

## Quarry owner owes public answers on Howe Caverns project

BY TOM SMITH  
For The Sunday Gazette

In a Daily Gazette article by reporter Ed Munger last month, Cobleskill Stone Products owner Emil Galasso voiced the expectation that his company's quest to mine 10 acres of property belonging to Howe Caverns (which he not coincidentally now co-owns) would probably generate some public resistance.

If he'd stopped right there, you could say that he was just owning up to a reality that accompanies a move such as the one he has proposed. Why wouldn't people concerned with the integrity of the historic caverns, and with questions regarding geological, environmental and other issues related to such a move, want reasonable questions answered? As a thoughtful adult himself, you'd think Mr. Galasso would accept this as a given.

You'd think this, especially, because he also has to deal with the appearance that a quarry operator assuming ownership of a tourist attraction, whose limestone caves contain rich deposits of the very product he excavates, has parallels to, say, a fox taking ownership of a legendary chicken farm, while asking people to trust that he values the hens only for their prized eggs.

### SNIDE REMARK

However, Mr. Galasso did not stop with his estimate that an intelligent public might not embrace his plan. He went on to clarify: "We're the target of every cuckoo environmentalist every time we want to do anything."

That hit home. I live in the village of Schoharie, and am a proud member of the grass-roots citizens group, Save Our Schoharie (SOS), which was born — not because we're "cuckoo," but precisely because Mr. Galasso decided he would try to turn a 60-some-acre property along the east rim of the village, zoned residential and agricultural, into a continuation of his Schoharie mine, whose current enlarged configuration has already gutted much of the mountainside in the northeast corner of the village.

The large majority of Schoharie's citizenry disagrees with Mr. Galasso over the legality and advisability of his expansion proposal in Schoharie.

# Under-mining our confidence



MARK WILSON/FOR THE SUN

# Smith

*Continued from page D1*

We see the move as a threat to our future as a community; Mr. Galasso sees it for its profit potential. Now, at the same time that he has stubbornly ignored the irrevocable harm his expansion would do to a pre-Revolutionary War community, he expects that people should easily extend trust regarding his stewardship of Howe Caverns.

Ironically, the need for SOS was unintentionally, but perfectly, articulated by Mr. Galasso himself a couple years ago, when he admonished another SOS member and me with these challenging words, no doubt aimed to discourage us: "I can afford this [fight]. The town

can't." That was his reduction of the argument.

Indeed, SOS's reason for being involves just that; to ensure that the town can ably defend itself so it might prosper long after we are gone. We are now involved in both legal and administrative processes to fight Mr. Galasso's rejection of our town and village laws and clear public sentiment, and try to keep that fight out in the open. By working in collaboration with both town and village officials, we have saved countless thousands of dollars and duplication of effort. So far, Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) officials have viewed our concerns as legitimate.

Neither we nor DEC are "environmental cuckoos," and Mr. Galasso's dismissive characterization of opposition to his initiatives only shows the small regard that he applies to those who stand in his way. And he is used to getting his way.

## **NATURAL PROGRESSION?**

Cobleskill Stone Products has referred to what it calls its "right of natural progression" to justify expansion plans, so it is entirely reasonable to ask about its intentions on land adjacent to its currently held quarry lands. Likewise, it would be reasonable to ask for clarification on Mr. Galasso's wording in the comment he makes in the earlier-referenced Gazette article, that: "It [the proposed 10-acre expansion into Howe Caverns land] has no impact on our cave that we allow people to get into." This reassurance would be more comforting coming from someone without a financial interest in the stone, and one whose primary concern is the preservation of caves and other karst features.

Moreover, Cobleskill Stone Products gets prickly when this fact is brought up, but years before they bought the Howes Cave site, two workers inspecting the caverns died from poisonous gases that wound their way underground from blasting at the Howe Caves quarry.

Perhaps the incursion into the Caverns' land [remember, a quarry never goes just onto land] is as harmless as Mr. Galasso portrays it. However, a community demanding objective assurances as to the preservation and safety of a geological treasure should be applauded, not demeaned. Alternatively, a community that stands by and numbly watches arguably the most scenic, historical portions of its county be progressively extracted for profit gets exactly what it, if not succeeding generations, deserves.