

EPF includes money to buy land

By MIKE LYNCH, Enterprise Outdoors Writer

An attempt to put a moratorium on state land purchases by Gov. David Paterson failed Friday when lawmakers were able to negotiate about \$17.6 million back into the Environmental Protection Fund for land acquisition, although the fund has been reduced by more than two-thirds from last year.

The EPF was included in a bill that opened state parks, historic sites and campgrounds around the state. It also provided about \$16 million in land stewardship. Overall, the EPF is \$134 million compared to \$222 million last year. The land acquisition fund last year was \$60 million.

Until last week, Paterson had been pushing for a moratorium on state land purchases and had put no money into the open space fund for land acquisitions. He still retains the right to veto any purchase, but his term expires at the end of the year, and a new governor could use the money.

The move to cut the land acquisition funds came after intense lobbying on both sides of the issue. Local Government Review Board Executive Director Fred Monroe has publicly led the fight to stop any pending state land purchases in the Adirondack Park while environmental advocacy organizations have pushed just as hard on the other side.

In Friday's aftermath, both sides claimed small victories.

"The \$17.6 million, I don't know what that's for yet," said Adirondack Council spokesman John Sheehan. "But the point was to make sure that account didn't get eliminated."

The two main properties that have been viewed as the next state land purchases for Forest Preserve are both owned by the Adirondack Chapter of The Nature Conservancy. One is 67,000 acres of former Finch, Pruyn and Co. land in the central Adirondacks, and the other is the 14,600-acre Follensby Park land near Tupper Lake, a property that has long been coveted by the state.

The \$17.6 million would not be enough to purchase all the Finch, Pruyn lands, but it could be enough for some parcels or perhaps for the Follensby property. The money could also be used in other parts of the state.

"If it's all for purchases in other places of the state other than the Adirondacks, for small-scale purchases, I guess we wouldn't have a large objection to it," Monroe said. "It's pretty clear that the state doesn't have the resources to adequately maintain and operate what we already have, and I think that should be the focus for the time being. And we should take a step back and look at the land acquisition process and make sure there's analysis of the economic impacts on the towns where the land is purchased."

One of the most blatant examples of the state owning land it can't manage in the Adirondack Park is the Moose River Plains in Herkimer and Hamilton counties. This spring, the state Department of Environmental Conservation closed more than 40 miles of dirt roads that access 50,000 acres because it didn't have the money to maintain the land or the staff to patrol it. It wasn't until the DEC was pressured by the towns of Inlet and Indian Lake to open the road system and subsequently offered in-kind services, such as road maintenance by the towns, that the roads opened last week.

"If we can't take care of the land we have, how can we ever bring to the table the discussion of purchasing more land," Inlet Supervisor John Frey told the Enterprise during an interview regarding the Moose River Plains two weeks ago. "For me, I do believe we need to purchase some tracts. I want to find that balance, though, between the residential use, the tourist use, the forestry industry use and the protection of those wilderness tracts. I do think there are pieces that need to be added to the wilderness tracts. I'd probably get shot at the county level for saying that, but how can we have that conversation when each year the DEC has less money to maintain the forest. ... Some of us in local government aren't opposed to the purchases. We understand why they happen, but if they are not sustainable, they don't make sense."

Of the three environmental organization representatives interviewed for this article, including the Adirondack Council and Adirondack Mountain Club, the one that expressed the most frustration with the reduction to the state acquisition fund and the EPF in general was Environmental Advocates, based in Albany.

"This isn't for all the big purchases that get headlines in the Adirondacks," said Rob Moore, executive director of Environmental Advocates. "A lot of these funds also go toward drinking watershed protection efforts, most notably in the New York City watershed. So these programs are very important for being able to acquire important lands for protecting the quality of drinking water reservoirs."

Both the Adirondack Council and Adirondack Mountain Club seemed relieved that the fund wasn't completely eliminated.

"This is a very tough budget year," said Adirondack Mountain Club Executive Director Neil Woodworth. "This is an environmental protection fund that has goods and bads. On the plus side, we kept open all the state parks and all the public campgrounds. We eliminated the proposed moratorium that so many people who were against further land acquisitions were lobbying for ... and we were able to secure over \$16 million for land stewardship."

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