

# Oneida County resolution gives Pelican River easement supporters an opening

Those who want to shut off 70,000 acres forever are far from done

## News analysis

By Richard Moore  
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On a 12-6 vote with two abstaining, the Oneida County Board of Supervisors passed a resolution two weeks ago opposing the state's proposed conservation easement purchase in the Pelican River Forest, but a number of equivocations may have given an unintentional boost to easement supporters.

Indeed, the most important part of that resolution — the opposition to the easement — was also the most conditional. Rather than oppose the easement purchase outright, the resolution opposed the purchase “as proposed,” leaving room for negotiations.

Further, while the resolution specifically stated the county would not support the purchase of any more public land within the county without the county's approval or that of affected towns, the resolution itself did not foreclose such approval on this particular easement.

During deliberation, supervisor Steven Schreier pointed out that the resolution kept the easement purchase alive, if indeed the DNR and the Joint Finance Committee ultimately based their final positions on those criteria.

“Those two words ‘as proposed,’ to me, they should be italicized, underlined, bolded,” Schreier said. “The whole works. If I could work them into every single one of these, I would do it.”

In effect, it was a green light for negotiations to continue, and a victory of sorts for easement supporters. No doubt it also was music to the ears of the owners of the land, the Conservation Fund, and of the DNR, which is actively pursuing the easement purchase from the Fund.

The tentative mood of the board was also evident by the lack of any attempt to strike the words ‘as proposed’ in favor of outright opposition. Then, too, the relatively soft support for the resolution itself — outside of a handful of adamant supervisors — was also evident early on when the board swiftly rejected a Robert Briggs amendment to make the resolution even tougher, by capping the total supportable amount of public land in the county at 30 percent.

Supervisor Billy Fried, for one, thought Briggs's amendment was too arbitrary and could strip towns of their voice.

“One of the things for me with the whole resolution is empowering the towns to be at the table and make decisions which are best for their townships,” Fried said. “If a town is teetering at 20 or 30 percent, I'd love to see where the towns are empowered to make the decision for their towns.”

Supervisor Steven Schreier also called the cap arbitrary.

“This is saying that you want a resolution that really binds us and says over a certain percentage we're a no-go regardless of whatever the merits are of the proposal,” Schreier said. “We're sending a message: ‘Don't come to us anymore about this.’”

But Schreier said he didn't have a crystal ball. “I don't know what the merits of a future proposal could be,” he said. “I don't know what the 30 percent is based on. What is it based on? Is there some feasibility study that said once you get past this point it's some tipping point and suddenly we just can't provide ambulance, we can't do anything. I've got to have information.”

### Confusion

More than once, supervisors — both those opposed to the resolution and those supportive of it — expressed confusion about the disjointed nature of the resolution, not to mention the discussion on the county board floor, which careened back and forth between philosophical opposition to easements and conditional support for them, including the Pelican River Forest easement.

Part of the resolution opposed the easement purchase as proposed, part of the resolution called for the state to buy trail easements, part of the resolution called for an overhaul of the notification process for easement approvals, and part of the resolution skewered the DNR's mishandling of the Pelican River proposed purchase.

On top of that, even more luggage was loaded with Schreier's proposed amendment calling for a restoration of the severance tax, which is a tax on a specific unit of timber harvested and which once provided local governments with another source of revenue.

Given all that, supervisor Linnaea Newman said the county needed to take more time to study the issue before voting.

“It's about more than one thing,” Newman said. “I mean at one point we're looking to poke a finger in the eye of the DNR because they kind of screwed things up and there's the very important question of the Pelican River Forest easement and there's no doubt that when funds were taken away, small towns suffered. So at the risk of stating the obvious, if this is the first time we're coming up with this most recent change [Schreier's amendment], I don't think we're done with this yet and I think it deserves a lot more discussion.”

Supervisor Robb Jensen said he wasn't particularly partial to advisory referenda anyway, and he said this one had so many disparate parts that supervisors could be blamed for opposing provisions they didn't really oppose if they voted no.

“For those of you who were on the board when I was here, these advisory resolutions, they always bothered me in a lot of ways,” Jensen said. “Because the way I understand it, the towns and the county don't have the power here. This is going down and advising somebody of something, and then we get all these things in here and I might favor the county and the towns having an opinion, but, if I vote no, then I guess I don't favor that.”

There was so much in the resolution that needed to be broken out, Jensen said.

“You can end up keeping more and more things in here, and it's like a pork bill,” he said. “I just get troubled by these. The severance tax — that should come out of the forestry committee and are you in favor of that? So I just really struggle with these.”

Some of those items are good and some perhaps would not be supported by his constituents, Jensen said.

“I don't know,” he said. “We didn't go to referendum so I didn't ask them in terms of what 1,500 voters think. So my understanding is this is advisory in nature, that right now the counties and the towns can't say no or make any kinds of changes at the state level.”

That may be, Holewinski responded, but he said the state was looking for input.

“I do believe the state is looking for our comment and I do know that Langlade County is working on a similar resolution and I had a conversation with the chair from Forest County a few days ago, and she wants to look at this because Forest County can't even afford to pay social workers,” he said. “They've got over 80 percent of their land already in a government entity and now there's like 653 more acres going to be taken from Forest County for future development. So they're looking at it.”

Another equivocation put the county on record as supporting the state purchase of trail easements and road rights-of-way, and supervisor Mike Roach questioned the consistency of that language within the framework of the larger resolution.

Specifically, the language called for the state to purchase a 33-foot-wide easement for snowmobile/ATV/UTV trails in the forest, as well as a 66-foot-wide right of way over proposed woods roads, and for the state to deed those rights of way and easements to the county, with the DNR bequeathing already planned endowment funds to the county for maintenance.

“I'm in favor of not allowing any more public lands in my county,” Roach said. “I think we have enough. What if you took those lines out? ... Because now you're saying if I'm the owner instead of this Mr. [the Conservation Fund's Clint] Miller, this resolution's saying we don't want the easement on this land, but we do want it for roads. ‘So Mr. Roach, you own all this land. Oneida County wants you to put easements on it for four-wheelers.’ Is that what it's really saying?”

Roach said the resolution should state opposition to any more easements and nothing more: “We've got enough state lands, we've got enough government lands.”

Holewinski replied that those easements would keep that land open for future development but guarantee permanent access for ATVs, UTVs, and snowmobiles.

### Schreier contested

During the meeting, the resolution was most aggressively challenged by Schreier, who targeted language stating that Oneida County “does not want more public land within the county without county and town approval if federal or state funds are used to purchase easements.”

Schreier's original motion on the severance tax would have eliminated that language and, at another point, Schreier inaccurately attempted to portray it as saying the county did not want more public lands, period.

“I mean if you want to focus on what it [the resolution] says, what you have here, ‘Oneida County does not want more public land within their county...’ you're ignoring literally the reality around you,” he said. “Nobody came here today and said that. I've got nothing other than one email included with all of the other emails objecting. One objection. So how can we as a body



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