

Empty Spaces Offer a World of Opportunity

BY HEIDI KRETZER

One feature of the Adirondack Park keeps me awake at night: empty storefronts. Certainly, stores come and go. Some stay for years, succeed, then slowly stagnate, some muddle in a matter of months, others are doomed in days. After vacated, some empty spaces are snatched in a second, wanted in weeks, or dormant for decades. At any point in time, empty shops scattered throughout the Adirondacks testify to the region's comparative disadvantage in the global economy.

Most goods can be purchased more cheaply and more efficiently outside our Blue Line at numerous malls, warehouse stores, and even over the Internet. What's more depressing than a place with boarded up windows, broken-down buildings, and an ambiance which makes you want to drive faster and leave the desolate empty spaces far behind? How about 112 towns, 12 counties, innumerable private organizations, and a state government who, to date, have not worked together to improve these downtrodden buildings and offer residents and visitors a product in which we have the ultimate comparative advantage - an Adirondack experience.

Across the Atlantic, small communities in the Apennine Mountains of Italy's Abruzzo National Park faced a similar situation: an economic disadvantage compared to areas beyond the Park borders.

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Abruzzo is similar to the Adirondacks: a mosaic of human settlements and remarkable wildlands. The National Park Service of Italy initiated a unique strategy to link the local communities with the natural resources of the Abruzzo. By building a series of thematic information centers in vacant storefronts, the Italians have successfully made the first steps toward establishing a connection between their park's natural resources and local prosperity.

Each center, and thus each town, plays host to a specific significant natural resource found in Abruzzo as well as general park and recreation information. You can visit a center in Campoli, a village inside the Park, and learn about the local bear population; take a tour of nocturnal wildlife in the Picinisco center and finish your journey at the Opi center to learn about chamois — a regional species of mountain goat. Throughout your visit you understand that the communities are an integral part of the Park and the Park is an integral part of the communities. Above all else, you take home an Abruzzo experience.

The success of the original centers has been extraordinary. The increase in tourism and economic activity in these communities, coupled with a greater understanding of the park's significance, has encouraged neighboring villages, outside Abruzzo, to ask the government to extend the boundaries of the Park so that they, too, can benefit from Abruzzo's assets. Imagine centers similar to these in the Adirondacks.

The Park-wide momentum for an Adirondack Community Information Centers (ACIC) project developed directly from the official twinning, or partnership, program between the Adirondacks

and Abruzzo. In the past two years, two Adirondack delegations with representatives from local government, the Adirondack Museum, Paul Smith's College, Adirondack Discovery, the Adirondack Communities and Conservation Program, the Lake Placid Institute, the Adirondack Ensemble, the Adirondack Park Agency, the Department of Environmental Conservation and many other groups have had the opportunity to visit Abruzzo National Park and experience these centers first-hand. The result is a unified effort working toward securing funds and bringing thematic information centers to fill our own empty spaces in the Adirondack Park. Although similar to Abruzzo's project, the Adirondack version accommodates our Park's unique management structure and our distinctive communities.

The Adirondack Community Information Centers project is a cooperative effort to revitalize rural town centers and surrounding communities through an information-based approach to the development of town resources and Adirondack Park amenities. It will do so through the conversion of abandoned store fronts to attractive centers which will provide essential information ranging from local natural attractions to development options. The Adirondack Community Information Centers project will be a region-wide effort focused on selected towns who volunteer to participate. The development process is currently under way in the Town of Inlet, Star Lake, North Creek, and Town of Keene. The goal of these centers is to increase the flow of information among institutions, organizations, residents, and visitors and thereby foster greater understanding and appreciation for the stewardship of the

Adirondack Park's natural resources and human settlements.

On a regional level, each ACIC will contain Park-wide interpretative, natural history, and cultural history themes to build an Adirondack identity for residents and visitors alike. At the local level, the ACICs will focus on the surrounding community.

Each center will feature:

Three standard exhibits:

- 1) General Adirondack Information
- 2) Overview of Adirondack Natural History
- 3) Overview of Adirondack Human History

Two community-based exhibits:

- 4) Local Town History
- 5) Local Recreational, Cultural, and Historical Opportunities

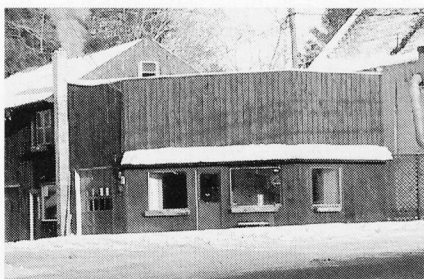
One detailed exhibit:

- 6) A Specific Natural or Cultural Theme

General information on the Adirondacks is not easily accessible to most visitors and residents. In 1999, the Adirondack Visitors Interpretive Centers served 60,000 people, the Adirondack Museum served 85,000. However, the Adirondacks hosts 9 million visitors per year. Only 2 percent of the visitors are learning about the Adirondacks through existing facilities. We need new strategies to reach the rest. The ACICs will provide a basic introduction to the Adirondacks for visitors and residents who mingle in downtown gift shops, groceries and gear stores yet haven't canoed the seven carries or read Alfred Donaldson's *A History of the Adirondacks*. The centers will inform visitors and residents about the town including local history, local recreational opportunities and activities, local sights, near-by public land, significant natural resources, tourism attractions, and key conservation and development issues. Each ACIC will be designed around a natural resource or cultural theme chosen by town residents. Potential topics range from waterways, wetlands, loons, and moose to mountains, mining, railroads, and great camps. The theme will provide a unique

approach for understanding and appreciating the Adirondack ecosystem and cultural history.

The ACICs will not only serve as an interface to an Adirondack experience, they will provide an interface with the abundant resources found on-line. A computer workstation in each ACIC will enable searches for additional information through an Internet connection to the new Joan Weill Adirondack Library at Paul Smith's College. This link will allow tourists and residents to browse the clearinghouse for Adirondack information,



Examples of the abandoned store fronts which through the ACIC project could be converted into attractive, functional tourist information centers.



providing access to primary reference materials, online library catalogs, and CD-Rom indexes as well as links to databases of recreation sites, accommodations, restaurants, and stores throughout the Park. The computer station will also provide connections to regional services and industries which facilitate business planning and community development.

The ACICs will serve as primary sources of information about the Adirondack Park Agency (APA) permitting system and zoning requirements for private lands in each community so that obtaining material about Park regulations will not be so difficult for residents living far

away from the central office. ACICs present residents and entrepreneurs the opportunity to access much of this information locally through hardcopy and electronic information sources.

Most importantly, ACICs will begin to stimulate revitalization of the empty spaces in communities throughout the Park. By locating in vacant storefronts, the ACICs will turn eyesores into attractions and make downtowns more appealing not only to residents and visitors, but also for new or relocating businesses. Each center will hire and train at least one full-time employee, one summer intern, and several volunteers. Periodic educational programs will attract people to the centers and to the communities. The ACICs will facilitate the Adirondack experience by functioning as springboards for visits to other places, such as the Adirondack Visitor Interpretive Centers, the Adirondack Museum, and other similar attractions, in the community and around the Park.

Town of Inlet

The Town of Inlet is a small community of about 350 year-round residents in the west-central Adirondacks. In recent years, the Town has taken progressive steps to improve the quality of life and plan for its future. The Town Board and the Chamber of Commerce formed an Inlet Area Economic Development Group with a broad base of local participation. This group conducted two surveys on community visioning and desired economic development, while also actively supporting a tourism assessment in Inlet. Town leaders have participated in a Gateway Communities training course and an exchange visit to the Abruzzo. Adirondack Discovery — a Park-wide interpretative lecture series — is also based in Inlet. All of this has sparked the community's interest in developing an ACIC.

The Town has chosen a tentative site for the proposed storefront. The building sits on Route 28, a national scenic by-way and primary thoroughfare in downtown Inlet, next to the Town Offices and right-of-way to the public beach. The Town of

Inlet is ready to begin the actual planning for the center design. The Town, the Adirondack Visitor's Interpretive Centers, the Department of Environmental Conservation, the Adirondack Museum, Adirondack Discovery, Paul Smith's College, the Natural History Museum of the Adirondacks, and the Adirondack Communities and Conservation Program will work together to design exhibits for the center. Adirondack Discovery and several college interns will staff the center during its first season. Once financial needs are met, Inlet should be on target for the ACIC to open this summer.

Star Lake

The Towns of Clifton and Fine in the western Adirondacks have seen turbulent economic times over the past decade. The closing of Benson Mines, changes in ownership of the Newton Falls paper mill, and the imminent threat of its closure have spurred the community to consider diversifying the economy. The Clifton-Fine Economic Development Group has been meeting regularly to consider ideas and work toward improving the current conditions of the communities. They have welcomed a tourism study, a community study, and are engaging in a town visioning process. The members are extremely interested in having an ACIC located in Star Lake. The Economic Development Group presented the idea to both Town Boards and they enthusiastically accepted the concept.

Numerous potential sites exist in Star Lake including an old gas station, an obsolete church complex, and a former wine and liquor store. At this time, further action depends upon financial support. We are actively seeking grants, working with State government representatives, and pursuing other resources to secure funds for a center which would open in 2001.

North Creek

The Town of Johnsbury has seen tremendous change within the past ten years. Town residents have taken impressive steps to initiate and steer the desired

change through an unofficial group called the Core Committee. The Core Committee reviews new community development ideas and recommends how to successfully proceed on projects. Another group, the Railway Depot Preservation Committee, has successfully raised funds and received grants to create a park and walkway along the railroad and river. Last summer marked the opening of a scenic train ride and this summer will start with the completed renovations of the old railroad station and plans for a new historical museum.

The Core Committee and the Railway Depot Preservation Committee want to include the ACIC concept in their long-term plans for improving the Town of Johnsbury. As a year-round conduit for tourists direct from downstate, the railroad station will provide an ideal place to locate an ACIC. With great eagerness from the Town and these committees, we will be looking for support and applying for grants to make this happen in the coming years.

Town of Keene

Keene is the primary gateway to the High Peaks Wilderness and the Lake Placid region. With progressive town leadership many activities are afoot. Residents have initiated several new projects including additional parking and a shuttle bus for hikers, a hiking trail connecting St. Huberts and Keene, an interpretive trail around Lake Winifred, and a corridor management plan for Route 73.

Recent grant money has given the Town of Keene flexibility to work on new, innovative projects. Although only in discussion, the Town hopes to design an information center which will become part of the park-wide effort for multiple Adirondack Community Information Centers.

What's New?

Our spectacular scenery, quaint communities, majestic mountains, unique cultural heritage, and precious living organisms, be they fungal or feathered, force us

to acknowledge and celebrate our first-class Adirondack experience. The ACICs will provide a plethora of opportunities including the opportunity to highlight the connection between communities and the wildlands; the opportunity to increase visitation to established park venues such as the Visitors Interpretive Centers, the Adirondack Museum, the Six Nations Indian Museum, Fort Henry, and John Brown's Farm; the opportunity to promote new venues such as the Saranac Lake-Lake Placid Railroad, the North Creek Railroad Museum, and the Natural History Museum of the Adirondacks; the opportunity to restore historic buildings and make our hamlets more attractive places to be; the opportunity to increase business for neighboring stores; the opportunity to entice the traveling public to stop in our communities; and the opportunity to use an existing successful model to improve our quality of life.

Opportunities

We have the opportunity to revitalize empty commercial spaces throughout the Adirondack Park with ACICs. The project will serve to integrate, educate, and build cohesion among Adirondack constituencies by using information from multiple disciplines to focus and advance the significance of the Adirondack Park's unique mosaic of wilderness and communities. Now we need a cooperative effort to develop a long-term vision for multiple ACICs scattered throughout the Park and ample resources and financial support make to make this plan a reality.

Let's learn from the successful experience of Italy's Abruzzo National Park and work together towards filling our empty storefronts and highlighting our communities' positive features. We can provide the ultimate Adirondack experience. After all, if we can fill these empty storefronts, we can open the door to a world of opportunity in which we all sleep through the night. The first Adirondack Community Information Center is scheduled to open in the Town of Inlet this summer. Hope to see you there!