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Erie County Forest
The Parks Department misled us on logging
By LARRY BEAHAN

The unplanned and poorly managed logging of the Erie County Forest this year is robbing us blind. It is squandering our money and depriving us and our kids of the opportunity to wander in a truly old woods.

We citizens of Erie County have owned 3,000 acres of forest in the Southern Tier since 1923. The trees have matured into a magnificent stand used for skiing, hiking, snowmobiling and nature education. Suddenly, the Parks Department has decided to cash them in for timber. In this reckless grab for cash, it has trashed principals of sustainable logging, the State Environmental Quality Review Act (SEQRA), economics and public opinion.

Take a look at what County Comptroller Mark Poloncarz has to say about this pillaging of public wealth at

http://www.erie.gov/comptroller/pdfs/audit_parks_forestry_2006.pdf

My favorite two points in his review are: 1.) The logging Request for Proposal appeared only once and in only one paper. 2.) Instead of hiring an independent consultant forester to ensure sustainable forestry and fair prices, the Parks Department employed the forester who works with that logger. What an opportunity for collusion!

The Parks Department led the county to expect 2006 lumber revenue of almost \$500,000 and delivered only \$170,000, from which it neglected to deduct \$5,000 of misappropriated Federal Emergency Management Agency money and \$37,000 of Housing and Urban Development money. It used that money to subsidize its favorite logger by building lumber roads.

The Parks Department described these lumber roads as "fire" roads. But the Department of Environmental Conservation calls the forests around here "asbestos woods," since our climate is too wet for significant forest fires. When the DEC sells timber from the State Forests, the logger pays to build lumber roads. There are no fire roads in Western New York's state forests. The HUD and FEMA money spent on the roads cutting up our forest was stolen from the urban poor and from victims of disasters.

The salaries of the Parks Department employees were not taken into account. Nor was the cost to the county of a major portion of our forest's reserve of old-growth - 150- to 180-year-old maple and cherry trees. This debacle left behind ruined trails, steep denuded slopes and barren creek banks; a forest open to erosion and stream pollution. This is a bonanza?

The Parks Department scuttled SEQRA with a lie. Instead of describing the logging of thousands of mature trees, it told the DEC that it was going to tend to "the health of the forest - it has become necessary to thin this lot of excess wind-blown trees which have become hazardous to the health of the remaining forest. Minimal hardwoods will be extracted."

Call your county legislator. Make your views on the future of our forest known.