

Adirondack Express
December 29, 2009

Adk Council pleased with outcome of vote

Adirondack Council Executive Director Brian L. Houseal offered his thanks to the state's voters, who approved a NYS Constitutional Amendment on Election Day authorizing a land swap involving the Adirondack Forest Preserve.

The measure was approved on Nov. 3 by a margin of 863,898 (67 percent) to 427,043 (33 percent), with 99 percent of the votes counted.

"We offer our sincere congratulations to the people of Tupper Lake, the New York Power Authority and National Grid. We thank all of them for placing their trust in us, and in our promise to promote the merits of this amendment," Houseal said. "This landslide approval shows that voters took the time to understand the issue and trusted our advice about the environmental benefits. We are gratified and humbled by the overwhelmingly positive response."

The result is similar to the 2007 Constitutional Amendment authorizing a land swap for the Town of Long Lake, which needed to drill a well for drinking water for the hamlet of Raquette Lake, but needed state land for the well. Voters approved a swap of one acre for the well in exchange for 12 acres of new Forest Preserve in Hamilton County.

Any resolution authorizing a public referendum for a Constitutional Amendment must be approved by either the delegates to a Constitutional Convention, or by being passed by two separately elected, consecutive, state legislatures. So, poorly written or environmentally damaging amendments are unlikely to ever make it to the voters.

The Constitutional Amendment approved by the voters on Nov. 3 will allow the state to swap six acres of current Adirondack Forest Preserve on the shoulder of NYS Route 56 in the Town of Colton, St. Lawrence County, for 43 acres of land owned by National Grid along the South Branch of the Grasse River, also in St. Lawrence County. The Grasse River parcel will become Forest Preserve, protected by Article 14, Section 1 of the NYS Constitution, also known as the "Forever Wild" clause. The six roadside acres will be owned by the power company, which will own the power line.

The amendment allows the power company 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. Now, if that line is felled by wind, ice, falling trees, or auto accidents, the new, second line will prevent a blackout.

"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."

“Aside from helping the economy, the voter-approved land swap also prevented some serious ecological damage,” Houseal said. “The New York Power Authority, which operates the hydro-power dams from which National Grid’s new line will be fed, came to us with a plan to go around the Forest Preserve. They proposed a six-mile detour into the woods, to avoid crossing the Forest Preserve for two miles along the shoulder of Route 56.

“We really didn’t like the detour. It would have carved a new road into an old-growth boreal forest ñ some of the state’s rarest plant and wildlife habitat — including the area known to have the state’s highest population of spruce grouse, which is an endangered species in New York,” Houseal said.

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

Now that the voters have approved the amendment, the NYS Legislature must pass a bill spelling out the specifics of the land swap and completing the transfers. That can happen the next time the legislature meets.