



With News & Classifieds From: **The Post-Standard**



Find the BEST LOCAL Mortgage Rates Here!
Best Local Real Estate

NEW **NEWSPAPER SEARCH** **GO** || **FIND A BUSINESS** **GO**

[Home](#) [News+Biz](#) [Local](#) [Sports](#) [Forums+Chat](#) [Cams+Radio](#) [Living](#) [Entertainment](#)

NEWS

The Post-Standard

Click here to subscribe!

» [More From The Post-Standard](#)

Top News

Cayuga Lake Watchdog

Bill Hecht doesn't hesitate to raise environmental issues

December 24, 2002

By **Dave Tobin**
Staff writer

Bill Hecht isn't afraid to ask: Why does the emperor have no clothes?

Almost half a mile beneath Cayuga Lake, Cargill Inc., the nation's largest private corporation, tunnels for salt. The company wants to more than double its mining capacity beneath the lake and is seeking permission from the state Department of Environmental Conservation.

Hecht, who owns property on Cayuga Lake and serves as a citizen watchdog over environmental issues in the Finger Lakes, has posed a simple question to the DEC and Cargill executives: What if the salt mine under Cayuga Lake collapses?

Cargill has tried to assure Hecht that safety precautions are built in, that it won't happen.

Hecht has persisted, asking Cargill about geologic faults and steps the company has taken to guard against collapse. Cargill has disclosed the information to the DEC, but asked that it not be disclosed to the public, citing corporate secrets. DEC officials won't release the information to Hecht, and he has appealed the matter with a DEC administrative law judge.

Who is this Hecht, and why is he asking such questions?

His questions don't stop with Cargill. Among others Hecht persistently raises, there are questions about: regional planning in the Finger Lakes, or the lack of it; groundwater contamination, and what government officials aren't doing to inform the public about groundwater threats; freedom of information issues, and the public's access to information in the public domain.

"People feel threatened when you start asking questions," Hecht said. "The people in office are supposed to be asking questions. They don't."

brought to you by:



INSIDE News

- » [Business](#)
- » [NewsFlash](#)
- » [Weather](#)
- » [Politics](#)
- » [Technology](#)
- » [Special Reports](#)
- » [Obituaries](#)
- » [Photo Galleries](#)
- » [Search](#)
- » [NY Lottery](#)
- » [Online Polls](#)
- » [News Releases](#)
- » [The Hot List](#)
- » [Corrections](#)

» [SEND THIS PAGE](#)

» [PRINT THIS PAGE](#)

» [Talk about Top News events!](#)

» [More Forums](#)

» [Log On to ChatXtra!](#)

CLASSIFIEDS

Get The Best Local...

[Jobs](#) | [Autos](#) | [Real Estate](#)

[All Classifieds](#) | [Place An Ad](#)

» [Win dinner for two from Secret Garden Restaurant](#)



- » [Maps & Trails](#)
- » [Buy your season pass here](#)
- » [Work here & ski FREE](#)
- » [Join the Lab Ski Club](#)

Spring Registration at Syracuse University

Register now!

Call
443-9378



>> [M & T Bank - All the Bank You'll Ever Need](#)

>> [Medical Jobs Openings now Available - Apply](#)

» [Advertise With Us](#)

Every citizen has the right to ask these questions, and you should not be labeled as a gadfly or a dilettante when you exercise your constitutional right."

The environment and local history are Hecht's passions, and provide clues as to where he will turn up next. He is 51, not married, has no children. He has had an extended, eclectic education; in college he studied anthropology, art, sculpture, architecture, geology, agriculture and environmental management.

He has had an eclectic assortment of work experiences: farming; helping to run a small natural-gas company; serving as executive director of the Cazenovia Preservation Foundation.

He is a sort of populist Brahmin from a wealthy Cayuga County family with long roots. For all practical purposes, he is financially independent, which gives him freedom and time to study matters that interest him, to attend meetings, to speak his mind.

In 1932, Hecht's Hungarian immigrant grandfather, Alexander Hecht, co-founded General Products Corp. in Union Springs. The company made automobile parts for Hecht's other business, Guaranteed Parts Co., then based in Manhattan.

Bill Hecht's father, Marco Hecht, eventually took over General Products, which he sold to Gulf & Western Industries in 1962. Marco Hecht stayed on as president until he retired in 1974, at which time General Products in Union Springs employed nearly 700 people.

Bill Hecht spent 12 years in Union Springs schools. His mother, Lydia, worked at the local library, where Hecht says he passed a lot of time reading and "copying down every footnote and reference that I thought was interesting," a habit he still has.

College began at Beloit College in Wisconsin, where he studied anthropology. Then Hecht attended Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, where he studied art, sculpture and architecture. He left college to work on his mother's family farm - the Patterson Farm, which had been in the family since 1820.

In the mid-1980s, he enrolled in the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry, and obtained a master's degree in environmental management in 1988.

While outspoken publicly, Hecht maintains a tight privacy about his personal life. He declines to talk about his finances and means of support.

Hundreds of trumpeter swans float in the Cayuga Lake water just offshore of Hecht's home, north of Union Springs. The home, built by his parents in 1959, is a handsome, one-story house set by itself in the woods, constructed with lots of stone and naturally finished wood.

It's from here that Hecht does much of his work: telephoning and firing off e-mails to his various networks of environmental committee and board members, and writing elected officials. He also scans into a computer old photographs, maps, old newspapers and things that feed his voracious interest in historical documents. Hecht puts the materials on various Web sites, among them, <http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.com/~tilde/webspringport/>

Hecht appreciates how rare his freedom of time is. "Where does the average citizen have the time to educate themselves on almost anything

of an environmental nature, where there might be a public hearing involved?" he asks.

Alan Kozlowski, director of Cayuga County's Real Property Tax Services, who also oversees the county historian's office, said Hecht has single-handedly made available maps and images that would otherwise not be viewable on the Internet.

"If it wasn't for Bill, a lot of stuff wouldn't be happening. He is always hovering around the wings, on environmental and planning issues," said Kozlowski. "He is an example of what one guy can do to make a difference."

So it's been with the Cargill mine expansion, too.

Hecht learned about it from a DEC notice, and wrote to Assemblyman Marty Luster, D-Trumansburg. Luster persuaded the DEC to informally extend the public comment period, while Hecht continued questioning Cargill executives about the mine's safety. The informal extension brought in an additional four comments before the public comment period closed, and the DEC is considering whether to approve the application, said Ken Lynch, regional director, in Syracuse.

"He (Hecht) is certainly persistent, and he appears knowledgeable," Luster said. "The way in which he's been handling it, I think he's performing a public service."

As executive director of the Cazenovia Preservation Foundation, he was passionate about saving property from development and keeping Wal-Mart out of Cazenovia.

"He got people riled up enough that they went out and did what they had to," said Gene Gissin, former president of the Cazenovia Preservation Foundation board. "He is not willing to compromise for compromise's sake. If he feels strongly about it, he does not back down. Sometimes that's a weakness, if you're trying to negotiate a project. People don't want it shoved down their faces."

Hecht continues to push for better planning in Cayuga County and the Finger Lakes region. He is passionate about his love of the Finger Lakes countryside, and he wants to preserve it for a long while.

"One of our big assets here is the open space and vistas, and we're paving them over," Hecht said. "It's not an either-or. I'm not saying preserve all this at the sacrifice of jobs, or pave it all at the sacrifice of aesthetic beauty. You can have both. But unless you are proactive in your planning, it's not going to happen."

© 2002 The Post-Standard. Used with permission.

» [Send This Page](#) | » [Print This Page](#)

[MORE NEWS](#)

- » [Sometimes Santa wears blue](#)
- » [Unanimous Adoption](#)
- » [Vernon Downs ordered to close](#)

[More Stories](#) | [14-Day Archive](#) | [Complete Index](#)

[MORE FROM THE POST-STANDARD](#)

[Post-Standard Links & Archives](#)

[About Us](#) | [User Agreement](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Help/Feedback](#) | [Advertise With Us](#)

© 2002 Syracuse.com. All Rights Reserved.