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☆ Letters - Lifton Letter Noble but Misguided

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This Wednesday Assemblywoman Barbara Lifton released a letter to DEC Commissioner Basil Seggos requesting that Cargill's mining permit renewal be denied. Her facebook page describes her personal experience living near the Retsof mine collapse, and her horror at seeing surface collapse, road damage, wells go dry, and aquifers turn saline. To protect Lake Cayuga her letter asks that mining under the lake, which she believes is more dangerous than mining under the adjacent land, be forbidden.

It is not more dangerous but less dangerous to mine under the lake. But more importantly Lifton's proscription is misguided for two reasons: First, mining under the land would mean the same kind of surface damage that alarmed her in the Retsof case could affect the land near Lake Cayuga, whereas at present it could affect only the lake floor. Second, forbidding mining under the lake would do nothing to reduce, and in fact would increase, the risks Lifton seeks to avoid.

Forbidding under-the-lake mining would deprive Cargill of most of its current salt reserves and, since expanding under land would likely require a long process of redesign, lease acquisition, and community engagement, Cargill would probably close the Cayuga mine. This would immediately achieve the economic consequences of the Retsof disaster (lost jobs, taxes, and salt supply). Yet it would do nothing to reduce the risks Lifton fears because the risk of flooding the mined out caverns as they slowly close by salt creep would remain.

Indeed, risk would be increased because there would be no knowledgeable personnel and equipment at hand to remedy leaks if the developed. A better approach would be for Lifton and other responsible officials to support the NYSDEC in its yearly review of Cargill's mining operations.

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