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Senate Democrats say New York's state parks will stay open

By PAUL POST, The Saratogian

SARATOGA SPRINGS — Democrats, who control the state Legislature, affirmed their commitment on Wednesday to keep New York's state parks open this summer.

But local officials, while encouraged, say they'll keep fighting until a finished deal is put in writing.

Gov. David Paterson announced previously that up to 91 parks and historic sites could be closed or scaled back across New York as part of a cost-cutting effort designed to reduce a projected \$9 billion budget gap. Almost three-fourths of the Saratoga-Capital Region's facilities were threatened, including Victoria Pool at Saratoga Spa State Park.

"We're thrilled that so many legislators realize the importance of state parks, but we're going to keep contacting them until they sign on the dotted line," said Heather Mabee, chair of the Saratoga-Capital Region Parks Commission.

She said several park "friends" groups have made a concerted effort to sway state lawmakers as well.

Senate Democratic leaders held a press conference at the capitol, where they said \$11.5 million will be restored to the budget to keep parks open.

"State parks are part of our history and our future," Senate Conference Leader John Sampson said. "They are the economic engine that drives our tourism industry. We need a fair and responsible budget, and cutting our parks is neither a fair or responsible solution to the fiscal crisis."

Meanwhile, the Assembly was set to release its budget version that would also override Paterson's proposed cuts.

"We'll take it," said Louise Goldstein, of the Save the Victoria Pool Society. "We just want our pool open."

Residents welcomed Wednesday's development and said parks need continued funding to make necessary improvements. Spa State Park was never threatened with closure, but it has a variety of needs. For example, Avenue of the Pines near Route 9 has a long row of deep pot holes.

"A lot of roads here need work," said Frank Waters of Saratoga Springs, who visited the park Wednesday with his wife, Shelley. "Doors on Roosevelt Baths are rusted."

“Dead trees need to be cut down, too,” she added. “We’re all for keeping all the parks open. I don’t know where they’re going to get the money from.”

Numerous groups such as Audubon New York, the Adirondack Council and Adirondack Mountain Club applauded lawmakers’ support for state parks. Thacher Park in the Heldebergs, which gets considerable use from inner-city Albany youths, was targeted for closure. Now it looks as if the site will remain open.

“We’ll still be able to picnic, play and enjoy nature,” the group Friends of John Boyd Thacher and Thompsons Lake State Parks said in a statement.