



THE CAROGA PROCESS

by Bernard E. Schmelz

The planning process in Caroga initially developed from what was perceived as a near catastrophe. In August of 1968, the New York State Department of Health quarantined both East and West Caroga Lake, due to high coliform counts. A combination of factors (lack of rain during the summer months, which traditionally maintained a high flow through the lakes, and an ever increasing failure rate of septic systems located near the shorelines, particularly in the Caroga Lake hamlet) precipitated a long standing problem. This was the catalyst which forced the recognition of a need for planning in the Town.

The Planning Board was appointed in September, 1968 and Local Laws No. 1 and 2 were adopted, establishing a sani-

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tary code for the Town and a method of enforcement.

The Town of Caroga is located in the north-central portion of Fulton County, in the Adirondack Foothills. The Town is wholly within the Adirondack Park, with a land area of 54 square miles and a 1978 estimated year-round population of 1,100. The majority of the year-round population is concentrated at the hamlet of Caroga Lake, as are a number of summer cottages and the activities which attract people to the area. Beyond this area of concentrated residential and commercial uses, the Town remains mostly forested—46 square miles of the Town are classified as forest land. The majority of the remaining area of the Town (six square miles) is classified as water and wetlands. The Town is also greatly affected by State ownership of land—approximately 46 percent of the Town's land area is State owned.

Caroga was made famous as a summer hideaway during the late 1800's and

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early 1900's—the main attraction being the Town's lakes, including Canada Lake, Stoner Lakes, Pine Lake, Green Lake and East and West Caroga Lake. After Memorial Day, the population begins to swell to over 8,000 by mid-summer, and daily visitors are estimated at 2,500. The Town's economy is dependent on the continued attraction of the Lakes and the beauty of the land which surrounds it.

The Planning Board is responsible for all phases of planning in the Town, including the drafting and recommending of various types of ordinances, conducting site plan reviews under the provisions of the Zoning Ordinance and Subdivision Reviews.

Mrs. Emma Krause, Town Supervisor, and the Town Board, have been consistent in their strong support of the Town's planning program. From its beginning to the present, the Town Board has acted favorably on the Planning Board's recommendations, which have attempted to balance environmental concerns, aesthetic concerns and realistic concerns for compatible development. During 1979, the Planning Board proposed a comprehensive zoning ordinance, which represented its best efforts at integrating local needs with the regional concerns of the Adirondack Park Agency. The net result of the adoption of this local zoning ordinance was the return to local control of development decisions, which had previously been determined by the Adirondack Park Agency.

In the early years, the Planning Board addressed certain problems by reacting

to situations. A formalized planning process began in 1974, when financial support became available through the Local Planning Assistance Program of the Adirondack Park Agency. This assistance was channeled through the County Planning Department and provided the direct technical labor necessary.

The Caroga planning process was based upon an assessment of all resources available in the Town. The program was divided into five phases, designed to provide cumulative results. The first phase—"Basic Studies" and carried on "Inventory" was initiated in the year 1974 to 1978. It was directed at preparing inventories of the natural, aesthetic and social resources of the Town. A total of ten specialized reports were prepared during this time.

The second phase of the program approach was called "Synthesis". In this phase, all of the information gathered in the basic studies was analyzed and formulated into an overall Land Use Plan. The Plan included a series of goals and objectives and a Land Use Plan Map, which would serve as a guide for the future development of a zoning ordinance.

The third phase of the process was "Code Development". A zoning ordinance was prepared, which would implement the goals and objectives outlined in the Land Use Plan. The Ordinance was prepared during the spring and summer of 1978.

The preparation of the Ordinance paid close attention to the natural resources of the Town. The basic studies were taken off the shelves, the resource maps unrolled and the Planning Board began the task of weighing out the options and developing the trade-offs, which would eventually lead to the development of the Ordinance and Zoning Map. The ordinance which was developed underscored the extreme sensitivity of the lakeshore areas of the Town which deserve the greatest protection. As the ordinance was prepared, countless meetings were held with the Town Board, in order to maintain the close working relationship that had developed over the years and to determine if there would be any troublesome sections within the Ordinance that would require changes or further explanation. During this phase, the local planning staff of the Adirondack Park Agency also participated in many of the Planning Board and Town Board meetings. Their participation in this early stage of development of the complete planning

program would later prove invaluable when the Town applied for "full approval" of the program from the Agency.

The first draft of the Ordinance was completed in early June of 1978. The Planning Board, Town Board, County Planning Staff and the Local Planning Staff of the Adirondack Park Agency, began the delicate task of preparing the Ordinance for public hearings, which were scheduled to begin the second week in August. As final reviews were completed, several hundred copies of the Ordinance were printed, and the next phase of the program began.

Next came the "Adoption Assistance" phase—better known as "Selling the Plan." The Ordinance was brought to the public at two public hearings held by the Planning Board. The hearings were held in August, at the height of the summer season, in order to give summer residents an opportunity to review the Ordinance and comment on it. The hearings drew relatively large crowds, approximately 200 persons attending each hearing. The wave of opposition was extremely vocal, but the supporters of the ordinance were just as strong. Many of the comments received served as useful input to the Board for making some changes in the Ordinance.

The Town Board held a hearing on the Ordinance in late August. This hearing was attended by almost 250 residents, listening and commenting on the form the Ordinance had taken through the hearing process. As the transcripts were completed, an intensive review of the Ordinance was started by the Town Board.

The final phase of the Caroga Process was the "Implementation". Adoption of the Ordinance and other codes did not conclude the process. The Planning Board, with the assistance of the County Planning Department, provided the Town Board and the Building Inspector/Zoning Administrator with direct assistance in familiarizing themselves with the entire contents of the Zoning Ordinance, the rules of procedure of the Zoning Board of Appeals, and with the drafting of the necessary forms required to properly administer the Zoning Ordinance, Building Code, Mobile Home Ordinance and Sanitary Code. A single "Standard Development Permit" form was prepared, which would serve all purposes except the Sanitary Code. The Planning Board believed it was best that a sanitary permit application be left as a separate form, due to the different information requirements which were needed.

In this phase, the Zoning Board of Appeals drafted a set of rules of procedure, in order to enable it to more properly function within the scope of responsibility which was delegated to it.

The implementation phase is an ongoing process, which will continue as ordinances inevitably need revision, land use plans need to be updated and new ordinances have to be drafted.

The Road to Full Approval

With the completion of the planning process, the Town Board formally submitted the local planning program to the Adirondack Park Agency for approval under the provisions of Section 807 of the Adirondack Park Agency Act, in July of 1979. Included in the local planning program package was the Town Zoning Ordinance, Local Laws #1 and #2 of 1968 and draft Subdivision Regulations.

The Planning Program was presented to the Adirondack Park Agency Commissioners at their September meeting which was held at the Nick Stoner Inn in Caroga. The program was introduced by the Town Supervisor, Mrs. Emma Krause, with technical presentations by County Planning Department Staff and the Agency's Local Planning Staff. At the conclusion of the two day meeting, many of the Commissioners expressed their pleasure at the professionalism under which the planning program was developed and presented. Though there was no final resolution on the approval of the program, several components of the program were reviewed by various committees and received their endorsement. Several issues were also identified which would have to be resolved prior to full agency approval. In particular, the Town's sanitary program was to be scrutinized, to determine if stricter standards would be required along the shoreline areas of the Town. Since the adoption of Local Laws #1 and #2, the Caroga Environmental Management Council has been monitoring the water quality in the lakes by undertaking coliform counts on a regular basis. These records, in conjunction with dye test information and lot ownership distribution information that was developed by the County and Adirondack Park Agency Planning Staffs, served as invaluable tools in demonstrating that the Town's sanitary program is working at a satisfactory level. There exists little opportunity for further development along the shorelines, due to the existing ownership pattern. Based on these findings, the

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Adirondack Park Agency adopted a resolution giving the Caroga Land Use Program conditional approval. The resolution pointed to a few minor deficiencies in the Zoning Ordinance which would require an amendment, and required the adoption of the Town's Subdivision Regulations.

On February 12, 1980, the Town Board amended the Zoning Ordinance and the Planning Board adopted the Subdivision Regulations. These two actions satisfied the conditions outlined in the Agency's resolution and led to the granting of full approval of the Caroga Planning Program, on February 29, 1980.

Full program approval transferred to the Town review jurisdiction of over a majority of the permit reviews which had previously been undertaken by the Agency. Land use permit decisions could now be made locally, by local officials, for local individuals, rather than by representatives of the Adirondack Park Agency.

The approval of the Caroga Planning Program signified a major step forward for planning in the Town of Caroga and Fulton County. The approval clearly demonstrated that the regional approach taken by the Adirondack Park Agency in land use planning can be modified and tailored to meet the local needs of a municipality and its residents. The approval also demonstrated that the Agency was willing to approve local plans which modify the regional plan, as long as they reflected the same types of concerns which are included in the Adirondack Park Agency Act.

Since the Town Board adopted the Zoning Ordinance, and the Agency granted the Town full approval, there have been no projects which required the Agency to conduct a project review. Several projects which previously would have required such reviews, have been locally administered, including a subdivision review, variance reviews, and several site plan reviews.

In the view of the Town Board and the Town Supervisor, the local planning program has been extremely effective and well managed. Few complaints have been heard from Town residents. The greatest fears voiced at the public hearings, held prior to the adoption of the Ordinance, have not materialized. The Town's responsibilities in conducting reviews were not greatly expanded, due to the full approval of the Program. Prior to full approval, the Town required Sanitary Permits, Building Permits and Mobile Home Permits.

Caroga can now devote a greater amount of time in planning for the future. There still exist many unresolved issues. There is continuing pressure on the quality of the Town's lakes, as more summer homes along the shorelines and in the hamlet are converted to year-round use. There is a need to further encourage development away from the lakeshore areas, where soil conditions are more suitable and the impact will be lessened.

Through their continued efforts an enlightened Town Board, Planning Board and general citizenry of Caroga will continue to preserve its status as the "Gem of the Southern Adirondacks."

