

11 July 2019

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Tax-free state lands are 'death by 98 cuts'

Middlefield is 31 percent owned by the state. This according to a report posted on Feb. 26 by the town Finance Committee on the town's website. It was a recap of the PILOT (payment in lieu of taxes) program where the town is only partially reimbursed by the state for the loss of property taxes. An additional 7.3 percent of Middlefield is owned by the Nature Conservatory and other NGOs (non-government organizations) who pay no taxes.

The report stated that Middlefield is 93 percent forested. This warehousing of forest land started in the 1930s to provide projects for the CCC and has continued unabated, with 98 parcels of land permanently removed from the town's tax rolls and any possible economic initiative. Middlefield accrues no advantage from this distant, non-revocable ownership. No one is wandering this wilderness and Middlefield must provide protection for this land.

Our small rural towns depend almost 100 percent on residential property taxes to finance their operations. A shortfall in state payments must be made up by the other taxpayers. Middlefield is a poor town which is unable to subsidize the green fantasies of our city folk neighbors — and legislators.

Completely overlooked is the percentage of buildable property permanently removed by the state's all-consuming ownership overreach. Middlefield has about 73 miles of road frontage. The state owns 12.4 miles (17 percent), or enough to provide 325 building lots with the required 200 feet of frontage each. Attracting new construction is the only way for Middlefield to avoid the ongoing demo-

graphic decline.

The "Rural Commonwealth" is an organization of 35 western small towns who have held 11 summit meetings exploring this and other state-related problems. Their primary recommendation was to ask the Legislature to provide consistent PILOT reimbursements. That seems unlikely to cure this problem.

I would demand a moratorium on all state and NGO land purchases in any town with over 10 percent ownership by state and NGO organizations. Secondly, give us our road frontage back.

Either that, or the state should buy the entire town to turn into forest and stop this death by 98 cuts to towns that have no recourse to stop this madness. The state might consider the savings of eliminating all the offices and programs associated with these purchases. You might already have enough wilderness?

The state places an economic value of less than \$100 per acre on non-road frontage property in its various chapter lands legislation. Why is the state paying \$1,000 or \$2,000 an acre for this land in the absence of other buyers? Absent the state, the property would reprice to its true value. The assessed value would fall to equilibrium, bringing fairness to this process.

The chapter land tax manipulation could probably be abandoned — but more on that next time.

Never a dull moment up here getting lost in the 93 percent Middlefield forest.

Howard Knickerbocker
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