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To enhance and protect the unique character of our communities through sound planning and development.

Position Paper 2 – NCCC Main Campus Expansion

The FTE Switch

From the time NCCC's plan to move to Lake Placid became public in December 2006, its stated reason for the move has always been "exploding enrollments." College officials have consistently set forth enrollments as the driving force behind their quest to build a new campus in Lake Placid or to expand the Saranac Lake campus. On January 22, 2007, Ed Trathen e-mailed to the entire college community a document entitled "North Country CC Campus Breakdown Of Enrollment Growth." Subsequently, at an all-faculty meeting, Mr. Trathen instructed those in attendance to refer to this document when members of the public confronted them with questions regarding the college's need to expand. This document compares college enrollment in the form of headcounts for fall semesters of 1999 and 2006. It also shows headcounts at other regional colleges for the same semesters. The numbers seem compelling, showing a 44% increase at the Saranac Lake campus and a 74% increase college-wide over a seven-year period, a rate of growth nearly triple that of the next fastest growing institution in the area; but no numbers were provided that might give the college community or the public at large any real perspective, and there was no hint of the utter collapse of enrollments that began with the fall semester of 1993, nor that only very recently has the college begun to enjoy a the level of enrollment that had been common through the 1980s into the early 1990s. "Exploding enrollments", based on headcounts, was nevertheless repeated like a mantra by both the college administration and the media. However, at the meeting of Wednesday, April 4, the reason for expanding or moving suddenly switched to a desire to increase Full-Time Equivalents (FTE) to 900 or better at the main campus alone. FTEs are based on a combination of headcounts and credit hours and are what the state uses to calculate its financial reimbursement to the college.

The April 4, Bernier, Carr and Associates presentation included some rather aggressive projections regarding FTE trends at the main campus. The figures they provided show

FTEs decreasing from 730 in the 2007-08 academic year to 700 in 2010-11, then jumping to 900 in 2011-12 with the completion of the new campus and reaching 1200 by 2013-14. A bit of history may help here. We do not have the FTE figures for the 2006-07 academic year; but the college has provided us with a trends summary for 1996-97 through 2005-06, and we have Dr. Karp's figures from 1979-80 through 1992-93. The highest FTE count for the entire college occurred in 1992-93, when the total was 1114.16 for combined fall and spring semesters. The FTE count from the main campus that year was 558.43. Only in the academic years 1980-81 through 1984-85 did the main campus FTE Count exceed 600, with 657.32 being achieved in 1984-85. Since 1999, the highest all-college FTE for which we have a number was 1095.8 in 2005-06, and that includes winter and summer sessions in addition to fall and spring semesters. The data provided by the college for fall 1996 through spring 2006 show FTEs for the main campus for fall semesters only; but we doubt that the full-year FTEs for the main campus reached 600 at any time during that period. The main campus barely broke 300 in the fall semesters of 2003, 2004, and 2005; and there was significant attrition going into the spring semesters for each of the following years, which would have held FTE totals down.

To propose that a new campus will, within three years of opening, generate more FTEs than the entire college has in its best years is, we believe, unrealistically optimistic. The number of high school graduates coming out of Essex County has already peaked, and Franklin County is peaking this year. After that, numbers from both counties decline for the foreseeable future. Statewide, the peak will be reached in 2009; and, seven years later, the number of people graduating from high schools in New York State will be fewer by 20,000. While the recruiting of older, "non-traditional" students may offset the effects of this trend somewhat, projections generated by the New York State Education Department, Office of Research and Information Systems, indicate that it will not be enough. Serving both Essex and Franklin Counties, North Country Community College straddles NYSED's Northern and Northeast Regions. FTEs in the Northeast Region are expected to peak in 2010 and then very gradually decline. FTEs in the Northern Region are also expected to peak in 2010, and will then decline more rapidly than in the Northeast Region, dropping 3% by 2013. This means that at precisely the time when every college in New York State will be scrambling to compete for a dwindling pool of applicants, the administrators of North Country Community College believe they can double the FTEs at the main campus. They are making an "If you build it they will come" gamble, and they are asking the citizens of Essex and Franklin Counties to come up with tens of millions of dollars to back their bet.

The April 4 presentation left us with more questions than answers. Here are some of them.

Malone and Ti

At the April 4 meeting, College attorney Jim Brooks claimed that new building at the Malone and Ticonderoga campuses has increased enrollments at those locations. Are we to believe that nothing else is or could be responsible? The college has a brand new and very handsome facility at Ticonderoga. In 2006, its first year of operation, it had a fall enrollment of 130 -- up significantly from the previous year. Nevertheless, the Ti campus had 136 students in 2000 when it was operating out of a storefront on Montcalm Street; and the 2006 figure falls far short of the Ticonderoga numbers from 1982-1992, and is only little more than half the all-time high of 249 in 1988. In Malone, where the Ballard Mill campus has been in operation for several years, it was not until 2005 that numbers there came close, at 468, to the all-time high of 477 in 1992. On the whole, the decade 1982-1992 showed much healthier enrollments in Malone than the decade 1996-2006.

Hodson Hall

Bernier Carr maintain that Hodson Hall has "outlived its usefulness" and must be demolished. We believe that the demolition of structurally sound, historic buildings is an idea that has outlived its usefulness. Most colleges cherish their older buildings and maintain them lovingly. Hodson Hall was built as the original Saranac Lake General Hospital in 1912-1913, not 1890 as college administrators and their consultants claim. Yes, that still makes an old building; but we wonder if the administrators and consultants are as accurate in predicting costs for a new campus and the FTEs it is supposed to attract as they are in dating the building that is currently the college's headquarters. And what will go in the location that is now the gateway to North Country Community College?

What are we paying for?

For all the talk and all the dollar figures that were presented on April 4, those listening learned little more than they knew when they walked in. They were told a new campus in Lake Placid would cost just over \$52 million, and in Saranac Lake it would cost just under \$62 million. This is up from the \$40 million that the county representatives heard when they were last entertained by college administrators in January. The audience this time was presented with costs of categories: for example, approximately \$5 million for upgrades, \$4 million for site work, \$9 million for contingency in Saranac Lake; slightly lower figures for the same in Lake Placid; and the heftiest category being new additions, costing \$32 million in Saranac Lake and \$28 million in Lake Placid. Nothing was said to indicate specifically what any of this money would build, with one exception: a 57,000 square-foot parking garage in Saranac Lake. And where on the campus would that go? The presenters didn't say, but we have a pretty good idea. One plan calls for the parking

garage to go on the site that would be made available by the demolition of Hodson Hall.

What plan is that? Bernier Carr did not present a plan, and college administrators have implied for months that there is no plan, insisting that everything is in a very "preliminary" stage. Nevertheless, there is a plan -- in fact, there are at least three plans, preliminary though they may be -- dating back to May of 2006, if not earlier. We have obtained copies of two of the plans for Saranac Lake, entitled Option "A" (\$34.8 million) and Option "B" (\$39.5 million). These were produced in-house by the college's Director of Buildings and Grounds, who declined to provide us with copies. We observed a plan for the Lake Placid site in the Director's office, but he declined our request for a copy of that as well; and we have not yet been able to obtain one from other sources.

And the parking garage? In Option "A", it would cost roughly \$5.4 million and be located just west of the Sparks Athletic Complex under a new Field House, which would cost \$4.5 million. This option calls for \$4 million to renovate Hodson Hall. In Option "B", which was produced in August 2006, the garage would cost \$5.5 million and would not only take out Hodson Hall but most of the Pine Grove is well -- a beautiful space at the top of the hill, where open-air classes are often held during warm weather and which is much more attractive to students than any parking garage ever could be. There would still be a Field House. This one would be attached to the west side of Sparks and would cost \$4.8 million. Bear in mind, these are college generated figures from 2006. Bernier Carr's estimates for the same projects, had they chosen to divulge them, would be much higher judging from the Bernier Carr price tag for the Saranac Lake campus of \$62 million, which exceeds Option "B" by 50% and Option "A" by 70%. If the college absolutely must have a parking garage, why could it not be built over or adjacent to the currently underutilized north parking lot?

And what about the theater? Did anyone mention a theater? No, but at the April 4 meeting, the Vice President for Academic Affairs, Tom Finch, spoke of four program areas that the college would like to develop to attract students in the future. These were (paraphrasing): respiratory therapy; performing arts; environmental science; and holistic medicine. These are all laudable goals; but, as much as we appreciate and support the performing arts, they present a problem in this context. The problem is a theater: \$1.1 million in Option "A"; \$1.7 million in Option "B". Bernier Carr's price tag might be more like \$2.9 million. We encourage the college to offer unique programs that do not require expensive infrastructure. We also encourage the college to focus the taxpayer's resources on the improvement and expansion of classroom, laboratory, library, and student services facilities. We have serious doubts about the necessity of field houses, theaters, and parking garages -- not to mention nearly \$2 million in Option "A" (could be \$3.4 million in Bernier Carr's world) for 10,000 square feet of "building connections", including a link

up the hill from Clermont Hall to the Library and then down the hill from the Library to the Connector.

Which is it?

In the capital improvements portion of their presentation, Bernier Carr stated that there was 119,226 square feet of space at the Saranac Lake campus. In the expansion portion of their presentation, they said there was 67,000 square feet when they were comparing the Saranac Lake campus to the 58,000 square feet available in the Lake Placid building. Does the higher figure include the dorms and other noninstructional space? If not, what do those numbers mean? Is one incorrect? If so, which is it?

Speaking of dorms

In addition to its existing instructional and administrative facilities, the Saranac Lake campus currently has three dormitories -- a rarity for community colleges and an amenity of which NCCC is justifiably proud. Throughout this process, no one has said anything about dorms at the Lake Placid site; and we suspect that there are no plans to build any there. The housing situation in Lake Placid is no secret to anyone. It is not student friendly, to say the least. Are the NCCC administrators thinking of following the extraordinarily bad example set by Paul Smith's College in busing the students to Lake Placid? Or are they simply going to leave the students to their own devices? This issue alone gives the lie to the position that a move to Lake Placid would be "best for the students" and should be seen as serious enough, in and of itself, to nix the Lake Placid deal.

The two location non-solution

The suggestion has been made that the college buy the Upstate Biotech site in Lake Placid and set it up as a satellite campus. This may be appealing in terms of striking a compromise, but it is a very bad compromise. It would be inefficient, at best. At worst, it is a formula for abandoning the Saranac Lake campus piecemeal. It is not a solution; and we oppose it unequivocally.

Up to code?

Bernier Carr repeatedly stated that it would be necessary to bring the existing buildings at the Saranac Lake campus "up to code," adding to the expense of expansion at this location. However, they never gave any examples. What specifically at NCCC's main campus is not up to code?

Who will maintain it?

In 1999 the Saranac Lake campus at NCCC had a maintenance crew of 10 people; but the maintenance department has been at the receiving end of a peculiar, counterintuitive trend at the college. While enrollments have been increasing since 1999 and, with them, wear and tear on the campus facilities, the number of maintenance personnel has been decreasing. Now there is a crew of five. Two of those work evenings as cleaners, and one is on indeterminate leave; so that leaves two to do the actual skilled tasks and grunt work of keeping the campus running. Traditionally, there has been one management position in the maintenance department; but, in an ironic twist to this story, a second position was recently added. So now, with enrollment "exploding" and the administration lobbying for an expanded campus in Saranac Lake or a new campus in Lake Placid, the very department charged with campus maintenance has had its labor force cut in half while its management has been doubled. If the administration is asking the taxpayers to make a multimillion dollar investment in the college, aren't the taxpayers entitled to have that investment protected by a fully staffed maintenance department?

Where's the difference?

The public has now repeatedly been told by college administrators and consultants that it would cost millions of dollars more to do what needs to be done in Saranac Lake than to build a new campus in Lake Placid. Where is the difference? It seems that a major part of this is the parking garage, which, in both Option "A" and Option "B", comes in at around \$5.5 million. Using the Bernier Carr inflation factor would bring the price to somewhere between \$8.25 million and \$9.35 million. Can the college's architects not find a more creative and economical way to deal with the parking situation at the Saranac Lake campus? And, once again, is a Field House essential? Can the college not offer excellent educational opportunities without one? Finally, while the Saranac Lake site is technically more demanding, it is also a much more exciting site, topographically, than that in Lake Placid; and the views are just as good. We challenge the architects to work with the Saranac Lake site in ways that turn its difficulties into advantages.