

WNBZ
March 26, 2010

Momentum gaining for Adirondack ‘economic zone’

The notion of establishing an economic zone within the Adirondack Park is gaining momentum.

Several weeks ago, the newly-formed Adirondack Caucus began floating the idea of an in-park economic development program, something akin to the now-defunct Empire Zone program.

The caucus, which consists of state Senators and Assembly members representing districts either wholly or partially in the park, said the Empire Zone program had features that could work if applied on a smaller scale.

Assemblywoman Teresa Sayward belongs to the Adirondack Caucus.

“What we envisioned was taking some of those ideas that came through various economic programs across the state – like tax credits and other things that are already out there,” she said. “But almost everything that’s available out there is premised on the creation of jobs. And many, many times you have to add 25 or 50 jobs to take part in any of these economic benefit programs; and that just doesn’t fit in our area.”

When Sayward and state Senator Betty Little first introduced the Adirondack Caucus and the notion of an Adirondack economic zone, the group only had support from fellow upstate Republicans.

But this week, the caucus got backing from the Common Ground Alliance – a large, park-wide coalition of elected officials, environmental groups and private stakeholders.

Ross Whaley of the Adirondack Landowners Association pushed the notion of an “Excelsior Zone” program for the park at the Adirondack Local Government Conference in Lake Placid.

“What if we had the equivalent of Empire Zones that worked for rural areas, so the focus was on businesses of four or five people instead of businesses of a hundred or more people?” he asked. “If the power was an economic power in that term ‘Empire Zone,’ as opposed to a political power; that makes sense. Let’s pass it because it makes a difference, rather than because it seems to be the politically correct thing to do.”

John Sheehan is spokesman for the Adirondack Council. He says there’s no conflict between boosting small businesses and continuing to protect environmental resources. And, like Whaley and Sayward, he thinks an Adirondack-specific economic zone would benefit everyone involved.

But for Sheehan, the most exciting aspect of the discussion is the chance for historically at-odds groups to work together toward a common goal. He notes that the last time different organizations got together, the results were positive.

“I think it’s already proven to be effective in that we already defeated the Governor’s proposal to stop paying taxes on the Forest Preserve a couple years ago,” Sheehan said. “That was the first time we saw that working together was for the benefit of everybody. Given the fact most of the leadership in Albany is run by folks south of Westchester County, it makes it imperative that groups in the Adirondacks get along in order to reach common goals.”

Sayward notes the Empire Zone program wasn’t a complete failure – so as the legislation is drafted, she doesn’t aim to reinvent the wheel.

“We’ll certainly look at the Adirondack Council’s ideas and the ideas that come out of the Common Ground Alliance as we move forward with this bill, and we’ll pick the best ideas and downsize them to fit the park’s needs,” she said.

As the Adirondack Caucus continues drafting its bill, the Common Ground Alliance has sent a letter to Governor David Paterson’s office calling on him to create a new economic development program for rural areas.

-Chris Morris, 3-26-10