

Area Leaders Meet with Snowmobile Clubs

Cooperation and communication are needed to keep Chautauqua County snowmobiling safe and enjoyable according to Chautauqua County Legislator Fred Croscut. Croscut organized a meeting of local officials, state elected representatives, law enforcement, and members of the areas snowmobile clubs on Saturday, November 14th at Webb's in Mayville. The meeting provided a forum for discussion and information sharing for such issues as snowmobile registration procedures, economic impact of snowmobiling, the role of snowmobile clubs, and priorities regarding law enforcement.

State Senator Catherine Young spoke about the importance of snowmobiling to the district's wintertime tourism industry and economy. She went on to commend the volunteers with area clubs for improving the riding experience for visitors and local snowmobilers. Assemblyman Joe Giglio reported that he and other State elected representatives have been fighting to keep designated State funds from snowmobile registrations flowing to clubs for trail grooming and maintenance.

Cherry Creek Sno-Goers member Rick Engasser presented information regarding the activities of area clubs and statistics concerning snowmobiling in the area. Engasser pointed out that the clubs have become far more efficient in recent years, equating them to small businesses, but staffed only by volunteers. Volunteers in clubs in Chautauqua County contribute 1,830 hours to grooming (mostly at night), another 2,200 hours of trail maintenance and development time, and safety patrol functions. Clubs operate 20 groomers which groom over 400 miles of State-reimbursed trails and another 200 miles of secondary trails. Although the volunteers are what makes it all possible, Engasser and others stressed how important the land owners who give permission for trails to cross their land are. Without cooperation and mutual appreciation between land owners and riders, snowmobiling would not exist in Chautauqua County the way it does today.

Snowmobile clubs in Chautauqua County include the Chautauqua Lake Snowmobile Club, the Cherry Creek Sno-Goers, the Ellery Sno Cruisers, the Lake Effect Trailbreakers, and the Sunset Drifters. The Chautauqua County Snowmobile Federation is comprised of members from each of the clubs and serves as a forum for communication, coordination, and planning.

Engasser presented four main priorities for the local snowmobiling industry. They are land owner relations, effective law enforcement and safety, signing & marking trails, and resources necessary to maintain and groom the trails. In terms of resources, it was noted that the clubs do not rely on any general State or local tax dollars but instead "pay their own way" by using a portion of snowmobile registrations, selling ads on trail maps, charging club dues, putting on fund-raising events, and seeking grants for capital projects.

Mr. Engasser concluded the presentation by stating the official snowmobile season will continue to be the day after the conclusion of shotgun deer hunting season. There was a lot of discussion about ways to keep snowmobilers off the trails until hunting season is over, and at other times when the trails aren't in proper riding condition. It was determined that ongoing communication to snowmobilers was the best method to enforce this concern. Chautauqua Lake Snowmobile Club member Chris Jaynes presented information about bridge repairs on segments of the trail system, stating that there are ongoing challenges to keeping all bridges in repair.

Barb Lucariella of the Department of Motor Vehicles informed attendees that the Mayville DMV office will again be open Saturdays from 9 a.m. to as late as 3 p.m. This has been tremendously helpful in the past for snowmobilers that have yet to register their sleds in New York when they arrive. It is a law that snowmobilers must have a valid New York registration as well as proof of insurance. Lucarella stated that renewals are already coming in, including many from out-of-state. The number of registration in the 2008/09 season was over 4,000. Snowmobilers that join a club in New York State receive a reduced registration cost. This arrangement helps spur membership in clubs which in turn improves the flow of information to snowmobilers and keeps trails in good working condition.

Don McCord, representing the Chautauqua County Planning Office informed the audience that most of the trails in Chautauqua County have been plotted for GPS systems, a task that should be repeated every two to three years as changes in the trails occur. McCord let club members know that Chautauqua County will soon be sending out contracts for 2010 so that the clubs can receive reimbursements from the State through snowmobile registration fees. In 2009, local clubs received \$299,000 for the more than 400 miles of trails groomed, maintained and signed by the clubs.

The discussion on law enforcement centered on public safety issues and ways to protect the interests of land owners in the trail areas. Making sure that snowmobilers are not operating under the influence of alcohol was the top public safety issue, followed by curbing excessive speed and dangerous operation. Law enforcement officials stated that the majority of snowmobile operators do not engage in these behaviors but that they will be watching out for those that do. This drew a strong positive response from club members at the meeting.

In addition, law enforcement personnel monitor for noise violations on modified sleds. The extremely loud snowmobiles are an irritant to land owners and may lead to strained relations between land owners and those maintaining the trails. Officers will also check for valid NYS registration and proof of insurance. Law enforcement includes the Chautauqua County Sheriff's office, the New York State Police, the New York Park Police, and the Department of Environmental Conservation officers. Police agencies usually have a presence out on the trails with officers on snowmobiles, as well as sporadically checking at road crossings from vehicles. The law enforcement effort is supplemented by the volunteer safety patrol, which sends out snowmobilers in groups of two or more to monitor safety, conduct safety inspections, and report emergency and dangerous situations.

There was a lot of discussion about ways to avoid having snowmobilers stopped more than once by different agencies. The solution hinges on requiring that proof of insurance be provided when registering a sled. In this way, law enforcement personnel would be reasonably assured that a sled was both registered and its rider insured. Such action would require a State Law. Law enforcement representatives maintained however that they would still need to be out there checking for impaired riders, noise violations, lapsed insurance, and overall public safety.

Jack Vanzile, of the Chautauqua County Sheriff's Navigation-Snowmobile Enforcement unit, stated that information on snowmobile safety courses is available at www.sheriff.us, in the Navigation Unit section. Additional information on safety courses is found at www.trailbreakers.com. Snowmobile registration assistance is available at the Chautauqua County DMV, 716-753-4229.

Additional officials at the meeting included Jim Caflish, Chautauqua County Legislature District 21, Jerry Park, Chautauqua County Legislature District 5, Marty Bova, Mayor of Mayville, Don Emhardt, Supervisor Town of Chautauqua, Andrew Avery, NYS Office of Parks & Recreation, Scott Ritchie, NYS Park Police, Chad Juenker, New York State Police, Darin Shultz, Chautauqua County Finance Director, and Andrew Nixon, Chautauqua County Visitors Bureau.



New York State Senator Cathy Young



Rick Engasser