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APA role in VICs slated to end

By KIM SMITH DEDAM, Staff Writer

RAY BROOK — Environmental cuts proposed by the governor would close Visitor Interpretive Centers at Paul Smiths and Newcomb that are frequented by area school groups for nature classes and field trips.

Gov. David Paterson's proposal would also put a moratorium on state land purchases.

VIC CLOSURES

Closing the Visitors Interpretive Centers would trim \$129,000 from the Adirondack Park Agency's budget in 2010-11 and \$583,000 annually thereafter.

It puts eight full-time people and two hourly personnel out of work.

"We're shocked," said one naturalist, speaking anonymously because they are not authorized to speak for the APA.

Paterson said the APA would look to find another organization to operate the centers.

"Recognizing the value of educating the public about the natural resources in the Adirondacks, (APA) would work to identify an educational or not-for-profit entity to assume operation of the facilities."

'TOUGH CHOICES'

APA spokesman Keith McKeever said the closure option was proffered by the agency.

"The governor asked all agencies to make tough choices and share in the sacrifice so that we can responsibly get through these difficult economic times.

"We had to prioritize the agency's core mission and responsibilities. Despite the undisputed positive impact the VICs have — including the message and programs they deliver — it was generally accepted the interpretive part of the agency was not part of our core mission, and we initiated a proposal to phase out the VICs by 2011.

"There will be no layoffs this year," McKeever said. "We anticipate business as usual. We will be proactively searching for any and all options to sustain those programs outside the agency."

Both Visitor Interpretive Centers have extensive trail systems for winter and summer use, located at the edge of forestlands owned by Paul Smith's College in Paul Smiths and by SUNY Environmental Science and Forestry in Newcomb.

APA leases the buildings and property from the colleges, McKeever said.

DEC, LAND-PURCHASE CUTS

The APA's wasn't the only stewardship cut.

The governor's budget also trims Department of Environmental Conservation spending by \$173 million, a 12.9-percent reduction overall with a loss of 54 jobs statewide.

In similar vein, Paterson called for a moratorium on state land purchases and shaved \$79 million from the Environmental Protection Fund.

The remaining Protection Fund appropriation of \$143 million would "focus on maintaining the state's existing facilities, protecting water resources, continuing to revitalize waterfronts and municipal parks and maintaining a quality agricultural system through farmland protection."

The primary revenue source for the Environmental Protection Fund is the state's real-estate transfer tax. Paying less into the fund, Paterson said, would net savings of \$77 million.

HUNTING CLUBS

Paul Hartman, the Nature Conservancy's director of government relations in Albany, said the cuts would hurt open-space preservation efforts.

The Nature Conservancy bought 166,000 acres of former Finch, Pruyn & Company lands in the heart of the Adirondack Park two years ago. Timber-management rights on 92,000 acres were sold to a Danish pension fund for \$32.88 million last March.

The remaining 65,000 acres was kept aside for addition to state forest land in an arrangement that includes 10-year transition deals slowly phasing out private use by 1,000 hunting clubs and agreements with some 27 towns.

"It's another factor to be taken into consideration," Hartman said. "It is unclear if this moratorium is for one fiscal year or indefinite. We view the hunt clubs as an integral partner in this; we want to ensure their interests are protected as this process moves forward."

Hartman said real-estate transfer taxes bring in "well in excess" of what is dedicated to the Environmental Protection Fund.

"At the lowest estimate, real-estate transfer taxes are going to generate just under \$400 million. While they are dramatically lower than a couple years ago, there is enough to meet current EPF obligations. They've (Paterson's budget team) identified in their mind different priorities."

He said the Nature Conservancy will pressure legislators to block the moratorium.

COUNCIL UPSET

The Adirondack Council said Paterson's plan declares war on the environment.

John Sheehan, spokesman for the group, said the cuts are deep "because the park has 140,000 people in it. There aren't enough votes in the Adirondacks to cause the governor any concern. That makes us an easy target. But it means we've got to start yelling a lot louder."

The state Open Space Plan targets about \$2.5 billion worth of land purchases statewide, he said.

"That's a long-term idea and requires planning over the next couple of decades. But most of what had been contemplated for conveyance in the Adirondacks is already under contract."

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