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Supporters laud land swap approval

By Matt Bosley, Editor, Valley News

TUPPER LAKE — Supporters of an amendment to the State Constitution legalizing a set of power lines built on State Forest Preserve are celebrating its recent passage.

Voters across New York State approved the measure by a margin of 863,898 to 427,043 Nov. 3, much to the delight of Elected representatives and environmental groups, both of whom supported it.

The amendment authorizes the transfer of six acres of Forest Preserve along Route 56 in the town of Colton to accommodate a new stretch of power lines to Tupper Lake. National Grid, the company that owns and operates the lines, will give 43 acres of land along the Grasse River in exchange.

"I am very thankful for the voter support we received on Election Day for this important constitutional amendment," said State Sen. Elizabeth Little, who sponsored the initiative and helped guide it through the Senate and Assembly.

The Adirondack Council was also a major proponent of the project, educating voters on how construction of the lines across the two-mile stretch amounted to the least environmental impact.

"This landslide approval shows that voters took the time to understand the issue and trusted our advice about the environmental benefits," said Brian Houseal, executive director for the Adirondack Council. "We are gratified and humbled by the overwhelmingly positive response."

The amendment allows National Grid to legally connect Tupper Lake to a back-up power supply. The community had suffered numerous power outages over the past decade because it was at the end of a single power supply line that starts in Malone.

Recognizing an immediate need for another line, National Grid, the New York State Power Authority and the state Department of Environmental Conservation signed an agreement authorizing construction in early 2008.

"It's impossible to build a sustainable, modern economy in a village that can't keep the lights on," Houseal said, "Dysfunctional villages only encourage more development in the back woods where it doesn't belong."

Houseal said the Adirondack Council supported the amendment because the alternative was to run the lines on a six-mile detour around the Forest Preserve.

"We really didn't like the detour," said Houseal, noting how it would have cut through old-growth boreal forest that is known to contain rare plants and wildlife, such as spruce grouse.

"We told them, 'This may sound crazy, but we want you to build this on the Forest Preserve. It will save you money and it will prevent ecological damage by confining the power line to an already-developed area,'" Houseal said. "They looked at us strangely at first, but then agreed."

The majority of the lines run across private property or remain on the state Route 56 highway easement; all except a two-mile stretch between Stark Falls and Sevey Corners. They have been in use since May.

With the amendment approved, the state legislature must now pass yet another bill spelling out the specifics of the land swap and completing the transfers.

"Passage couldn't come at a better time as winter quickly approaches and demand for power will increase in Tupper Lake and the Tri-Lakes region," Little said. "This is a smart solution and the result of effective teamwork by the business community, environmental advocates and local and state officials."