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APA nomination illustrates big split

Pro-development groups knock recommendation for area boat builder to fill seat on agency

By BRIAN NEARING, Staff writer

ALBANY -- The potential appointment of a prominent Adirondack boat builder to the Adirondack Park Agency has highlighted the rift between conservation and development -- forces that have long butted heads over the park's direction.

On Tuesday, a panel of state lawmakers on the Senate Environmental Conservation Committee voted along party lines to recommend Olmsteadville resident Peter Hornbeck to fill the agency seat formerly held by Lake Placid hotel owner Arthur Lussi, whose term expired in June.

The nomination, made by Gov. David Paterson, now moves on to the Senate Finance Committee and, if it passes that hurdle, the full Senate for consideration. The seat carries a four-year term.

Republican lawmakers, along with pro-development groups, decried the move and painted Hornbeck as too environmentally focused. Hornbeck, who owns his own boat-building business, is a member of Protect the Adirondacks. Last month, the group sued the APA over its decision to lift wilderness protection rules from Lows Lake in St. Lawrence County.

"If his nomination is approved by the New York State Senate, it would mean that four of the board members of the Adirondack Park Agency have ties to environmental advocacy groups, creating serious imbalance in the agency," said Fred Monroe, executive director of the Adirondack Park Local Government Review Board.

The APA board has 11 members.

Sens. Betty Little, R-Queensbury, and Carl Marcellino, R-Long Island, questioned how the APA could include someone from a organization that had sued it.

But Democrats on the committee voted to recommend Hornbeck, and conservation groups have lined up behind the appointment, saying Hornbeck will work to protect the massive 6 million-acre park's wilderness character.

"He is a local businessman who provides good jobs in town ... and he has local government experience on the Minerva Planning Board," said John Sheehan, a spokesman for the Adirondack Council, a group that lobbies to protect wilderness. Three current APA commissioners -- Chairman Curt Stiles as well as Cecil Wray and Dick Booth -- served as directors of the Adirondack Council.

Sheehan said Monroe's group has sued the APA at least a half-dozen times since the 1980s; despite that, former Gov. George Pataki, a Republican, made his APA appointments based on

recommendations from the local review board. "Gov. Paterson is not in the same party, and he is not bound to continue the prior administration's practices," said Sheehan.

Hornbeck's opposition to the proposed Adirondack Club and Resort, a massive 6,300-acre project in Tupper Lake also is a dividing line for his supporters and detractors. The Tupper Lake-based, pro-business group, Adirondack Residents Intent on Saving their Economy, which supports the resort project, said Hornbeck's appointment would threaten "the economic well-being of the Adirondack Park."

Hornbeck's daughter, Leigh, is a staff reporter with the Times Union.

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