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EDITORIAL

Altering Forest Preserve is rare, but it's necessary

You'd think the last thing any loyal, tree-hugging environmentalist would support is a power line cut right through the Adirondack Forest Preserve.

But in a rare display of kinship between environmental groups, Adirondack community leaders and big business, they're supporting a statewide ballot proposition to run a three-mile electrical line through the environmentally sensitive state forest preserve to provide emergency power to the community of Tupper Lake.

The forest preserve is so sacred that any such project requires approval by two separate sessions of the state Legislature and statewide support from voters to amend the state constitution. The Legislature has already supported the proposal with sponsorship from state Sen. Elizabeth Little.

The forest preserve has only been altered five times in the past 20 years. So you know that any attempt to disrupt the preserve in any way is not taken lightly. But in this case, there is significant justification for voters to support the change.

Under the Nov. 3 ballot proposition, voters are being asked to agree to give up 6 acres of forest preserve land in the St. Lawrence County town of Colton to allow for the construction of power lines along a three-mile stretch of Route 56. In exchange, National Grid would purchase 43 acres of nearby wild forest land, which then would be added to the forest preserve.

The line, located north and west of Tupper Lake and Saranac Lake, is needed to provide a backup source of electricity to the two communities - particularly Tupper Lake - which are highly vulnerable to power outages from winter storms. A power line to the east already serves the two communities, as well as Lake Placid.

Running the power line through the forest preserve in Colton would actually be less disruptive to the environment than a proposed six-mile alternative route around the forest preserve. The roadside where the utility poles have already been constructed contains no significant environmental characteristics, according to literature provided by the Adirondack Council. The area around the proposed alternative route, meanwhile, contains sensitive vegetation and animal habitats - including the home of the endangered spruce grouse. In this case, the decision to cut through the preserve will actually help the environment.

For those concerned about public access being restricted along the new route, they needn't worry. National Grid, which owns the land that the power poles stand on, has agreed to allow continued public access across its right-of-way. Snowmobile traffic, currently banned along that stretch, would continue to be prohibited to help maintain the character of the forest preserve.

This might seem like a relatively benign request to make of voters. But supporters of this project fear that many people concerned about the environment, particularly downstaters, will automatically vote against any proposal that appears to disrupt the forest preserve. Supporters are also concerned that anti-Albany sentiment over state spending and this summer's Senate fiasco will prompt voters to reject anything that smacks of interference by state government.

So every vote by individuals who understand the positive nature of this proposal is needed for it to pass.

This proposal would protect Adirondack residents from freezing in the winter by giving them an alternative power source. It would result in the addition of 37 acres of wild forest to the forest preserve. It retains public access. And it would protect environmentally sensitive areas from unnecessary encroachment.

It might feel a bit awkward, but voters should vote in favor of state Proposition 1 when they go to the polls on Nov. 3.

Local editorials represent the opinion of The Post-Star editorial board, which consists of Publisher Rick Emanuel, Editor Ken Tingley, Editorial Page Editor Mark Mahoney and citizen representative Robert Sellar