know that *any* action taken will have the desired effect or won’t cause further flooding, especially for people downstream of it, the next time?

There are also larger questions that were not fully addressed at the 11/1 meeting—like what happens to the tax base of our towns if multiple families and businesses take a FEMA buyout and, as often happens in these cases, moves out of town?

Here are some thoughts toward a possible locally driven action plan:

- First, we need to do everything we can in our towns for the people most affected by the flooding. In the Town of Jay, the town government, in conjunction with the Town of Jay Flood Relief Committee and Adirondack Community Trust, has set up tax-deductible fund for flood victims (as has the Town of Keene via ACT). It is reachable at [www.HelpJayNY.org](http://www.HelpJayNY.org). If you haven’t already donated or can donate again, please visit the site; just as importantly, please e-mail the address to everyone on your contact list, as we need to widen the circle of donations beyond our towns and even the North Country region.

- Second, we need a plan to deal with the impact of FEMA buyouts. One thing that could be done is that each town could generate an inventory of currently available homes and properties and actively encourage sellers to negotiate with town residents taking the buyout, perhaps at a lower asking price, perhaps via subdivisions. It’s possible this approach has implications for current housing-density regulations in the Adirondack Park. Would the APA work with the towns on this? Are there any existing state or Federal resources to help make such in-town transitions possible flood survivors? And what resources are currently available to aid our towns in building senior/low-income housing, which could help offset the loss of private homes? Clearly, there is a role here for a public-private partnership.

- On the funding front, we all know about the lack of public monies. But there is a process going on right now with the Regional Economic Development Councils that Gov. Cuomo has initiated, with the initial proposal for each region due Nov. 14th. Is it possible for the Towns of Jay, Keene, and Black Brook to get in on that right now? I’ve looked at the current draft, and while it contains some good things, it is rather broad and focused on the longer term. A comprehensive river management plan for the Ausable River would be an immediate project and could include economic opportunities. You can help by sending your comments now, at <http://nyworks.ny.gov/content/north-country>.

- Finally, we have to focus on flood prevention and mitigation—and do it now, before the ice jams and run-off this coming winter and spring. This is a dire need in the short term. We also need a comprehensive river management plan, which is more long term. If there is one entity who has the jurisdiction and at least some of the resources to spearhead this latter effort, it is the Ausable River Association (AsRA), working in conjunction with the Towns of Jay, Keene, and Black Brook. According to new Exec. Director Corrie Miller, ASRA already has a strategic management plan underway and will need input from the river communities. Residents need to get involved with ASRA as active members; we also need citizen-activists who ready to focus right now on the short-term need for flood prevention and mitigation.

Just as the Town of Jay Flood Relief Committee brought together volunteers who immediately set to work on the fundraising mission, generated a slew of events, and continue to meet weekly, we need **a locally based task force of citizen volunteers**—from all perspectives—to grapple with the challenge, working directly with the two towns and local nonprofits, especially AsRA. Once an initial plan can be developed locally, we then need to band together to press the state and the Federal government for the necessary resources and involvement to make the plan a reality. We need a massive P.R. campaign to make our voices heard in Albany and Washington—like the Who’s in Whoville, shouting over and over again, “We are here! We are here! WE ARE HERE!”

Tropical Storm has altered the face of our Adirondack North Country community, impacting dozens of families, individuals, and businesses to such an extent that those of us who were not directly affected may never completely comprehend. The Ausable River and many of its tributaries have also been adversely affected. The river is the geologic lifeblood of our communities. We need to set right both the river AND the people who draw so much beauty, energy, and economic benefit from living on it.

“How do we live with a dynamic river?” asked Prof. Mihuc near the end of his presentation, posing what may have been the ultimate of the many important questions he raised. The key to the future of our communities may very well depend on how we answer it.

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