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Hornbeck APA nomination rocks the boat

Sen. Little wants to keep Lussi on APA board; no opposition to nomination of former NYSERDA President Valentino

By MIKE LYNCH and CHRIS KNIGHT, Enterprise Staff Writers

The nomination of canoe maker Peter Hornbeck to a seat on the state Adirondack Park Agency Board of Commissioners has been held up in the state Senate amid local-government concerns about him being an environmental group board member.

Both the Adirondack Associations of Towns and Villages and the Adirondack Park Local Government Review Board have written letters against Gov. David Paterson's nomination of Hornbeck, a former chairman of the Residents Committee to Protect the Adirondacks and current board member of Protect the Adirondacks! Hornbeck would replace Lake Placid hotelier Art Lussi, whose family owns the Lake Placid Crowne Plaza Club and Resort, in an in-Park seat on the APA board.

Hornbeck lives and has his business in Olmsteadville, in the town of Minerva in southwestern Essex County.

"Peter is a fine person, an excellent canoe builder and a family friend," Local Government Review Board Executive Director Fred Monroe wrote to Paterson. "However, I believe that his past positions as a member of the board of directors, and as chairman of the Residents Committee to Protect the Adirondacks (now merged with Protect the Adirondacks!) should raise concerns."

Hornbeck's nomination was scheduled to come before the Senate Environmental Conservation Committee on Tuesday, but state Sen. Betty Little, R-Queensbury, asked committee Chairman Sen. Antoine Thompson, D-Buffalo, to table the appointment because of concerns from local-government groups in the Park, according to Little's spokesman, Dan Mac Entee.

"Betty spoke with Senator Thompson, and he agreed that in light of those concerns they would hold the appointment for now," Mac Entee said. "The concerns we're hearing from local government is they don't think he would necessarily best represent the views of a lot of people living in the Park."

Little said she's talked to Hornbeck and called him "a very nice man." But she said she asked for his nomination to be put off because of comments her office received about the environmental groups he's been involved with.

Little also said she wants Lussi to continue serving on the APA board.

"He understands the economics of the Park, he has a balanced approach, and I'd like to see him stay," she said.

Lussi told the Enterprise this morning that he would like to remain on the board but had not been asked to do so by the governor. He said he received a letter from the governor's office in early January thanking him for his service and informing him that he wouldn't be asked to return for another term, which expired on June 30, 2009. Lussi can remain on the board until his replacement is confirmed.

"I don't know this, but maybe I'm getting vibes that I've been fairly outspoken on a couple of sensitive issues, and maybe that's what's leading the political climate to say, 'Maybe we need to make a change,'" said Lussi, who was appointed by Republican Gov. George Pataki in 2006.

Lussi has spoken out against regulations that would limit the size of new boathouses and has also advocated for more wind towers in the Park, specifically at the state's Gore and Whiteface Mountain ski areas. He also voted against making land and water in the Lows Lake area wilderness.

Because of those stances, and his support of businesses in the Park, Lussi has gained the support of AATV and the Local Government Review Board.

"During his tenure on the APA board Mr. Lussi has demonstrated his ability to be an independent voice on matters that affect the people of the Park with a vision for linking economy, community and conservation in lock-step with our shared constituency," AATV President Brian Towers wrote in a letter to Paterson.

If Hornbeck's nomination is approved, he would be the fourth current APA board member with connections to environmental groups in the Park. Agency Chairman Curt Stiles and commissioners Cecil Wray and Richard Booth have all been involved with the Adirondack Council in the past.

While the committee took no action on Hornbeck's nomination, Mac Entee said it did approve Gov. Paterson's appointment of former New York State Energy Research and Development Authority President William Valentino to the seat currently held by James Townsend, chairman of the APA's State Lands Committee. The nomination still needs to gain approval in the Finance Committee and the full Senate. Townsend's seat expired June 30, 2009.