

Adirondack Daily Enterprise  
January 20, 2010

## Local officials assess how the North Country will be impacted

By JESSICA COLLIER, Enterprise Staff Writer

As local politicians and organizations assessed the potential impacts of Gov. David Paterson's proposed budget on the North Country, many were concerned about how cuts would affect the region, but some saw some bright spots.

---

Little

State Sen. Betty Little said she was concerned about cuts disproportionately impacting the North Country, with three North Country prisons on a list of four to be closed.

Little also disagreed with Paterson's proposal to add an extra \$1 cigarette tax, saying it would send people in her district to Vermont or the Akwasasne Reservation to purchase them.

"It hurts a lot of local businesses," Little said.

The proposed \$1.8 million in cuts to tourism-related state agencies may hurt the region, too, since it is so dependent on tourism as an economic driver, Little said.

She did see some opportunities in the proposed budget, including a moratorium on state land acquisitions.

"I think that when you don't have a lot of money, certainly you have to prioritize how the money is being spent," Little said.

In addition to putting money where it is needed most, Little said the moratorium would give the state and local governments a chance to step back and look at a long-term strategy for the Adirondack Park, to "look at when is enough enough. Do we have enough of the Forest Preserve land?"

When land is moved into the Forest Preserve, timber can no longer be harvested from it, affecting the forestry industry, Little said. Too much of this may at some point affect the sustainability of communities in the Park, she said.

Little also said she sees the proposed closure of the state Adirondack Park Agency's Visitor Interpretive Centers in Paul Smiths and Newcomb as an opportunity for environmental groups or other nonprofit groups to take them over.

"I'm sure that they could do it for less costs than the state has been able to," Little said. "I think they can be a little more flexible than the state can be."

She said that although some of Paterson's proposals for mandate relief may be vague, they could turn out to be helpful.

Little stressed that the budget process is just beginning and much could change before a spending plan is finalized.

"There's a lot in the details, and in the next few weeks, we'll certainly be looking at and debating it," Little said. "I hope that the rest of the process is very open and transparent so we can keep track of and participate in what the final budget is going to be."

---

Sayward

Assemblywoman Teresa Sayward also said she saw good and bad in the governor's budget.

She said she liked that he is using a spending cap that will return any excess revenues over \$500,000 to people paying property taxes, and she also supports his ideas for mandate reliefs.

The moratorium on state land acquisitions is something Sayward said she has been supporting for some time.

"At a time when we are worrying about health care and our schools, I think that a moratorium would be a good thing," Sayward said. "I have, in fact, written him repeatedly on those issues."

Sayward supports Paterson's proposals to repeal Wicks Law requirements, which have school districts contracting each piece of a construction project out to different companies, and to create more flexibility in the SUNY/CUNY college system.

Bridge funding would increase in Paterson's proposed budget, which Sayward said is important with recent troubles with the Champlain Bridge and subsequent reports that other bridges in the state desperately need work as well. She also said she likes that the proposed budget doesn't change highway funding.

Paterson had his budget proposal distributed on disc, which Sayward said saved \$75,000.

"I've been asking and asking that everything we do here be put out electronically," Sayward said. "Maybe this is a beginning."

Sayward was concerned about some of the governor's cuts that she said could have significant impacts on the region.

The proposal to cut aid to schools will hurt high-need schools the most, she said.

Unlike Little, Sayward said she saw the possible closing of the VICs as a bad thing.

"That brings people in and that brings revenues into our community, so we certainly have a problem with that," Sayward said.

---

#### Local government

Paterson's budget includes some significant cuts from local government aid, but Franklin County Manager Jim Feeley said they won't impact his county much.

State budgets that try to reduce spending often continue program requirements while cutting the amount of state money that goes into fulfilling them, but Feeley said he didn't see that happening much in this budget proposal.

"I'm happy that I don't see the shift in costs," Feeley said.

He said parts of the budget that may hurt the county include reduced aid to nursing homes, community colleges, long-term care programs and probation departments.

Feeley said Paterson's proposed mandate reform would be a bright light in the budget. He also likes that it would release more money from 911 surcharges to help counties with public safety communications and that it would reform indigent defense requirements.

---

#### Environment

Not everyone was happy with Paterson's proposal to cut \$79 million in funding to from the Environmental Protection Fund, which would include the moratorium on state land acquisitions.

In a press release, the Adirondack Council called the budget plan a declaration of war on New York's environment.

"Both the environment and the economy of the Adirondack Park would suffer disproportionately if this plan is approved," said Brian Houseal, executive director of the Adirondack Council.

Paul Hartman of the Nature Conservancy said his organization is disturbed by what he called a historic decision by the governor to stop land acquisition.

"Land acquisition provides enormous benefits to the citizens of New York," Hartman said.

He said increasing the amount of state land provides the Park with increased tourism and economic development opportunities, drawing people to the region to recreate and enjoy the wilderness.

"We think that this is a step backward," Hartman said. "Overall, we're extremely disappointed with the governor's budget proposal."

Hartman said he hopes the Legislature will decide to restore the cuts.

---

#### Health care

Adirondack Medical Center spokesman Joe Riccio said the governor's proposal could have a dire impact on AMC finances.

Without even looking at proposed cuts to Medicare and Medicaid, Riccio said his organization is looking at a loss of \$551,000, after four rounds of cuts over the last two years, which he said already amounted to about \$600,000.

AMC has an operating margin of about \$220,000, Riccio said, so Paterson's proposal would mean it would see a budget deficit of about \$225,000.

If Medicare and Medicaid cuts were to go through on the state level, it would also mean a loss of matching federal funding as well, Riccio said, so any cut would be a double loss to local hospitals and nursing homes.

Riccio said AMC will work with state representatives to lessen cuts that would affect the organization.

---

#### College aid

The governor's budget plan would cut and change the state's Tuition Assistance Program, including reducing each TAP award by \$75.

Paul Smith's College spokesman Ken Aaron said that while some may not consider \$75 much money, that amount may be a make-or-break factor for students who already are on the fence about being able to afford college.

"We see these kinds of decisions being made every day," Aaron said in an e-mail.

If the college were to close that tuition gap with increased financial aid to students, Aaron said it would cost the college \$30,000.

---

## ORDA

Paterson's budget would cut \$1.6 million from the Olympic Regional Development Authority in Lake Placid, or about 5 percent of its operating budget.

ORDA spokesman Jon Lundin said Tuesday that his organization was still assessing the information coming in from Albany. He said ORDA is working on a plan to reduce its budget accordingly.