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## Green groups FOIL review board; Monroe anticipates lawsuit

The Adirondack Local Government Review Board is anticipating a lawsuit from green groups because environmentalists have begun seeking information on the publicly funded organization's finances.

But one of the two green groups seeking the information says a lawsuit isn't necessarily pending and the organizations are just seeking greater transparency.

Green groups have long argued that since the review board is an advisory arm of the Adirondack Park Agency, its conspicuous lobbying efforts – often aimed at easing development restrictions or halting the advance of the state Forest Preserve – are an illegal use of public funds.

But Adirondack Council spokesman John Sheehan was hesitant to commit to a suit Monday, instead stating that a relative lack of available information about the review board's finances is worth looking into.

"I'm not willing to make any announcements until I see what is provided by the review board," Sheehan said.

The review board has received two Freedom of Information Law requests from regional green groups in the last month; one from the Adirondack Council and the other from Protect the Adirondacks. Both have sought the financial records of the publicly funded body.

Sheehan said the council isn't looking for anything specific and the organization often delves into the finances of the public bodies it regularly deals with.

"It's pretty routine; as far as agencies we deal with on a regular basis, we are often trying to figure out how they function," Sheehan said. "It's not exactly transparent over there."

But for review board Executive Director Fred Monroe, the sudden interest in his organization's finances seems like a sign of a pending legal battle.

"Obviously they are plotting some sort of attack, but who knows what," Monroe said. "They've been after private landowners and businesses for years. Now it looks like they are going after local government."

Monroe said over the last fiscal year, the review board has spent roughly \$15,000 on private communications and consulting firms. At least some of the time those firms were given the task of lobbying Albany.

He stressed that much of the work done by the consultants was aimed at accomplishing the review board's mission.

And he argues that his time meeting with lawmakers and the Governor's office is part of the review board's mission.

"Reporting to the Governor and the Legislature is part of the job," he said. "I guess I don't understand how it isn't since we are required to report to the Governor and the Legislature."

Monroe said the review board has seen its state funding gutted by nearly 30 percent over the last two years. What was once \$100,000 in state funding has diminished to closer to \$70,000. Monroe has been asking local towns and counties to contribute more cash because of the reductions in state funding.

Monroe said the two recent FOIL requests are the first he has received in five years.

But Sheehan was surprised at the reaction over the information requests.

"FOIL requests happen all of the time," he said. "I've never seen anyone complain to the press about getting one before."

-Jon Alexander, 6-29-10