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Hornbeck nomination sinks in senate 'review'

By KIM SMITH DEDAM, Staff Writer

RAY BROOK — Gov. David Paterson's nomination of Peter Hornbeck to the Adirondack Park Agency Board apparently failed in the Senate Finance Committee.

Firm denial of the controversial appointment is somewhat in question, caught in legislative semantics.

In a statement issued Thursday morning, Sen. Betty Little (R-Queensbury) said many of her colleagues, both Republican and Democrat, have shared her concern over the conflict of interest Hornbeck's nomination posed.

Hornbeck is a member of Protect the Adirondacks, an environmental organization that filed a lawsuit against APA in January.

Little's spokesman Dan Mac Entee said there was much discussion by the 32-member Senate Finance Committee about potential conflict, since Protect the Adirondacks has also lobbied hard against development in the Adirondack Park, particularly against the Adirondack Club and Resort project proposed in Tupper Lake.

Following adjudication this spring, that project will end up before APA commissioners for a final vote.

Mac Entee said Hornbeck did not gain enough support for committee approval.

"Sen. Little was told late (Wednesday) afternoon that there were, at best, 14 votes in support of the nomination," he told the Press-Republican.

"The Governor's Office has been notified of that by the Senate Finance Committee."

But an aide to Finance Committee Chairman Sen. Carl Kruger (D-Brooklyn) presented a less decisive stance Thursday, saying the nomination is undergoing "in-depth review."

Chief of Staff Jason Koppel said "some of the members" have "some concerns" and have asked to look further into the nomination.

In-depth review means the committee, or some faction of it, will "check out some additional information," Koppel said, and "review more than just skimming the nominee's (Hornbeck's) resume and bringing it out to committee."

Hornbeck did not return Press-Republican calls Thursday seeking comment.

LOBBYING

Senate Environmental Conservation Committee Chairman Antoine Thompson (D-Buffalo) said Paterson's office called repeatedly to press the appointment, a rare event in his committee's review process.

From there, the appointment went to Finance Committee.

Whether buried or flat-out denied, exposure of potential "green loading" on the APA Board was welcomed by local park government and business officials.

Three of eight sitting APA commissioners, including Chairman Curt Stiles, have prior affiliation with the Adirondack Council.

Cecil Wray and Dick Booth also served on the Adirondack Council Board.

REPRESENTATION

Adirondack Local Government Review Board Executive Director Fred Monroe welcomed Albany's apparent pause for ethics review.

"I think they are finally responding to the fact that APA regulation has a huge impact on the lives of people who live in the Adirondacks and that elected representatives — legislators, supervisors, mayors — should have input into the selection process for leaders of the Park Agency."

He said Little is working on legislation to require the governor to choose resident APA commissioners from a list of nominees provided by local government.

"It's the way to ensure you have representation there; it's just fundamental democracy," Monroe said.

'NO CONFLICT'

Environmental groups maintained neutrality, saying they have not mounted any campaign to posit members on the APA board.

"I don't create lists and send them down to the Governor's Office," said David Gibson, executive director of Protect the Adirondacks, on whose board Hornbeck currently sits.

"The Senate Finance Committee knows that Peter would step down from our board (if appointed to the APA). Once you remove yourself from the board, there's no conflict. Senator Little's made that point to make the nomination controversial; and anything controversial is going to be held up."

John Sheehan, spokesman for the Adirondack Council, said several key appointments are being held up, awaiting results from the March 16 special election to replace ousted Sen. Hiram Monserrate of Queens.

He does not believe former Adirondack Council members appointed to APA present an inherent conflict of interest.

"If you take a look at our board, it's 30 members deep, and we have term limits. It is almost inevitable that some of them would wind up in state government positions working on Adirondack policy issues.

"Dick Booth has had no contact with this organization since 1992," Sheehan said.

"Curt Stiles was a much more recent member, but he is resident of the park with a background in water-quality advocacy.

"Wray ended his affiliation with the Adirondack Council in 1997. Really the reason he was chosen had much more to do with the fact he was closely affiliated with then Governor George Pataki. It is almost a coincidence they were members of the Adirondack Council Board."

BUSINESS VIEW

Business officials have applied political pressure to deny Hornbeck's nomination.

Garry Douglas, president of the Plattsburgh-North Country Chamber of Commerce, said in a statement they "were pleased to assist in securing support from upstate Democrat Senators (William) Stachowski (D,C-Lake View), (Darrel) Aubertine (D-Cape Vincent) and (David) Valesky (D-Oneida) and see this as evidence that there is now a degree of bi-partisan recognition across upstate that the Adirondack Park is confronting a serious challenge of economic and community sustainability."