

SACANDAGA LAKE

Watchdog says aim is to give lake folks a voice

BY JOE MAHER

Gazette Reporter

Peter Van Avery knows how to rattle the bureaucrats' cages.

After a long career in corporate communications, the recently retired Van Avery became a public figure in 2000, a year after the state Department of Transportation proposed a replacement for the Batchellerville Bridge in Edinburg.

He co-founded the Batchellerville Bridge Action Committee with neighbor Maryann Haskell, and helped forge a compromise height for the replacement span after a long public battle with the DOT.



VAN AVERY

Shortly after that issue was settled he was back in the papers, this time taking on the Hudson River Black River Regulating District, the public authority that operates the Great Sacandaga Lake, a manmade, flood-control reservoir.

The district's board had proposed a fee hike for people who have access permits to use the state-owned lake, increases in some cases that topped 1,000 percent.

Since then the self-appointed government watchdog has worked to shine a light on the agency's actions, calling on the attorney general, the state comptroller and the governor to investigate the district.

One comptroller's audit and numerous staff and board resignations later, Van Avery, a Schenectady resident and seasonal resident of Edinburg, is still fighting.

He complains about the "glacial speed" of change and questions whether the new executive director is truly a reformer or just a public-relations whiz.

See **WATCHDOG**, page A8

Watchdog

Continued from page A1

This guy doesn't mince words. Even his allies say he goes too far on occasion, although they don't question his credibility.

"I wish he'd lay off sometimes," said Northville resident and fellow regulating district critic Guy Poulin. "I think he's hypercritical but he's got his facts pretty straight. That's my opinion. . . . He doesn't stop, you know?"

Others who have found themselves in Van Avery's sights say they wish he wasn't so negative.

Still others, including Willard Loveless, who quit as the regulating district's executive director after the fee-hike proposal was withdrawn, won't say anything.

Loveless declined to comment for this story and former board member Tim Noonan of Old Forge didn't respond to a message seeking comment.

CRITICISM CONTINUES

Richard Lefebvre, who has been the executive director of the regulating district for about a year now, made it a point to meet with Van Avery after he was appointed. He said the meeting was cordial and touched on many issues. Still, Van Avery has continued to criticize the district, and officials admit they're getting tired of hearing the criticism.

"We seem to be the recipients of a great deal of criticism that is negative and not very often the recipient of positive stroking," Lefebvre said. "I find it hard to believe that in a year's time we have only solicited negative responses when I know that the district is much different today than it was a year ago. I just wish that he could be more positive at times."

District board member James Jankowski of Broadalbin said Van Avery needs to understand that government moves slowly and all district operations are being reviewed by other state agencies such as the comptroller's office.

"His complaints are valid, we are working on them. We hope he's satisfied that we're working on them. He's got to be seeing these things Dick Lefebvre's done," Jankowski said.

Van Avery said he's still making critical comments because the

district is slow to change and keeps making mistakes. He cites the recent release of the findings of the comptroller's audit.

"I am not satisfied with the rate at which the district is making changes. It has a tiny staff of fewer than 30 employees, and it ought to be easy to turn around the operation," he said.

"Executive Director Lefebvre took office in mid-January 2004. He must have become quickly aware that the secretary-treasurer and the counsel were being paid full time for part-time work, with full medical, dental, and vision benefits. Why did it take five months to remove them from the payroll?"

"And wasn't he aware that the district was reporting full-time service credits on these part-time employees to the New York State Retirement System? In fact, if the comptroller's auditors hadn't shown up in March, would those two individuals still be on the payroll?" Van Avery said.

DEEP ROOTS

Van Avery has deep roots in the Great Sacandaga Lake area. His paternal great-great grandfather and grandmother were among the earliest settlers in Edinburg in 1813.

Van Avery was born and schooled in Schenectady, earned a degree in English literature from Yale University, and took his first job in 1956 at Scholastic Inc., a publisher of educational magazines in New York City.

"The starting pay was 70 bucks a week, considered low even in those ancient days, but considering my lack of experience, it was more than I was worth," Van Avery recalled.

He said he learned the art of writing a simple sentence from an editor at Senior Scholastic, a magazine for social studies students.

"The editor was an old hand in the magazine business, a tough-as-nails perfectionist. He kept me there night after night until 10 or 11 p.m., tearing apart my articles and slowly putting them back together," Van Avery said.

By 1962 Van Avery was married, and he and his wife had their first child. They decided to leave the city. Van Avery returned to his hometown, working in the communications operation at the GE Research and Development Center, eventually becoming manager. He said he loved the job.



MARC SCHULTZ/GAZETTE PHOTOGRAPHER

Peter Van Avery visits the Crosstown Expo Boat Show in Schenectady's Crosstown Plaza. Van Avery is a self-appointed government watchdog. His targets have included the state Department of Transportation and the Hudson River Black River Regulating District, which operates the Great Sacandaga Lake.

"What a delight to work with reporters from around the world in announcing such exciting innovations as revolutionary high-speed medical imagers, high-performance engineering plastics, artificial-intelligence systems, high-efficiency lighting systems, the world's first made-in-the-laboratory gem diamonds, and advanced electric and hybrid vehicles," he said.

Van Avery said when he retired in 1996 his plan was to fix up the family camp his parents had built in 1951.

"My idea of heaven is building walls out of knotty pine boards and then trimming up doorways and windows. Outdoors, I get my kicks out of cementing up stone walls," he said. "For someone like me who spent a lifetime shuffling paper, it's a thrill to build something that you can step back and admire."

Van Avery also admits to being a fan of horror movies, reading fiction, collecting classical music CDs and attending SPAC concerts, boating and fishing. "And, best of all, hanging out with our four children and our eight young grandchildren," he said.

VIEW OF BRIDGE

Van Avery's lakeside camp in Edinburg has a view of the Batchellerville Bridge, and it was the planned replacement of that span — more accurately the state

DOT's approach to presenting the plans to the public — that turned him into an activist.

He accused DOT officials of planning informational meetings after seasonal residents had left the lake, and of planning an unnecessarily high new bridge.

Five years later the Batchellerville Bridge Action Committee has about 500 members. Van Avery said it was created to further the interests of the 4,650 access permit holders on Great Sacandaga Lake.

"The vast majority are seasonal residents who live in the Capital District, elsewhere in the state, or even outside its borders. Although they quadruple or quintuple the populations of lake-area towns in summer, and pump huge amounts of money into the local economy through property taxes and purchases, they can't vote, and they therefore have no influence on local government. Our mission is to give this 'silent majority' a voice," he said.

Van Avery said his ultimate goal is to preserve the beauty of the lake for his grandchildren to enjoy.

"I'm the last guy in the world who ever thought he'd become a government watchdog. When I started out, some of my friends and neighbors shook their heads sadly and told me I was wasting my time. I confess that I had some doubts, too," Van Avery said.

But sitting through lengthy board meetings has its payoffs, he said.

"I've met a lot of wonderful people around this beautiful lake, and their words of encouragement through letters, e-mails, and phone calls make it all worth while. Although I qualify as a senior citizen, some of the folks cheering me on are a lot older than I am. Many are living on fixed incomes, and they tell me that their camp is their one pleasure left in life. When I tire of the battle, I think of them and that recharges my batteries," he said.

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