In Dreams Begin Responsibilities



Panorama from the Sagamore boat dock. Photo by Carl Heilman II from "Lake George."

IMAGINING A NATIONAL "FRESHWATER CENTER" FOR LAKE GEORGE

By Anthony F. Hall

The protection of natural resources should be recognized by New York State as an "industry cluster," not unlike high-tech manufacturing, life sciences, clean energy and financial services, capable of attracting investment, stimulating job growth and seeded with investments, says Jim Siplon, president and CEO of the Economic Development Corporation of Warren County (EDC).

A Lake George Freshwater Center would affirm the commercial possibilities of protecting and promoting natural resources such as water, says Siplon, who is spearheading a drive to create a freshwater center on Lake George.

Among other things, the Lake George center would be a hub of synergistic collaboration and a hive of entrepreneurial energy and scientific innovation, he says.

According to Siplon, New York State ought to position itself as a global leader in the business of freshwater protection. "It should say to the world, 'If you are an enterprise interested in protecting natural resources, you should have a presence (near the Lake George Freshwater Center and in the Adirondack Park) and we're going to invest the money to attract you and to help you grow, hoping that you will then help us develop New York's next strategic cluster," Siplon said.

Siplon formally introduced the idea of a Lake George Freshwater Center at EDC's most recent annual luncheon, held October 27, 2025 at Fort William Henry's Carriage House.

"Lake George and its surrounding ecosystem have become world leaders in using science to provide unmatched protection for the region's freshwater resources," Siplon said, alluding to the RPI-based Jefferson Project. "Despite this," he continued, "a formal economic development channel has not been created to capture and share the unique knowledge base, data and solutions that have been birthed here."

Speaking with the Lake George Mirror, Siplon said, "global investment in the protection of freshwater will be ongoing and I don't want to see a freshwater center built somewhere other than Lake George. We have the knowledge base, the energy, the history and the legacy (to develop the market potential of protecting freshwater in a world where freshwater challenges are abundant and growing)."

The idea of a Freshwater Center on Lake George has evolved over more than a decade of conversations, initiated in 2013 when Dr. John E. Kelly III, at the time the leader of IBM's research teams and the featured speaker at that year's EDC's annual luncheon, hinted that something big was coming to Lake George: a joint venture that would link environmental protection with economic development and leverage both. A few months later, Kelly announced the creation of the Jefferson Project, an ambitious collaboration between business (IBM), academia (RPI) and environmental conservation (The Fund for Lake George, since merged with the LGA).

In 2023, Kelly again addressed an EDC luncheon, this time speaking about the Jefferson Project's progress in decoding cynobacteria and the likelihood that its scientists and engineers will be the first to understand why some are benign and others toxic.

(Given the economic impact of toxic algal blooms, which is estimated to be in the billions, an ability to prevent cynobacteria from manifesting dangerous variations "is a very big deal," Kelly said.)

Kelly was joined in 2023 by Dr. Martin A. Schmidt, the former provost of MIT and Dr. Shirley Jackson's successor as RPI's president, who spoke about "economic leapfrogs," the dynamics that enable one region to surpass its competitors by creating new assets or leveraging existing ones.

"Identify or create 'unfair advantages;' that's what will push this region forward. Create an infrastructure and an environment that will attract the assets that will drive the economy," Schmidt advised.

"As you identify the organizations, institutions and individuals deeply committed to this region and which have the capacity to think long term - bring them together to seek out the opportunities that will make the whole greater than the sum of the parts," said Schmidt.

According to Siplon, that is precisely what he is in the process of now doing – "bringing together organizations, institutions and individuals deeply committed to this region which have the capacity to think long term."

He has formed a steering committee comprising himself, John Kelly, Martin Schmidt and Brendan Wiltse, present and CEO of the Lake George Association, to advance the idea of a national Fresh Water Center on Lake George.

Others who can help elicit support from New York State, regional business leaders and elected officials will be recruited, he said.

"I want to help build and convene a coalition of people who have been investing their time, energy and knowledge into protecting Lake George," he said.

According to John Kelly, "This idea is in the very early stages of development. We've had some preliminary conversations and we're going to get together to do some further brainstorming; we're still figuring out what a freshwater center could be or become."

Among other things, the group will explore funding sources for commercial applications of natural resource protection.

Ryan Moore, president and CEO of an EDC member, Behan Communications, noted, "That New York State has not generated any business ideas from freshwater protection is a problem - one we should put our heads together to solve."

In addition to being a lab for economic development and cutting-edge technologies, the Lake George Freshwater Center could become a world-class scientific research facility and an interpretive center for residents and visitors, said Jim Siplon.

At this early stage in the freshwater center's development, Siplon is not looking much further than seeking state funds for a comprehensive study of a freshwater center's promise and potential.

"It deserves the support of government, academia and business – it's an economic development initiative that aligns with the values of the Adirondack Park," he said.