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OCCA seeks to map Otsego's resources

By Tom Grace

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The Otsego County Conservation Association is reviving a project to catalogue Otsego County's resources, including geography, climate and infrastructure.

"We were working on this a few years ago, but it's not something that one organization can do alone," said Teresa Winchester, OCCA's assistant director. "We're going to need help from a lot of people to get this done, but it's something that's definitely needed."

While there are many reasons to take stock of the county's resources, the prospect of imminent widespread drilling for natural gas in the area's shale beds has put the project on the front burner, Winchester said.

Information compiled a half-decade ago will have to be reviewed to make sure it's up-to-date, she said, but may form a basis for going forward.

In June, at a conference on gas drilling at SUNY Morrisville, environmental attorney Kimberly Rea suggested that communities take stock, Winchester said.

"She said it was very important to have base-line information on resources," Winchester said.

OCCA's survey should not be seen as a tool to prevent local gas drilling "but a way to help ensure that it's done appropriately," she said.

Erik Miller, OCCA's executive director, said the organization hopes to prepare "an encyclopedia of the area's resources, so everyone knows what exists in the county and everyone knows what's yet to be documented."

Miller said the natural-resource inventory should help officials make informed decisions on planning many types of development, not just siting gas wells.

"It should help us craft developments that do the least possible amount of environmental damage," he said.

The project is massive, but OCCA will start by seeing what data are on record, he said.

Miller said among the county offices OCCA will work with will be the geographical-information systems office and the soil and water office.

OCCA will "see what they have," Miller said. "We'll go to the USDA, try to build on what's already out there."

After ascertaining what's on record, he said, researchers will try to determine what information is missing and how to fill in the gaps.

"It's a large project, not something you can complete in a month or two, and we're going to need help from the community, from researchers, from many people, to get this done," he said.

Among categories likely to be looked at are "geography-topography, geology, hydrology, soils, vegetation, wildlife, wetlands, land use, climate, air, historical and cultural features, existing and planned infrastructure, noise, regional relationships, contaminated sites and critical environmental areas."

Miller, who serves as Third Ward alderman in the city of Oneonta, is a Republican candidate for mayor.

