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September 24, 2026

Kathy Moser, Commissioner
NYS Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation
625 Broadway
Albany, NY 12238

Via Email

**Re: Constitutional Amendments for State
Facilities Located on the Forest Preserve**

Dear Commissioner Moser:

Thank you very much for speaking with me last week about the need for constitutional amendments for the construction of State facilities on the Forest Preserve. With respect to the interpretation of the case law which we discussed relating to Article 14, section 1 of the Constitution, pages 9 and 11-12 of the Court of Appeals 2021 opinion in Protect the Adirondacks!, Inc. v. NYSDEC and APA, 37 N.Y.3d 73 (2021) discuss that "the constitutional protection is unitary", that the clause is meant to protect the Forest Preserve in its "wild state", and that even where there are "laudable aims," a project that interferes with the purpose of protecting the Forest Preserve as wild forest is in violation of Article 14. A copy of the Court of Appeals opinion is enclosed for your reference.

Article 14's protection of the Forest Preserve is not limited to its prohibition on destroying timber. The Court of Appeals held that "[t]he forever wild provision ensures the preservation of state-owned land with the Adirondack Park ... in its wild state." Protect the Adirondacks!, Inc. v. NYSDEC and APA, 37 N.Y.3d at 82. The Court explained that "violation of the prohibition against the destruction of timber is a violation of the 'forever wild' clause, because that prohibition was a means to the ultimate objective of protecting the forest as wilderness." Id. at 83. Similarly, the construction of new buildings is contrary to "the ultimate objective of protecting the forest as wilderness," even if no timber is destroyed in the process. Id.

Protect the Adirondacks continues to urge you and your team to consider fully the restrictions imposed by Article 14 in planning for

Protect the Adirondacks

PO Box 48, North Creek, NY 12853 518.251.2700

www.protectadks.org info@protectadks.org

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facilities that are managed by the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation on Forest Preserve lands. The construction of new buildings on the Forest Preserve, even when they have a laudable purpose and do not involve substantial tree cutting, interferes with the preservation of the lands as wild forest. Such actions are thus impermissible under Article 14 unless the Constitution is amended to permit them.

For instance, Article 14 was amended to allow the transfer of 10 acres of Forest Preserve land, which contained certain outbuildings associated with the historic Great Camp Sagamore, to the adjoining nonprofit landowner, so that the buildings could continue to be used and maintained, despite the fact that maintaining them would not result in any tree cutting. Likewise, the construction of a water supply well by the Town of Long Lake on Forest Preserve land required a constitutional amendment, even though few, if any, trees would be cut. See Article 14, section 1. Thus, any construction or use of Forest Preserve lands for non-Forest Preserve purposes is only permitted if Article 14 is amended.

As you know, Protect the Adirondacks supported the constitutional amendment that was recently passed for the construction of new facilities at the Mount Van Hoevenberg Winter Olympic Sports Complex. A copy of a press release that we distributed is enclosed for your reference. However, one of the challenges for the passage of that amendment was that the State agency involved (ORDA) had already constructed the facilities before the amendment was passed, a clear violation of Article 14. Our ongoing desire is that State agencies will engage early in the process of Article 14 amendments so that they can be passed by the voters before construction work begins on Forest Preserve lands.

Given that the process of obtaining a constitutional amendment is lengthy and passage of a proposed amendment is not guaranteed, we urge State agencies to consider and analyze the possibilities of alternatives that do not necessitate an amendment, such as the placement of new facilities on nearby town-owned or private lands.

Finally, enclosed for your review is a letter that we sent to legislative leaders in 2024 supporting a constitutional amendment to facilitate the redevelopment of Mount McGregor, which as you know is in very close proximity to the historic Grant Cottage and the grounds around it. We continue to advocate for this proposed amendment.

Thank you again for the open dialogue about these matters, and on behalf of the Board of Directors of Protect the Adirondacks, thank you for the opportunity to share our position with you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Claudia K. Braymer".

Claudia Braymer
Executive Director

cc: Bradley Siciliano, Esq., NYS OPRHP, Office of Counsel
enc.

State of New York Court of Appeals

OPINION

This opinion is uncorrected and subject to revision
before publication in the New York Reports.

No. 21

Protect the Adirondacks! Inc.,
Respondent-Appellant,

v.

New York State Department of
Environmental Conservation et
al.,
Appellants-Respondents.

Jennifer L. Clark, for appellants-respondents.

John W. Caffry, for respondent-appellant.

Sierra Club; Adirondack Association of Towns and Villages, Inc. et al.; Empire State
Forest Products Association, Inc.; Open Space Institute, Inc. et al.; Adirondack Council,
Inc. et al.; The Nature Conservancy, amici curiae.

RIVERA, J.:

On this appeal, we must determine whether the state's plan for the construction of
approximately 27 miles of Class II community connector trails designed for snowmobile

use in the Forest Preserve is permissible under the New York Constitution. The plan requires the cutting and removal of thousands of trees, grading and leveling, and the removal of rocks and other natural components from the Forest Preserve to create snowmobile paths that are nine to 12 feet in width. We conclude that construction of these trails violates the “forever wild” provision of the New York State Constitution (art XIV, § 1) and therefore cannot be accomplished other than by constitutional amendment.

I

The Adirondack Park currently encompasses approximately six million acres of public and private lands. The Forest Preserve encompasses 2.5 million acres of State-owned land within the Park. Defendant New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) was established in 1970, with a mandate to “[p]rovide for the care, custody, and control of the forest preserve” (ECL 3-0301 [d], 3-0101; *accord* ECL 9-0105 [1] [granting DEC authority and duty to take “care, custody and control of the several preserves, parks and other state lands described in this article”]). Defendant Adirondack Park Agency (APA) is concerned with “developing long-range park policy” to advance “optimum overall conservation, protection, preservation, development and use of the unique scenic, aesthetic, wildlife, recreational, open space, historic, ecological and natural resources of the Adirondack park” (Executive Law § 801). The DEC, in consultation with APA, develops individual management plans for units of land classified in a master plan,

which “shall guide the development and management of state lands in the Adirondack park” (*id.* § 816 [1]).

In 2006, the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) and the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation prepared a “conceptual snowmobile plan” with the goal of creating a system of snowmobile trails between communities in the Adirondack Park. In 2009, DEC developed a guidance document, entitled “Management Guidance: Snowmobile Trail Siting, Construction and Maintenance on Forest Preserve Land in the Adirondack Park,” to implement the concepts outlined in the plan. Under the guidance, the “multi-use” snowmobile trails are meant to improve community connections, but are also intended for more “passive recreational uses,” including hiking, mountain biking and other “non-motorized recreational pursuits in the spring, summer and fall.” Trails in the park that are open to snowmobiles are classified as either Class I secondary snowmobile trails or Class II trails, the type at issue in this appeal. Class II trails are “trail segments that serve to connect communities and provide the main travel routes for snowmobiles.”

Protect the Adirondacks! Inc. commenced this combined declaratory judgment action and article 78 proceeding, alleging, in relevant part, that construction of the Class II trails violated article XIV, § 1, of the New York Constitution. Plaintiff alleged that the construction of the trails is impermissible because it required cutting and destruction of a substantial amount of timber, would create an “artificial man-made setting” in the Forest Preserve and was inconsistent with the Preserve’s wild forest nature. After a bench trial Supreme Court held that the construction was not unconstitutional.

The Appellate Division reversed with one Justice dissenting (175 AD3d 24 [3d Dept 2019]). The majority adopted a bifurcated analysis of the constitutional provision and held that construction in the Forest Preserve of the Class II trails did not violate the “forever wild” clause because the qualities of the trails—“which have similar aspects to foot trails and ski trails and have less impact than roads or parking lots”—do not “impair[]” the wild forest nature of the Forest Preserve (*id.* at 29). Nevertheless, the Appellate Division held that the trail construction constitutes an unconstitutional destruction of timber (*id.* at 29-31). The dissent would have held that the construction of the Class II trails “effect a reasoned balance between protecting the Forest Preserve and allowing year-round access” (*id.* at 32 [Lynch, J., dissenting]).

Defendants appeal, and plaintiff cross-appeals, as of right (*see* CPLR 5601 [b]).¹ We now affirm and hold that the planned construction of the Class II community connector trails would violate the constitution.

II

The Forest Preserve is a publicly owned wilderness of incomparable beauty. Located in two regions of the Adirondack and Catskill Mountains, the Forest Preserve—with its trees, rivers, wetlands, mountain landscape, and rugged terrain—is a respite from the demands of daily life and the encroachment of commercial development. It has been this way for over a century because our State Constitution mandates:

“The lands of the state, now owned or hereafter acquired,
constituting the forest preserve as now fixed by law, shall be

¹ Following a jurisdictional inquiry, we retained both the appeal and cross appeal.

forever kept as wild forest lands. They shall not be leased, sold or exchanged, or be taken by any corporation, public or private, nor shall the timber thereon be sold, removed or destroyed.”²

This unique “forever wild” provision was deemed necessary by its drafters and the people of the State of New York to end the commercial destruction and despoliation of the soil and trees that jeopardized the state’s forests and, perhaps most importantly, the state watershed.³

In 1873, in response to widespread concern about the visible and potentially irrevocable depredation of the Adirondacks, the state appointed a commission of “trained forest experts” to “investigate and report a system of forest preservation” (Report of Committee on Forest Preserves, New York Assembly Documents, No. 36, at 3, 39). The commission’s final report urged the creation of a forest preserve to “be forever kept as wild forest lands” (*id.*).

In 1885, the legislature passed a statute providing that “[a]ll the lands now owned or which may hereafter be acquired by the State of New York” within certain counties, “shall constitute and be known as the Forest Preserve” (L 1885, ch 283, § 7). In accordance with the recommendations of the report, the statute further provided that “[t]he lands now

² The provision was originally codified as article VII, § 7, and recodified as article XIV, § 1, in the Constitution of 1938.

³ A report to the legislature in 1873 cautioned that “within one hundred years the cold, healthful, living waters of the [Adirondack] wilderness . . . will be required for the domestic water supply of the cities of the Hudson River valley” (Verplanck Colvin, *Report on the Topographical Survey of the Adirondack Wilderness of New York*, New York State Senate Documents, No. 53, at 41, 42 [1873]; see e.g. *Report of Committee on Forest Preserves*, New York Assembly Documents, No. 36, at 6 [1885]).

or hereafter constituting the forest preserve shall be forever kept as wild forest lands. They shall not be sold, nor shall they be leased or taken by any person or corporation, public or private” (*id.* § 8).

The original statutory and administrative efforts to protect the wild forest proved ineffective. Just two years after the Forest Preserve was created, the legislature afforded the comptroller the authority to sell, upon the recommendation of the Forest Commission, timber and land located on the boundaries of the preserve (*see* L 1887, ch 475, § 8, amending L 1885, ch 283, § 8). In 1893, the legislature conferred upon the Forest Commission “greatly enlarged powers” to sell timber, lease camp sites, and build roads and paths in the Forest Preserve (*Association for Protection of Adirondacks v MacDonald*, 228 App Div 73, 77-78 [3d Dept 1930], citing L 1893, ch 332).

The Constitutional Convention of 1894 assembled in response to widespread discontent with the destruction of the Adirondack forest.⁴ The convention delegates were determined to maintain the wild forest nature of the Preserve—“these wide-spread evergreen woods”—both because of their value as a “great resort for the people of this

⁴ The Forest Commission’s Annual Report for the year 1893 noted the extent to which these policies had exacerbated the problem of exploitation: “[f]ully two-fifths of the great forest has already been cut over by lumbermen, who have removed the spruce and pine, leaving a forest in which there is little or no merchantable timber that can be floated down the streams” (*id.*; *see also Railroads in the Adirondacks*, NY Times, May 19, 1891, at 4 [“Commissioner Basselin has had every appearance of being on the side of those who desired to get possession of timber lands belonging to the State, and there was reason to believe that he might be in favor of running railroads through the forests to facilitate the work of stripping them of timber and to add to the profits of his private business”]).

State” and as a singular “capacious cistern, extending over this region” (4 Rev Rec, 1894 NY Constitutional Convention at 130). David McClure, a New York City lawyer and delegate, sponsored an amendment that would protect the Forest Preserve. McClure described how the failure to preserve the forest had already resulted in environmental distress: “Bars have risen in the Hudson on account of the washing down from these mountains, from which trees have been taken, and everywhere we have seen the falling of waters to an extent that has been dangerous” (*id.* at 132). Thus, one delegate exclaimed, “you must close the door” to commercial interests, “and you must close it tight, and close it right away; and not only that, you must keep it closed” (*id.* at 156).

The proposal was revised to ban the leasing of the land and the removal or destruction of timber. As revised, the amendment garnered unanimous support from the 1894 Constitutional Convention delegates and was submitted to a vote of the electorate and approved by the people of the State of New York. The drafters conceived that any use of the Forest Preserve contrary to the constitutional mandate may only be accomplished by an amendment approved by the electorate. The legislature, by more than a century of popular referenda proposing constitutional amendments for projects large and small within the Forest Preserve, confirmed and honored the Convention’s solution. Thus, since becoming law in 1895, the people of New York have voted to amend article XIV, § 1, a total of 19 times to permit specific encroachments on the Forest Preserve.⁵

⁵ For example, amendments in 1918 and 1927 respectively provided for the construction of a state highway from Saranac Lake to Old Forge and another from Wilmington to the top of Whiteface Mountain. Amendments in 1941 and 1947 permitted construction of ski

III

Only once before has this Court considered the meaning of the constitutional provision at issue here. In *Association for Protection of Adirondacks v Macdonald* (253 NY 234 [1930]), the Court held that a statute authorizing the construction of a bobsleigh run, requiring the destruction of 2,500 trees, for the 1932 Winter Olympics in Lake Placid was unconstitutional (*id.* at 242).

As the Court noted, the proposed project was miniscule in comparison to the great expanse of the Preserve, requiring only 4.5 acres of land out of a total of 1,941,403 (*id.* at 237). Unquestionably, the value to the public of hosting the Olympic games and bobsledding in the years thereafter was high. Nonetheless, we held that the bobsleigh run could not be built, despite its attractions, because the constitution forbade it:

“However tempting it may be to yield to the seductive influences of outdoor sports and international contests, we must not overlook the fact that constitutional provisions cannot always adjust themselves to the nice relationships of life. The framers of the Constitution, as before stated, intended to stop the willful destruction of trees upon the forest lands, and to preserve these in the wild state now existing; they adopted a measure forbidding the cutting down of these trees to any substantial extent for any purpose” (*id.* at 241-242).

trails on Whiteface Mountain, Belleayre, Gore, South, and Pete Gay Mountains. A 1987 amendment allowed for the extension and widening of these ski paths. In 1957, an amendment authorized the relocation, reconstruction, and maintenance of existing state highways to eliminate dangerous curves and grades, and, in 1959, the same authority was extended to the existing interstate highway 502.

Applying *MacDonald* to the appeal before us, we conclude that the planned 27 miles of snowmobile trails may not be built without constitutional amendment.⁶ Contrary to the Appellate Division, we do not interpret the provision as a bifurcated clause. All members of the Court agree that the constitutional protection is unitary (*see* dissenting op at 6-7). The forever wild provision ensures the preservation of state-owned land within the Adirondack Park (and Catskills) in its wild state (*see MacDonald*, 253 NY at 241). The destruction or removal of trees represented a principal threat recognized by the 1894 Convention delegates, and violation of the prohibition against the destruction of timber is a violation of the “forever wild” clause, because that prohibition was a means to the ultimate objective of protecting the forest as wilderness.

The construction of the Class II trails is, for constitutional purposes, no different than the construction of the bobsleigh run. Both would work a substantial change to the Forest Preserve. Both were explained as having a specific purpose that did not benefit the overall public interest (the Olympics and connecting local communities) and both were additionally justified as having a broader purpose that benefitted all the people of New York (opening the bobsleigh run and snowmobile trails for general public use).⁷ The Class II connector trails require the clearing of approximately 27 miles of trail (the total land area

⁶ Given our decision that the planned construction of the Class II trails is unconstitutional, plaintiff is not entitled to any additional relief on its cross-appeal.

⁷ The impetus for the bobsleigh run was to facilitate the 1932 winter Olympic games, but it was thereafter to be “maintained, during the winter season, for the use and pleasure of the public” (L 1929, ch 417).

cleared or to be cleared is approximately one acre per mile of trail) resulting in the destruction of 6,184 trees of at least three inches diameters at breast height and 25,000 trees total, removal of rock and grading of the wild forest. By comparison, in *MacDonald*, the bobsleigh run and appurtenant facilities would have required the clearing of over 4 acres of the Forest Preserve and the destruction of many fewer trees, the blasting and removal of 50 cubic yards of rock and the construction of the bobsleigh track structure (228 App Div at 82).

Further, the Class II trails require greater interference with the natural development of the Forest Preserve than is necessary to accommodate hikers. Their construction is based on the travel path and speed of a motorized vehicle used solely during the snow season. The trails may not be built like roads for automobiles or trucks, but neither are they constructed as typical hiking trails.⁸ Under DEC's 2009 guidance document, the Class II trails are not to exceed nine feet in width except on sharp curves, steep slopes, and bridges, where a 12-foot width is allowed—the same width as an interstate highway lane and enough to accommodate two SUVs, side-to-side. The proposed bench cuts—cuts into sloped ground and removal of the cut soil, rock and trees to create a “bench” upon which a trail can be placed—require clearing the land on the up- and down-slopes of the trail,

⁸ The dissent elides the distinction between a factual finding by the courts below that the Class II trails in issue here are “more similar to hiking trails than to roads” (dissenting op at 15 n 4, quoting 175 AD3d 24, 28 [3d Dept 2019]) with a finding that they *are* hiking trails. How these trails are constructed is uncontested. Thus, whether these trails are more akin to hiking trails than to roads is relevant to determining DEC's compliance with its policies and procedures, but it does not resolve the issue here, for we are concerned with whether the construction of these trails violate the constitution.

resulting in the clearing of the forest floor up to 20 feet in width in certain areas—a span wide enough to site a two-car garage.

Defendants and the dissent offer two principal arguments in response. The first is that we should not view the destruction of trees as significant because the number is comparatively small per mile of trail (*see* dissenting op at 14). We rejected a similar argument in *MacDonald* when we declined to minimize the impact of the project by viewing it as a small percentage of the overall Forest Preserve (*see MacDonald*, 253 NY at 236-237 [rejecting the argument that “(t)he Forest Preserve within the Adirondacks consists of 1,941,403 acres” and “(t)he taking of four acres out of this vast acreage for this international sports’ meet seems a very slight inroad upon the preserve for a matter of such public interest and benefit to the people of the State of New York”]).

Second, defendants and the dissent contend that the project’s impacts are justified because it enhances access to the Preserve and provides a variety of recreational opportunities. That analysis proceeds from a fundamental misunderstanding. The constitution provides for access and enjoyment of the Forest Preserve as a wild forest: “very considerable use may be made by campers and others without in any way interfering with this purpose of preserving them as wild forest lands” (*MacDonald*, 253 NY at 241, citing Robert Marshall, *The Problem of the Wilderness*, 30 *The Scientific Monthly* 141, 141 [1930]). The project proposed here, like that proposed in *MacDonald*, is impermissible “simply and solely for the reason that . . . the Constitution says that it cannot be done” (*id.*).

Improving recreation and the use and enjoyment of the preserve are laudable aims, but they were insufficient in *MacDonald* to obviate the need for a constitutional amendment.

The fact that defendants may be doing everything they believe feasible to minimize the destruction of the Forest Preserve in the construction of the Class II trails, by, for example, reducing the number of trees cut, routing the trails as close to the periphery or highway as possible, and implementing erosion control measures, does not support a different conclusion. The issue is simply whether the project, as proposed, complies with the constitutional provision.

If the people of the State of New York decide that these Class II community connector trails are sufficiently beneficial, despite their impact on the Forest Preserve, then that determination may be realized through constitutional amendment. Indeed, other projects to enhance recreation or provide access by motorized transport have required constitutional amendment. Since its enactment in 1894, the forever wild provision has been amended 19 times; 4 of those amendments have come in the past 15 years. Those constitutional amendments have authorized, among other initiatives, the construction and maintenance of specific highways, ski trails, and bike lanes in the Forest Preserve. If a constitutional amendment is required for projects that enhance recreation (bobsleigh runs; ski trails) or improve mobility (roads) or do both (bike lanes within preexisting roads), then

a constitutional amendment is also required to construct rights of way for a different form of motorized transportation (snowmobiles).⁹

If the trails at issue here are equally important to New York as those projects were, then the people can express their will accordingly through the democratic process. Until they say otherwise, however, the door is closed because the planned Class II trails are constitutionally forbidden.

The order of the Appellate Division should be affirmed, without costs.

⁹ The 2017 amendment to article XIV, § 1, provided a simplified method of advancing a limited set of projects in the public interest, by adding 250 acres to the Forest Preserve and creating a “health and safety land account” of 250 acres of Forest Preserve land. The drafters of this amendment recognized that, under article XIV, it was “overly cumbersome, time consuming and expensive” for small communities to amend the Constitution for every modest public project they wished to execute (Senate Introducer’s Mem in Support). Accordingly, with the land account established, a town, village, or county may be granted Forest Preserve land to address a limited set of public projects as long as no other alternative exists (see Assembly Bill 2016-10721, available at https://nyassembly.gov/leg/?default_fld=&leg_video=&bn=A10721&term=2015&Summary=Y&Text=Y).

STEIN, J. (dissenting):

For well over one hundred years, the leaders and citizens of this State have strived to protect one of its most precious resources, the Adirondack Forest Preserve, consistent with the public policy that “[w]hatever the advantages may be of having wild forest lands

preserved in their natural state, the advantages are for every one within the State and *for the use of the People of the State*” (*Association for Protection of Adirondacks v MacDonald*, 253 NY 234, 238-239 [1930] [emphasis added]). To that end, the Forever Wild provision states that

“[t]he lands of the state, now owned or hereafter acquired, constituting the forest preserve as now fixed by law, shall be forever kept as wild forest lands. They shall not be leased, sold or exchanged, or be taken by any corporation, public or private, nor shall the timber thereon be sold, removed or destroyed”

(NY Const, art XIV, § 1).

This Court has long rejected an interpretation of the Forever Wild provision as mandating that, in order to keep the Forest Preserve “as wild forest lands,” we must endeavor to “preserve it from the interference in any way by the hand of man” (*MacDonald*, 253 NY at 238). That interpretation is contrary to the guiding principle that “[t]he Forest Preserve and the Adirondack Park . . . are for the reasonable use and benefit of the public” (*id.* at 240-241). Rather, we recognized that “[a] *very considerable use* may be made by campers and others without in any way interfering with th[e] purpose of preserving them as wild forest lands” (*id.* at 241 [emphasis added]).

The project at issue in this appeal—initiated by respondent New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) after a multi-year planning, public comment, and review process in conjunction with the Adirondack Park Agency—involves the construction in the Forest Preserve of segments of trails totaling approximately 27 miles to be used by hikers and, during the winter, snowmobilers. I disagree with the majority’s conclusion that the project “would work a substantial change to the Forest Preserve”

(majority op at 9). The majority misreads our State Constitution to arrive at the mistaken conclusion that the people of this State must undertake the arduous process of constitutional amendment to enable a long-standing public use of the Preserve to continue in a manner that is both safe for, and designed to protect, the Preserve's most sensitive resources. Because the majority's holding thwarts the intention of the drafters of the Forever Wild provision (NY Const, art XIV, § 1) and manifestly contradicts this Court's precedent, I dissent.

I.

The six-million-acre Adirondack Park is currently visited by approximately 12.4 million people annually (*see* Adirondack Council, State of the Park, 2020-2021, at 4, https://www.adirondackcouncil.org/vs-uploads/sop_archive/1599077695_SOP_2020_FINAL.pdf [accessed Apr. 9, 2021]), and the 2.6 million acres of state-owned Forest Preserve within the Adirondack Park contain nearly 2,000 miles of trails (New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, Welcome to the Adirondacks, <https://www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/119734.html> [accessed Apr. 9, 2021]). The state-owned land within the Park is classified into several basic categories (*see Matter of Adirondack Wild: Friends of the Forest Preserve v New York State Adirondack Park Agency*, 34 NY3d 184, 192 [2019]; Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan, at 16 [August 2019]), with most of the land in the Forest Preserve classified as Wild Forest (*see* Adirondack Council, State of the Park, 2020-2021, at 4). Under the Master Plan, “[m]otor vehicle use, including snowmobile use, is expressly authorized in wild forest areas” (*Adirondack Wild*, 34 NY3d at 193; *see* Master Plan, at 34-39). In fact, even in the absence of a single constitutional

amendment authorizing snowmobile trails, there are nearly 800 miles of trails in the Forest Preserve that can accommodate snowmobiles. Despite the existence of these trails, the majority deems unconstitutional the construction of 27 miles of new trails that are suitable for use by snowmobiles—but will serve multiple purposes year-round—on the ground that the new trails will lead to “a substantial change to the Forest Preserve” (majority op at 9). It is unclear how the continuation of a long-standing public use by means of a project that reduces the total number of trails in the Preserve and protects its most ecologically sensitive areas constitutes a substantial change or impacts the wild forest nature of the Preserve.

By way of background, in 2006, DEC and the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation adopted the Snowmobile Plan for the Adirondack Park/Final Generic Environmental Impact Statement. The plan anticipated a new trail system with no material increase in miles, but with the development and creation of trails to connect communities located within the Park, as well as the redesignation of existing trails within the forest interior as nonmotorized trails (*see Matter of Adirondack Council, Inc. v Adirondack Park Agency*, 92 AD3d 188, 189 [3d Dept 2012]). Under the plan, the new trails would be open year-round for recreational use by, not just snowmobilers, but also hikers, cyclists and cross-country skiers. The proposed placement of trail segments at the periphery of Forest Preserve areas—near existing roads—and the closure of multiple preexisting snowmobile trails located in the interior of the preserve was for the purpose of “ensur[ing] protection of sensitive resources on both public and private land” and achieving a “net benefit to the Forest Preserve lands” themselves (DEC & Office of Parks, Snowmobile Plan for the

Adirondack Park/Final Generic Environmental Impact Statement, 4 [October 2006]; *see Adirondack Council, Inc.*, 92 AD3d at 190).

In 2009, to implement the plan, DEC and respondent APA adopted the “Management Guidance: Snowmobile Trail Siting, Construction and Maintenance on Forest Preserve Lands in the Adirondack Park.” The Guidance provides for a two-tiered classification system for snowmobile trails, consisting of Class II, community connector trails and Class I, secondary trails that are spur trails or ungroomed (*see Adirondack Council, Inc.*, 92 AD3d at 189-190). This appeal involves only the Class II trails.

Like the snowmobile plan, the Guidance called for the closure of trails to motorized vehicle use in interior areas of the Preserve and the placement of new trails along the periphery of the forest to the extent possible to “shift[] the highest snowmobile use to the outer periphery of Forest Preserve lands” and lead to “lower noise levels, lower exhaust emission levels, decreased impacts on wildlife and reduced user conflicts between users participating in motorized and non-motorized forms of recreation” in “the wilder, more remote areas of the Forest Preserve.” The Guidance further provided that the cutting of “overstory” trees was to be avoided in order to maintain a closed forest canopy, and that old growth and large trees should be protected. Thereafter, DEC constructed 11 non-contiguous Class II trails or trail segments on Forest Preserve land. The 27 miles of new trails constructed between January 1, 2012, and October 15, 2014 required that a total of 6,184 trees measuring at least three inches or larger at breast height (DBH) be cut.

Following a trial on plaintiff’s claims in this declaratory judgment action, the courts below determined that the term “timber” in the Forever Wild provision “is not limited to

marketable logs or wood products, but refers to all trees, regardless of size” (175 AD3d at 31); thus, “approximately 25,000 trees,” including seedlings and saplings, “either had been or would be cut to construct the trails” (*id.*). Supreme Court—relying on the evidence that the tree cutting was not for commercial purposes, involved no clear cutting, and was in the nature of “the creation of a narrow trail through a wooded area” for use by the public—held that “the number of trees cut herein is not so ‘substantial’ under the within circumstances as to render the actions violative of the Constitution.” In contrast, the Appellate Division held that the construction of the Class II trails would result in an unconstitutional destruction of timber in the Forest Preserve “‘to a substantial extent’ or ‘to [a] material degree’” (175 AD3d at 31-32, quoting *MacDonald*, 253 NY at 238). Nevertheless, despite declaring that “construction in the Forest Preserve of the Class II Community Connector trails that were planned and approved as of October 15, 2014[] violates NY Constitution, article XIV, § 1” (*id.* at 33), the Appellate Division—like Supreme Court—concluded that “plaintiff failed to demonstrate how the construction of Class II trails, which have similar aspects to foot trails and ski trails and have less impact than roads or parking lots, impairs the wild forest qualities of the Forest Preserve” (*id.* at 29).

II.

As noted by the majority, all members of the Court disagree with the Appellate Division’s bifurcated analysis of article XIV, § 1 (majority op at 4, 9). The two sentences of this provision are interrelated such that the destruction of timber to a substantial or material degree necessarily violates the ‘forever wild’ prescription of Article XIV and,

concomitantly, the removal of timber that is not sufficiently substantial to impact the wild forest nature of the Preserve will not be unconstitutional. Although the amount of timber cut is central to the inquiry, the *MacDonald* “substantial extent” or “material degree” standard cannot be reduced to merely an exercise in tree counting, but requires consideration of the scope, nature, purpose and impact of the project on the affected area and on the Forest Preserve as a whole.

Turning to the legal issues disputed by the parties, the construction of the trails at issue here—involving the removal of 6,184 trees three inches DBH or larger—took place over 27 miles of non-contiguous, multi-use trails that did not adversely affect old-growth trees, retained a closed canopy, provided for erosion control, involved no infiltration of invasive species, and resulted in the closure to motorized use of 46 miles of preexisting snowmobile trails in sensitive interior areas. Under these circumstances, the subject timber cut is not sufficiently substantial or material, in itself, to impair the wild forest nature of the 2.6-million-acre Preserve within the meaning of the Forever Wild provision, particularly inasmuch as this Court has long recognized the primary importance of the public’s right to access the Preserve (*see MacDonald*, 253 NY at 238-239).

In discussing the history of the 1894 amendment that first added the Forever Wild provision, the majority correctly observes that the Forever Wild provision had its genesis in widespread public concern over the depredation of timber by industrial logging interests and the impact of commercial exploitation on the forest and watershed (*see majority op at 5-7*). The 1885 statute that created the Preserve mandated that the “forest preserve shall be forever kept as wild forest lands” and could not be sold, leased or “taken by any person

or corporation, public or private” (L 1885, ch 283, § 8). At trial, plaintiff provided undisputed testimony that the statute was enacted in response to the “[w]idespread belief that commercial logging was destroying the Adirondacks and all its value.”

Nevertheless, the Forest Commission, which was tasked with maintaining and protecting the Preserve (*see* L 1885, ch. 283, §§ 1, 9), continued to sell both land and timber in the Forest Preserve (*see* L 1893, ch. 332 §§ 103, 121). Thus, at the 1894 Constitutional Convention, the Committee on the Forest Preserve was animated by a concern that a forest “form[ed] during the lapse of uncounted ages can be swept away in a few years by the acts of the lumbermen and the fires that follow in his path” (4 Rev. Rec, 1894 NY Constitutional Convention at 130). The delegates recognized the value of the wild forest as a watershed (*id.* at 130-132), “as a great resort for the People of this State . . . for seeking, finding and preserving health” (*id.* at 131-132), and as “a symbol of sport, of recreation and pleasure-seeking” (*id.* at 133). With respect to timber, the proposed Constitutional amendment initially provided only that the timber on Forest Preserve lands could not be “sold” (*id.* at 124), but ultimately was revised to include the additional restriction that timber cannot be “removed or destroyed” (*id.* at 158). “Destruction of trees by flooding, through the erection of dams, was decried and was one of the reasons suggested for adding the word ‘destroyed’ to the amendment” (*Association for Protection of Adirondacks v MacDonald*, 228 App Div 73, 79 [3d Dept 1930]). In that vein, the chairperson of the Committee on the Forest Preserve, David McClure, expressed dismay at the “selling to lumbermen some of the trees, regardless of the devastation, burnings and stealing[] that follow in the lumberman’s track” and at “the notion of the lumbermen cutting the woods and taking out the best trees and

destroying, with every tree he takes, [50] in addition” (4 Rev Rec, 1894 NY Constitutional Convention at 139).

As the foregoing demonstrates, defendants are correct that the primary aim of the drafters was the prevention of commercial logging or the sale of land for that purpose, in order to preserve it for “the great number of pleasure seekers, [and] the great number of invalids that annually visit that territory” (*id.*). Thus, while the delegates intended to protect the Preserve from commercial exploitation, they did not intend to create a purely isolated and untouched forest haven; rather, they preserved the forest for the use and enjoyment of the People of the State of New York. That is, the delegates considered the protection *and the use* of the Preserve to be interlocking goals, not mutually exclusive or incompatible interests.

Our cases have consistently recognized that these are interlocking goals—preservation *for the purpose* of enabling recreational use of the wild forest land in the Preserve by the People. In 1899, just five years after the Forever Wild provision was added to the Constitution, this Court recognized that the “primary object of the . . . forest preserve was to save the trees for the threefold purpose of promoting the health and pleasure of the people, protecting the water supply as an aid to commerce and preserving timber for use in the future” (*People v Adirondack Ry. Co.*, 160 NY 225, 248 [1899] [emphasis added] [holding that a railroad operated by steam in the Park was not a permissible use of the land given “the well-known danger of destruction of forest lands by fires communicated by

locomotives”]).¹ We further explained that, in making the Forest Preserve lands “absolutely inalienable,” their “*use* is not restricted, either by legislation or circumstances, to a special locality, or to a limited number of inhabitants, but *is extended to all the people*” (*id.* at 247-248 [emphasis added]).

Approximately 30 years later, in *MacDonald*, the Court stated that

“[t]he purpose of the constitutional provision, as indicated by the debates in the Convention of 1894, was to prevent the cutting or destruction of the timber or the sale thereof, as had theretofore been permitted by legislation, to the injury and ruin of the Forest Preserve. To accomplish the end in view, it was thought necessary to close all gaps and openings in the law, and to prohibit any cutting or any removal of the trees and timber *to a substantial extent*”

(*MacDonald*, 253 NY at 238 [emphasis added]). The Court reaffirmed its understanding that “the advantages” of preserving the “wild forest lands . . . in their natural state . . . are for everyone within the State and for the *use* of the people of the State” (*id.* at 238-239 [emphasis added]). In other words, we have long considered the recreational use of the wild forest lands to be constitutional, so long as such use does not impair the wild nature thereof.

MacDonald is especially instructive here. The *MacDonald* Court noted that “[s]ome opinions, notably those of the Attorneys-General of the State . . . have even gone so far as to state that a single tree, and even fallen timber and dead wood, cannot be

¹ The majority errs in stating that this Court has considered the meaning of the Forever Wild provision only once before, in *MacDonald* (see majority op at 8). In fact, we first considered the meaning of the provision and explained its purpose in *People v Adirondack Ry. Co.* (160 NY 225, 248 [1899]), shortly after it was enacted.

removed; that to preserve the property as wild forest lands means to preserve it from the interference in any way by the hand of man” (253 NY at 238). However, *MacDonald* rejected that strict reading of the constitutional provision, stating:

“The words of the Constitution, like those of any other law, *must receive a reasonable interpretation*, considering the purpose and the object in view. . . . The Adirondack Park was to be preserved, not destroyed. Therefore, *all things necessary were permitted*, such as measures to prevent forest fires, the repairs to roads and proper inspection, or *the erection and maintenance of proper facilities for the use by the public which did not call for the removal of the timber to any material degree*. The Forest Preserve is preserved *for the public*; its benefits are for the people of the State as a whole”

(*id.* [emphasis added] [citations omitted]). It bears emphasis that *MacDonald* recognized that the maintenance of proper facilities for public use and access are among the “things necessary” that are permitted, so long as they do not result in “the removal of the timber to any material degree” (*id.*). As noted above, we also explained that “[a] very considerable use may be made by campers and others without in any way interfering with this purpose of preserving them as wild forest lands” (*id.* at 241).

Under *MacDonald*, *insubstantial* cutting to allow public use of the forest consistent with its character as a wilderness is constitutional. That rule follows from our recognition that the cutting of “timber” to provide for public use of the Preserve in a manner that maintains the Preserve’s wild forest nature is not a competing policy interest to be balanced against preservation of the wilderness; rather, both concerns are central to the purpose of the Forever Wild provision. In any event, it was settled by *MacDonald* over 90 years ago that there is no absolute bar on cutting “timber” to enable the public to use and enjoy the

Preserve as a wild forest, provided that such cutting is not to a “substantial extent” or to “any material degree” (253 NY at 238, 242). Thus, two of the questions before us on this appeal are what is “timber” and what is cutting of it to a “substantial extent” or “material degree.”²

With respect to the understanding of the term “timber” around the turn of the last century, contemporaneous statutes distinguished between the terms “tree” and “timber” or defined timber as trees of a certain size (*see* Former Fisheries, Game and Forest Law § 280 [enacted in 1895 and prohibiting trespass on Forest Preserve land and “cutting or carrying away or causing to be cut or assisting to cut or carry away, any tree, bark or timber within the forest preserve”]; L 1892, ch 707 § 3 [permitting the Forest Commission to purchase lands subject to the right of the owner to remove timber provided that it was not hard wood or “soft wood with a diameter of less than ten inches at the height of three feet”]; L 1894, ch. 317 § 84 [permitting those who discovered mines on state lands to cut timber necessary to make a road and requiring reimbursement to the state only for trees measuring four

² To the extent that plaintiff and the courts below read the word “timber” in the constitutional provision as referring to seedlings and saplings, that reading is contrary to the facts of *MacDonald*, as well as to the instruction therein that the Forever Wild provision “must receive a reasonable interpretation, considering the purpose and object in view” (253 NY at 238). Regarding the facts, the record on appeal in *MacDonald* makes clear that the smallest “tree” considered in that case was still at least three inches DBH. Moreover, it is not reasonable to interpret the term “timber” in the constitutional provision to include seedlings and saplings because only a few seedlings will grow into saplings and only a few of those saplings will grow into trees. Nevertheless, while seedlings and saplings may not be “timber,” defendants properly concede that a project’s effect on *all* vegetation, including small trees and new growth, must be considered in determining a project’s effects on the wild forest nature of the Preserve.

inches or more at a height of one foot from the ground]). There is no reason to believe that the drafters of the Forever Wild provision read the term differently.³

On a more pragmatic note, there are approximately 2,000 miles of hiking trails in the Preserve. Because maintenance of those trails requires the clearing of seedlings and saplings, as well as side cutting (*see* United States Department of Agriculture, United States Forest Service, Trail Construction & Maintenance Notebook, Clearing and Brushing; Removing Trees, <https://www.fs.fed.us/t-d/pubs/htmlpubs/htm07232806/page07.htm> [accessed Apr. 9, 2021]), adoption of plaintiff's interpretation of the term "timber" to include seedlings and saplings would disincentivize trail maintenance and thereby unreasonably increase the risk to the millions of people who use the Preserve each year. Any interpretation of the constitutional provision that would discourage the maintenance of existing facilities for the public would be contrary to our recognition in *MacDonald* that the "Forest Preserve and the Adirondack Park within it are for the reasonable use and benefit of the public" and that "the use of the park by campers and those who seek solitude of the north woods" is entirely appropriate (253 NY at 240-241).

³ During the 1915 Constitutional Convention, the delegates proposed that the words "timber thereon" be changed to "trees and timber thereon" in order to "mak[e] more inclusive the scope of the provision" (2 Rev Rec, 1915 NY Constitutional Convention at 1340)—reflecting the delegates' understanding that "trees" and "timber" were not interchangeable terms. Ultimately, the proposed 1915 Constitution was voted down in its entirety and the provision remained unchanged, but the proposed amendment indicates that the delegates in 1915 rejected the interpretation of the original Forever Wild provision that plaintiff now urges and the courts below adopted, namely that trees of all sizes are "timber."

In my view, under *MacDonald*, the timber cutting at issue here was not to such a substantial extent or material degree that it violated the Forever Wild provision. The purpose of the cutting is to open safe, year-round trails geared toward keeping users on the trails and out of sensitive areas. Unlike in *MacDonald*, where the cutting of 2,500 trees three inches DBH or larger was concentrated across a 1¼ mile long path, the trail construction at issue here does not involve a clear-cut, but the creation of narrow trails that run a total of 27 miles in segments throughout the vast Forest Preserve. Moreover, the construction at issue in *MacDonald*, which the Court deemed unconstitutional, involved “blast[ing] away about fifteen large boulders and the ends of three or four ledges of rock, entailing the removal by blasting of about 50 cubic yards of rock” (228 App Div at 76) to make way for the construction of a bobsled run plus the return route, altering the vista of the Sentinel Range and changing the character of the area. Although the total number of trees over three inches DBH to be cut is significant at 6,184 trees, the timber cut in the construction of the Class II trails is not substantial or material when spread out over the course of 27 miles and given that their purpose is to allow access to and public use of the Preserve in a manner which is fully harmonious with the natural surroundings; nor does the cut alter the wild forest nature of the Preserve.

Creating hiking trails for year-round use is entirely consistent with the purpose underlying the constitutional protection of the Forest Preserve, and the construction at issue here involves trails that the courts below found to be more in the nature of hiking trails

than roads.⁴ Such construction does not work a substantial change to the Forest Preserve within the meaning of *MacDonald*, particularly given that the construction of the Class II trails furthers the purpose of the Forever Wild provision. Specifically, as proposed, the construction at issue resulted in the rerouting of 46 miles of preexisting trails that ran through sensitive interior areas of the Preserve in order to close them to motorized use, which serves to protect the wild forest nature of the Preserve. Given the undisputed net benefit to the Preserve itself, the courts below correctly concluded that “construction of the Class II trails did not violate” the first sentence of “the ‘forever wild’ clause” (175 AD3d at 28).

Apart from the construction techniques and ecological purpose of these trails, consideration of the use to which they will be put is also proper under *MacDonald*. *MacDonald* involved, not just blasting, but also the clearing of thousands of trees for a “[s]port[] which require[s] a setting that is man-made [and] unmistakably inconsistent with

⁴ The majority notes that “projects to enhance recreation or provide access by motorized transport” in the Forest Preserve have been authorized by constitutional amendment, including the construction and maintenance of specific state highways (majority op at 12-13). To the extent the majority suggests that snowmobile trails are akin to state highways, rather than hiking trails (*see id.* at 10 n 8), such a determination would be contrary to the affirmed findings of fact of the courts below, which we are “without power to review . . . if such findings are supported by evidence in the record” (*Congel v Malfitano*, 31 NY3d 272, 294 [2018], quoting *Humphrey v State of New York*, 60 NY2d 742, 743 [1983]). Specifically, the courts below found that the trails are “more similar to hiking trails than to roads” (175 AD3d 24, 28 [3d Dept 2019]). That finding is supported by evidence in the record; as the Appellate Division explained, “[a]lthough the width of Class II trails falls between the width of foot trails (which vary from two to eight feet wide) and forest roads (which are typically between 12 and 20 feet wide), the trails are not paved or covered in gravel and are not crowned to divert water” (*id.* at 28).

the preservation of these forest lands in the[ir] wild and natural state” (228 App Div at 82). The Court explained that “[t]he same plea made for the toboggan slide in winter might be made for the golf course in summer, or for other sports requiring the use of the removal of timber. In other words, this plea in behalf of sport is a plea for an open door through which abuses as well as benefits may pass” (253 NY at 242). Those concerns are not present here because, as Supreme Court stated, “trails for access would appear to be the quintessential example of an appropriate use of the Preserve.” The trails do not irrevocably change the wild nature of the land affected, commoditize it in the manner of a “golf course” or “toboggan slide,” or encourage large, concentrated gatherings of sporting participants and spectators. Given the purpose and nature of these trails, together with the affirmed findings of fact that the trail construction techniques minimized adverse environmental impacts, it cannot be said the construction of the trails impaired the wild forest nature of the Preserve.

The majority’s conclusion to the contrary ignores the nearly 800 miles of similar trails already existing in the Preserve, the constitutionality of which is not disputed. Limiting public access to the Preserve on trails such as these, which are akin to hiking trails, defeats this Court’s instruction in *MacDonald* that the Forever Wild provision “must receive a reasonable interpretation, considering the purpose and the object in view” (253 NY at 238). Because the majority’s decision misapplies our precedent and undermines the very purpose of protecting the Forest Preserve for the benefit of the public seeking to access it in its wild forest state, I am compelled to dissent.

Order affirmed, without costs. Opinion by Judge Rivera. Judges Fahey, Garcia and Wilson concur. Judge Stein dissents in an opinion, in which Chief Judge DiFiore concurs.

Decided May 4, 2021



PRESS RELEASE
October 16, 2025

Vote Yes to Amend Article 14 of the NYS Constitution for Mt. Van Hoevenberg Winter Sports Complex

*Protect the Adirondacks urges voters to vote YES on the proposed
Article 14 Constitutional Amendment for Mt. Van Hoevenberg*

For more information, call Protect the Adirondacks:
Claudia Braymer, Executive Director: Cell 703.937.7163

Protect the Adirondacks, Inc. (PROTECT) supports a proposed constitutional amendment—on the ballot in November 2025—that resolves past Forest Preserve constitutional violations at the Mount Van Hoevenberg Winter Sports Complex near Lake Placid and requires that the State purchase an addition 2,500 acres of land to be added to the Adirondack Forest Preserve.

“This amendment will ensure that the integrity of Article 14, the “Forever Wild” clause, of the Constitution is respected, and it restricts development at Mount Van Hoevenberg to no more than 323 acres of land for the explicit purpose of Nordic skiing and biathlon trails and related facilities. The enabling legislation makes clear that other facilities not directly related to the operation of the Sports Complex, such as zip lines, hotels, and swimming pools, are not permitted,” said Claudia Braymer, Executive Director of PROTECT. “We urge the voters to vote yes on this amendment in November.”

As required by the Constitution, the resolution proposing an amendment to Article 14 of the New York State Constitution, the famed “Forever Wild” provision, for the Mount Van Hoevenberg Winter Sports Complex near Lake Placid, passed in two successive legislative sessions. The resolution sponsored by Senator Pete Harckham and Assemblymember Billy Jones (S.5227/A.7454) passed in 2023 during the 2023-2024 Legislative session and again in 2025 during the 2025-2026 Legislative session. In addition, enabling legislation (S.8047/A.3628) also passed the Legislature in 2025. Accordingly, the Constitutional Amendment now goes to the voters in November for a vote on whether to amend the Constitution with the proposed language. The language of the resolution for the proposed Constitutional Amendment is as follows:

Protect the Adirondacks!
PO Box 48, North Creek, NY 12853 (518) 251-2700
info@protectadks.org www.protectadks.org
Like Us on Facebook Follow Us on Instagram/Threads @ProtectAdkPark

NOTWITHSTANDING THE FOREGOING PROVISIONS, THE CONSTRUCTION, OPERATION, AND MAINTENANCE TO INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS FOR NORDIC SKIING AND BIATHLON TRAILS THAT WILL ACCOMMODATE GLOBAL COMPETITIONS, TRAINING, AND EVENTS, TOTALING NOT MORE THAN THREE HUNDRED TWENTY-THREE ACRES OF TRAILS AND APPURTENANCES THERETO, IS AUTHORIZED ON ONE THOUSAND THIRTY-NINE ACRES OF FOREST PRESERVE LANDS AT THE MOUNT VAN HOEVENBERG OLYMPIC SPORTS COMPLEX IN THE TOWN OF NORTH ELBA IN ESSEX COUNTY, AND AS AN OFFSET THERETO THE STATE MUST ACQUIRE FOR INCORPORATION INTO THE FOREST PRESERVE AT LEAST TWO THOUSAND FIVE HUNDRED ACRES OF FOREST LAND FOR INCLUSION IN THE FOREST PRESERVE IN THE ADIRONDACK PARK ON CONDITION THAT THE LEGISLATURE SHALL DETERMINE THAT SUCH LANDS ARE EQUAL TO OR GREATER IN VALUE.

The proposed constitutional amendment authorizes the State to use up to 323 acres of the 1,039 acres in the Mount Van Hoevenberg Winter Sports Complex for the construction, operation and maintenance of Nordic skiing and biathlon trails and a stadium for training, competition and world class events, as well as necessary facilities such as access roads, parking lots, offices, lodges and snowmaking equipment. The enabling legislation specifies the types of facilities not allowed, including hotels, swimming pools, and zip lines. In exchange, the State must acquire for incorporation into the Forest Preserve at least 2500 acres of forest land in the Adirondack Park.

The Mount Van Hoevenberg complex is a state-owned and operated facility managed by the Olympic Regional Development Authority (ORDA) and is located on the constitutionally protected Forest Preserve. The lands occupied by the complex are classified as “Intensive Use” by the Adirondack Park Agency. The complex also includes adjoining lands owned by the Town of North Elba; the Town-owned lands are not subject to the constitutional amendment. The complex includes the Olympic bobsled and luge track, cross-country skiing and biathlon trails, and associated facilities.

More background information is available here:

<https://www.protectadks.org/vote-yes-on-constitutional-amendment-for-the-mount-van-hoevenberg-winter-sports-complex/>

Protect the Adirondacks

Protect the Adirondacks is an IRS-approved non-profit organization dedicated to the preservation and stewardship of the 6-million-acre Adirondack Park. Our mission is to protect the Adirondack Park’s wild character for current and future generations. PROTECT pursues this mission through a combination of advocacy, grassroots organizing, independent public oversight, research, water quality monitoring, education, and legal action. Protect the Adirondacks was formed in 2009 as the result of a merger between two long-standing environmental conservation groups in the Adirondack Park,

the Resident's Committee to Protect the Adirondacks (est. 1991) and the Association for the Protection of the Adirondacks (est. 1901).

Protect the Adirondacks is managed by a 21-member Board of Directors of Adirondack leaders with expertise in environmental law, local government, Adirondack environmental and cultural history, state agency management, and small business. Protect the Adirondacks maintains an office in a 100% energy efficient, solar-and wind-powered office in Johnsbury in the central Adirondacks. For more information see www.protectadks.org and @ProtectAdkPark.

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Constitutional Amendment needed to re-purpose the 3 closed prisons in the Forest Preserve

Dear Assemblymember Glick and Senator Harckham:

There are now three decommissioned state prisons on Forest Preserve lands. Two are within the Adirondack Park and one is outside the Park on Forest Preserve lands in Saratoga County. The three closed prisons are Camp Gabriels Correctional Facility in the town of Brighton, Franklin County; Moriah Shock Incarceration Correctional Facility in the towns of Moriah and Elizabethtown, Essex County; and Mount McGregor Correctional Facility in the towns of Corinth, Moreau and Wilton, Saratoga County.

Staff

Peter Bauer
Executive Director

New York State's prison population has shrunk to around 32,000 from a high of nearly 75,000 in 1999-2000. The reduction in inmates has led to the closing of more than two dozen prisons around the State. Camp Gabriels has been closed since 2009 and Mount McGregor since 2014, while Moriah Shock was shut down more recently in 2022. The State Police are temporarily using the Mount McGregor facility for training exercises, but this is short-term. As state prisons, none of these facilities pay local taxes, unlike the majority of the Forest Preserve where all local real property taxes are paid by the State.

Claudia K. Braymer, Esq.
Deputy Director

Christopher Amato, Esq.
**Conservation Director
and Counsel**

The facilities could be demolished and removed by the Department of Corrections to restore the sites to a wild forest setting, but that does not

Protect the Adirondacks

PO Box 48, North Creek, NY 12853 518.251.2700

www.protectadks.org info@protectadks.org

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appear to be a realistic or responsible proposal for these facilities. The buildings at Moriah Shock are still in relatively good shape. Some of the dozens of buildings at Mount McGregor are massive structures made of stone and concrete. Some of the buildings at Camp Gabriels are historic structures. Demolishing the buildings would create a tremendous amount of waste and wasted opportunity.

The facilities could be used by the State, but the State has found it challenging to repurpose closed prisons throughout New York. For instance, the facilities could be taken over from the Department of Corrections by the Department of Environmental Conservation, the Adirondack Park Agency or the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation to be used in a way that is consistent with Forest Preserve restrictions, but no state agency has stepped forward with a plan for any of these sites.

The facilities could theoretically be conveyed to a private entity for redevelopment, but the State Constitution prohibits the leasing or sale of these facilities to a private entity without a constitutional amendment. More than a decade ago, the Office of General Services organized a series of public auctions for the Camp Gabriels facility, where the winning bid was eventually around \$166,000, but the sale was never completed due to the legal requirement for a constitutional amendment to clear title to the property.

Each of the three prison facilities is sprawling and contains a considerable acreage and assortment of buildings (see maps attached). Camp Gabriels includes roughly 92 acres and 48 buildings. Moriah Shock covers 60 acres and has around 20 buildings. Mount McGregor covers 53 acres and has around 100 buildings and structures. Camp Gabriels and Mount McGregor are linked historically to other state lands. Camp Gabriels was originally part of a much larger purchase, but the prison complex was separated from other Forest Preserve lands, which will remain as Forest Preserve, including a portion of the shoreline of Church Pond. The Mount McGregor prison complex is located adjacent to a historic site and other state lands, such as the historic Grant Cottage, where President U.S. Grant wrote his famous memoir as he was dying of throat cancer, and Lake Bonita in Moreau Lake State Park. The Town of Brighton is interested in gaining access to the Camp Gabriels' water system to create a new water district for local residences in the area around Route 86 where residential wells have been contaminated by road salt pollution.

From our discussions with local community leaders, they would like the opportunity to work with the State to repurpose these facilities and bring them back onto the tax rolls if they can be successfully removed from the Forest Preserve through a constitutional amendment. If they are not removed from the Forest Preserve, then nothing will happen with them, and they will sit and deteriorate. Camp Gabriels has already experienced significant building deterioration in the more than a decade during which it has sat dormant. Local leaders talk about possibilities like community housing, maker space, small manufacturing parks, non-profit office space, and educational facilities, among other things, although there are no specific proposals for any of the facilities.

Protect the Adirondacks supports a 3 Prisons Constitutional Amendment to Article 14, Section 1, the famous “Forever Wild” clause. Historically, Article 14 constitutional amendments are only pursued when they are needed to solve some kind of problem facing Adirondack communities or administration of the Forest Preserve. We believe that a 3 Prisons Amendment passes both tests for helping communities to provide municipal services and to improve Forest Preserve management.

For local communities, these fully developed sites hold the possibility that they could be repurposed somehow, either by one entity that purchases the facility, or by many entities, public and private, working together. The State could either sell or transfer them to local governments. While closed prisons do not have a strong track record of successful adaptive re-use in New York, the location of Mount McGregor in Saratoga County, long the fastest growing county in the state, and the good condition of all of the buildings at Moriah Shock, which was not organized as a standard prison, but functioned more like an educational campus, hold real possibilities. The location of Camp Gabriels in the Tri-Lakes area of the Adirondacks, arguably the most dynamic neighborhood in the Adirondack Park, also holds promise. In addition to meeting any number of public needs from housing to small business space to non-profit space, repurposing could bring these facilities back onto the tax rolls, which would benefit local governments and schools. The reality, though, is that nothing can happen without a constitutional amendment to free up these facilities for future public or private use.

An amendment would also remove scores of non-conforming buildings from the Forest Preserve and remove inconsistent, incongruent uses. Replacement lands to compensate the Forest Preserve would be part of the amendment, and these new lands would be managed as wildlands and provide public recreational and outdoor experiences. The existence of closed prisons on the Forest Preserve undermines very basic Forever Wild values of wilderness, solitude, outdoor recreation, wildlife protection, and universal openness and accessibility.

A 3 Prisons Constitutional Amendment is an investment in Adirondack communities and the Forest Preserve, and, really, what could be better than that? We encourage you to explore the viability of such an amendment for First Passage in 2024 along the lines of suggested draft legislative language below. As we see it, this amendment should be simple, and focused on repurposing three closed prisons and 205 acres on the Forest Preserve and compensate the Forest Preserve with 2,500 acres to be purchased by the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC). We suggest 2,500 acres because it’s significantly greater than the 205 acres being removed from the Forest Preserve, which we believe will make the amendment attractive to voters, and because the Mt. Van Hoevenberg Amendment, which received First Passage in 2023, also calls for compensation of the Forest Preserve with 2,500 acres of new lands.

Here is suggested draft language for a 3 Prisons Amendment:

Notwithstanding the foregoing provisions and subject to legislative approval prior to transfer of title, three decommissioned state correctional facilities on forest preserve lands totaling approximately two hundred five acres and including various buildings may be conveyed by the

state in a public or private sale provided that the state acquires at least two thousand five hundred acres of lands in the Adirondack park for inclusion in the forest preserve that the legislature determines are of equal or greater value. The aforementioned three decommissioned state correctional facilities are Camp Gabriels Correctional Facility in the town of Brighton, Franklin County; Mount McGregor Correctional Facility in the towns of Corinth, Moreau and Wilton, Saratoga County; and Moriah Shock Incarceration Correctional Facility in the towns of Moriah and Elizabethtown, Essex County. Camp Gabriels Correction Facility includes land developed as a private tuberculosis hospital, private college annex and state correctional facility, comprising forty-eight structures on approximately ninety-two acres of land along state route 86, part of lot 78, township 18, Great Tract 1, Macomb's purchase in the town of Brighton, Franklin county. Sufficient water rights on the above-described Camp Gabriels premises shall be held in reserve for the town of Brighton, Franklin county, for the purpose of creating a water district to supply potable water to residents in the area of Easy Street in the hamlet of Gabriels in the town of Brighton whose drinking water wells have been contaminated by road salt. Mount McGregor Correctional Facility includes the land developed as a tuberculosis sanitorium, home for veterans, facility for persons with developmental disabilities and state correctional facility, comprising up to one hundred structures on approximately fifty-three acres of land on Mount McGregor adjacent to Moreau Lake State Park, part of the Kayaderosseras Patent, 18th and 23rd Allotments in the towns of Corinth, Moreau and Wilton, Saratoga county. Moriah Shock Incarceration Correction Facility includes the land developed as a state correctional facility and up to twenty structures on approximately sixty acres of land that is part of the Iron Ore Tracts in the towns of Moriah and Elizabethtown, Essex county. Each of the aforementioned sales shall be subject to the condition that the properties be used for a public purpose after sale and that the revenue derived from each such conveyance be paid into an account of the state to be used solely for acquisition of lands within the Adirondack park to be added to the forest preserve as specified herein.

As stated above, we see a need for such an amendment to deal with the three decommissioned prisons on Forest Preserve in the North Country. We have talked with the local governments in the six towns and three counties where these facilities are located and there's general support to remove these facilities from the Forest Preserve, though there is concern about the complications of a constitutional amendment. We have told local government leaders and other stakeholders that there's no other way. The only way that these facilities can be repurposed is through an amendment. We have also briefed members of the State Senate and State Assembly on this issue and they have stressed the important role of your leadership and your committees. We look forward to discussing this matter further with you. Thank you for this opportunity to share our thoughts on this important matter facing the Forest Preserve.

Sincerely,

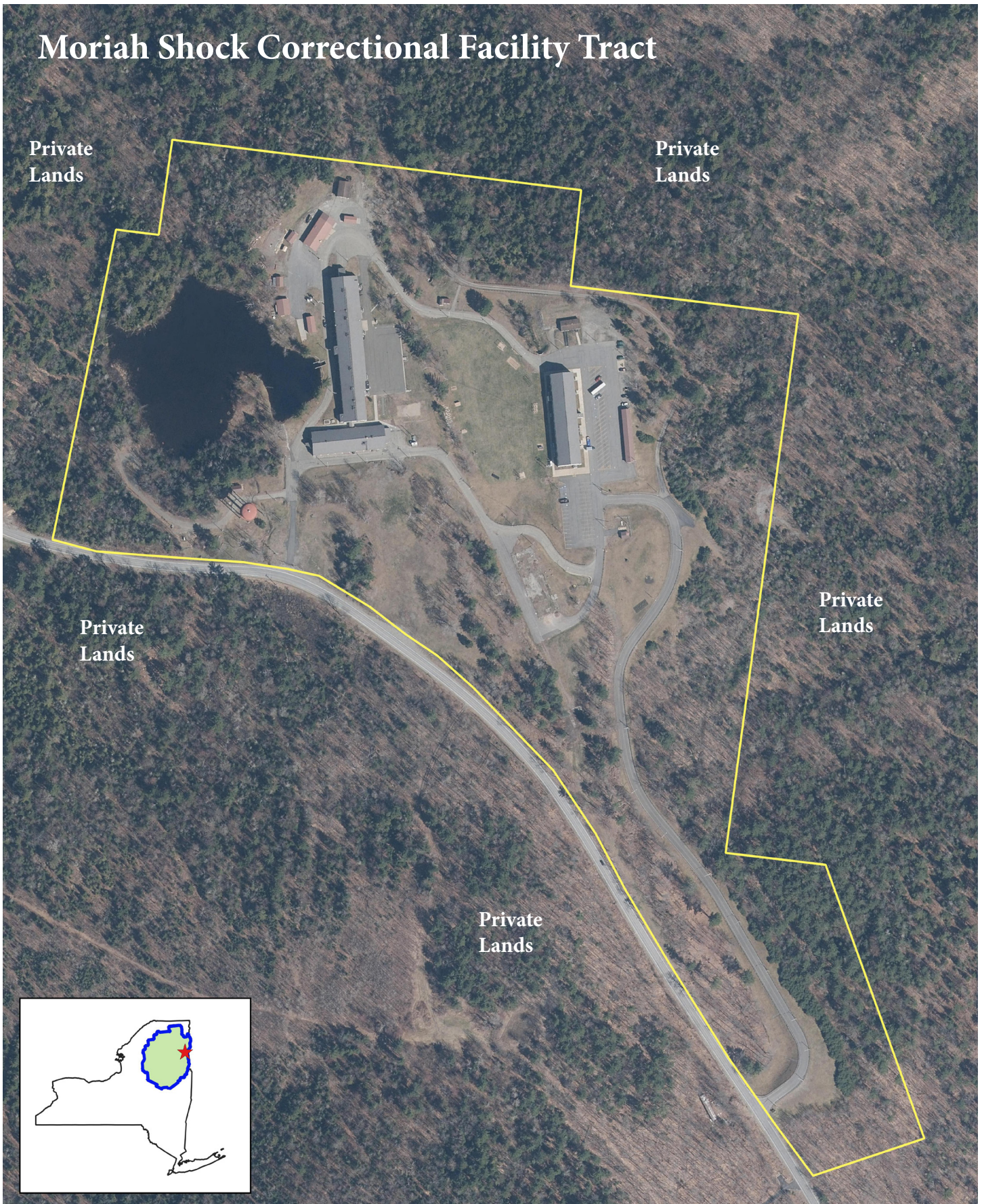


Peter Bauer
Executive Director

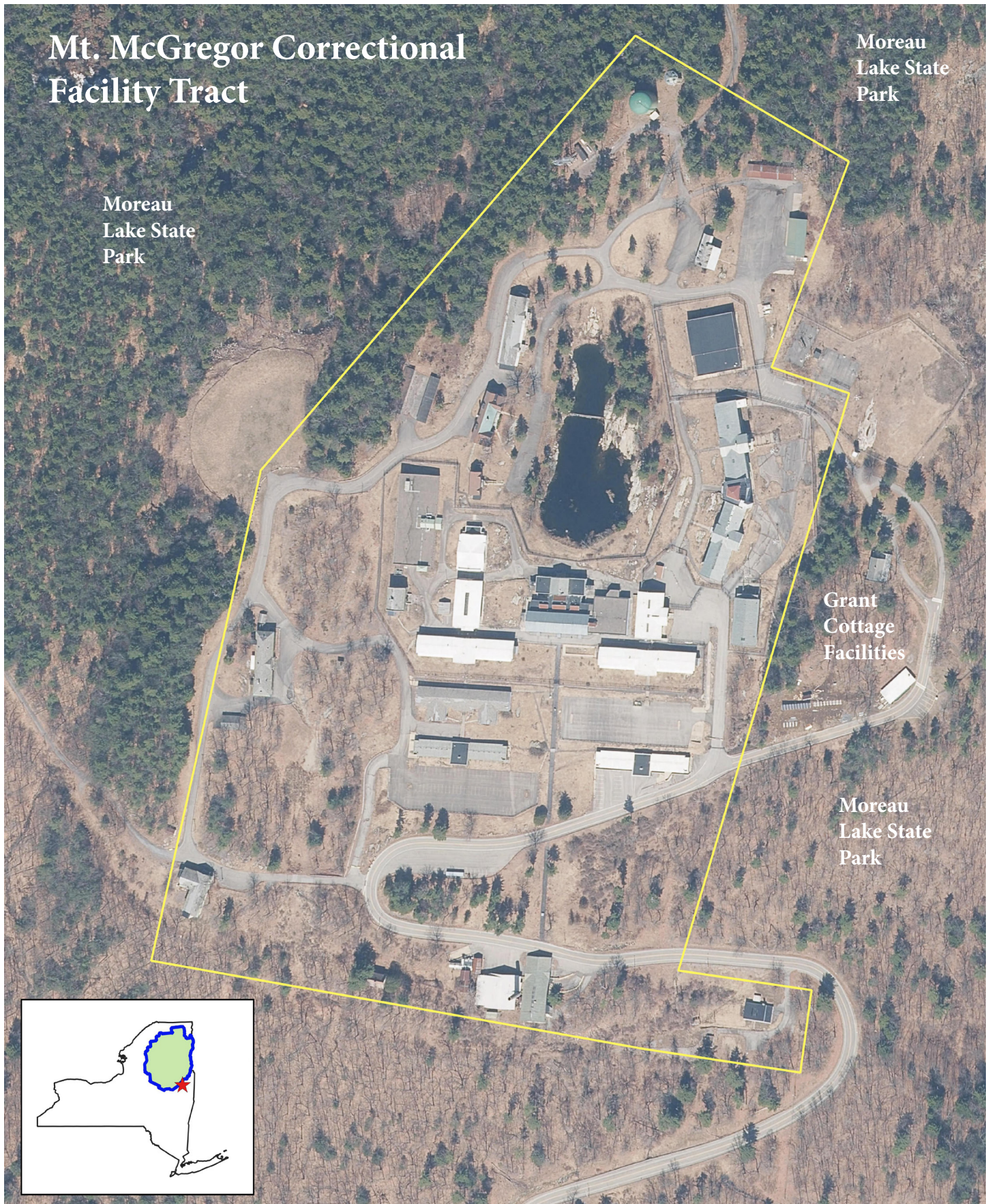


The decommissioned Camp Gabriels Correctional Facility in the Town of Brighton, Franklin County, includes 92 acres and more than three dozen buildings.

Moriah Shock Correctional Facility Tract



The decommissioned Moriah Shock Correctional Facility in the Towns of Moriah and Elizabethtown, Essex County, includes 60 acres and more than two dozen buildings.



The decommissioned Mt. McGregor Correctional Facility in the Towns of Moreau, Wilton, and Corinth in Saratoga County, includes 53 acres and nearly 100 buildings.