

Budget plan would stop buying of Adirondack land

BY STEPHEN WILLIAMS Gazette Reporter

The state would stop buying new public land in the Adirondacks under Gov. David Paterson's proposed deficit-reduction 2010-11 budget, and it's possible some state parks would have to close.

The moratorium on natural land purchases and other environmental spending cuts Paterson proposed on Tuesday were immediately criticized by advocates.

"It's a real body blow, but I think we can make the case that [restoring cuts] is terribly important for the future of New York," said David Gibson, Protect the Adirondacks! executive director.

The governor's executive budget plan would cut \$214 million from agencies with environmental responsibilities, including the Department of Environmental Conservation, Adirondack Park Agency and Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation. Proposed cuts could mean closing some of the state's 214 parks and historic sites, a state parks spokeswoman said.

The two Adirondack Visitor Centers operated by the APA, in Newcomb and at Paul Smiths, would be closed in the governor's plan, saving nearly \$600,000 in 2011-12.

Paterson said the cuts in environmental areas are part of a needed effort to close a \$7.4 billion state budget gap — just a few among dozens of cuts throughout the proposed budget.

But the proposals will require legislative approval, and Adirondack Park environmental advocates and state park supporters are objecting to the cuts.

"Both the environment and the economy of the Adirondack Park would suffer disproportionately if this plan is approved. We call on the Legislature to amend this plan before the April 1 deadline," said Brian Houseal, executive director of the Adirondack Council.

The state already owns about half of the land in the 6-million-acre Adirondack Park.

A moratorium would have the support of many local government officials, who generally think the land can be more productive in private ownership.

"We're delighted with it. It's something we've sought for many years," said Frederick Monroe, Chester town supervisor and executive director of the Adirondack Park Local Government Review Board.

"All the local government representatives feel there has not been sufficient attention paid to the economic needs of the Adirondacks," Monroe said.

A moratorium on new land purchases would leave The Nature Conservancy indefinitely holding 161,000 acres in the Adirondacks it bought from Finch, Pruyn & Co. in 2007.

The conservancy paid \$110 million for the land, expecting to eventually sell about 65,000 acres to the state for inclusion in the Forest Preserve.

The land includes properties conservationists have long wanted the state to acquire, including the Hudson River Gorge, Boreas Ponds and Essex Chain of Lakes.

Most of the rest of the land remains in private timber production, though the state has been expected to buy public access easements.

The Nature Conservancy doesn't regard the plan as threatened, said Connie Prickett, spokeswoman for the conservancy's Adirondack chapter.

"We always thought of this as a multiyear process," she said. "We didn't expect to sell 65,000 acres to the state all at once."

The governor's proposal eliminates \$58.9 million for land acquisition from the Environmental Protection Fund compared to this year.

"Zeroing out land and easement acquisition funding from nearly \$60 million last year is a direct attack on New York's open space and true park needs," said Dan Plumley, Protect the Adirondacks! conservation director.

The Department of Environmental Conservation would be asked to sustain a \$173 million cut — nearly 13 percent of its budget.

Reduction in the Environmental Protection Fund would account for \$79 million of those cuts, but positions, including some state foresters, are also proposed for elimination.

State officials said that any money in the budget needs to be focused on existing resources.

"EPF resources 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," state budget officials said in the proposed spending plan.

Protect the Adirondacks! also said it's important that the two visitor interpretive centers remain open.

"The VICs are the educational arm of the APA," Gibson said. "Education is where people gain awareness."

A parks advocacy group, meanwhile, is warning about possible closure of state parks and historic sites throughout the state.

The governor's proposal calls for the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation to reduce next year's spending from \$263 million to \$230 million.

"With a cut in funding of this magnitude, we know for certain that there will be significant closings," said Robin Dropkin, executive director of Parks & Trails New York, a private parks advocacy group.

More than 100 park sites reduced services this year to cope with funding cuts, and closings are definitely possible if funding is cut further, said parks spokeswoman Eileen Larrabee.

"There will be an impact on parks, but it is yet to be determined what parks or historical sites may be affected," she said.

In the Capital Region, the state parks include Saratoga Spa State Park, John Boyd Thatcher in Albany County, Grafton Lakes in Rensselaer County and many historic sites.