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Cathead Mountain land swap proposed

BY JIM MCGUIRE Gazette Reporter

A land swap proposal that would reopen the Cathead Mountain trail and give the hunting club that owns over 800 acres on and around the mountain motorized access to its clubhouse is back on the table.

Assemblywoman Teresa Sayward, R-Willsboro, introduced legislation Tuesday that could lead to the required constitutional amendment.

“I think it’s a good swap,” Sayward said of the proposal that would turn over three 160-acre great lots to the state in return for the single great lot through which the old access road passes.

The problem facing the legislation and the club’s goal is that two of three Adirondack protection groups oppose the deal and the third, the Adirondack Council, is taking a neutral position while expressing reservations.

The Adirondack Mountain Club and Protect the Adirondacks (the latter a merged organization consisting of the old Association to Protect the Adirondacks and the Residents Committee to Protect the Adirondacks) contend the proposal does not provide enough public benefit to warrant amending the state constitution. And, ADK Executive Director Neil F. Woodworth said, unlike recent successful Adirondack land swaps that provided such necessities as fresh water to a municipality and new cemetery space, this deal appears designed to convey the most benefit to a private entity.

To complete a swap, two successive Legislatures need to approve the proposal before the voters get the final word in a statewide referendum. “I don’t know if it could make it through the Legislature without all the groups behind it,” Adirondack Council spokesman John Sheehan said of the deal.

Expressing the concern that the club is not offering enough acreage while also retaining the right to erect up to six hunting camps on the land it would control, Sheehan said, “We’re not dead set against it, but I’m not sure we would go out and promote it.” Sheehan and Woodworth said their organizations also have reservations about the future of the radio tower and the club’s assertion of its right to build a new one nearby and lease space if the state police cease using the existing structure and it is removed as part of a restoration of the fire tower and abandoned ranger cabin.

“I’m not sure where it will go without the support of the environmental groups,” Sayward said. “Normally, we try to get the environmental groups on board,” she said, noting that even if the proposal were approved by two sessions of the Legislature, it is the groups that sell the proposal to the voting public.

But, said Sayward, addressing the issue of public benefit, gaining the ability to run power to the summit to ensure operation of the state police radio tower is “a very important piece.” She said the deal would reopen the trail and provide access to Grant Lake. “I think there’s a great benefit,” she said.

Though the Hatchbrook Sportsman’s Club (originally known as Thomas Gang Inc.) was given temporary permits to cross the state land in the years following its purchase of the adjoining land in 1988, court decisions regarding the sanctity of the state Forest Preserve led the Department of Environmental Conservation to stop issuing the permits in 2000. The club filed suit to regain access and lost.

In response, the club, which owns land at the base of the hiking trail as well as the summit where the State Police continue to operate a communications tower, closed the popular trail, which affords views of the Great Sacandaga Lake, the distant Green Mountains and the heart of the Adirondacks.

“We closed that trail out of desperation to try to get support for what should have been the right thing to do — let us use the road,” said club spokesman Ron Palmer.

Palmer said the new proposal was developed after terms offered by the club in 2005 also failed to gain the support of the protectionist groups. That proposal offered to swap one great lot for the one sought by the club.

Palmer and club President Lou Venditti met with a reporter this week in an effort to present the proposal directly to the public.

Palmer said his membership is willing to make additional concessions, reducing future hunting camp development from six to fewer and limiting development options for a future radio tower.