

WNBZ
March 24, 2010

Green groups pleased with proposed senate EPF restoration

Although the Environmental Protection Fund won't be increasing this year, green groups are relieved the New York State Senate has proposed to restore it to 2009-2010 levels.

Earlier this year, Governor David Paterson had proposed slashing \$79 million from the EPF as part of an attempt to close a projected \$9.2 billion budget deficit in the coming fiscal year.

But after significant public outrage and intense lobbying from environmental groups, the preliminary 2010-2011 Legislative Budget released Monday would restore the EPF to its previous level of \$222 million.

Adirondack Council spokesman John Sheehan told WNBZ Tuesday he's not surprised by the Senate's proposed restoration of funds, but he is pleased.

"Actually, we are not surprised by that. They got a lot of feedback from the public about cuts to the EPF," Sheehan said. "We are glad to see they took our advice to keep it where it was. We didn't want to see the EPF go backwards."

Of the \$79 million Paterson had proposed slashing, \$67 million was to stem from a moratorium on state land acquisitions.

Hamilton County Board of Supervisors Chairman Bill Farber argues that a moratorium on the state's acquisition of land is needed, especially in the Adirondack Park, purchases have traditionally been done haphazardly with little regard to the effects on the local communities.

The Nature Conservancy often acts as an intermediary between private sellers and the state.

According to conservancy Executive Director Mike Carr, a huge amount of planning goes into each and every purchase.

"We say no more often than we say yes," Carr said.

In 2007, the conservancy bought 161,000 acres of private lands in the park's center for \$110 million from the Finch Pryun Paper Company.

The proposed moratorium would have stalled a handshake agreement between the Nature Conservancy and the state, sticking the green group with at-least several more years of maintenance costs and taxes on nearly 60,000 acres.

Carr stressed the Senate move is only a proposal, but it does warrant some optimism.

“We’re cautiously optimistic,” Carr said. “It’s still south of where it was supposed to be, but it’s better than those disproportionate cuts.”

In 2007, the state had proposed increasing EPF levels to \$300 million this year.

EPF funds go toward local municipal projects like brown field cleanups and local easement acquisitions. It is regularly tapped to pay the state’s share of property taxes on forest preserve to local governments.

For Sheehan, the move to restore the EPF to its previous level is as good for the taxpayer as it is the forest preserve.

“This is really brick and mortar projects, including landfill closure, construction of recycling facilities and things that have to be built by local people and otherwise with local taxes,” Sheehan said. “So, this doesn’t only help the environment, but helps the economy.”

Local officials had lauded the Governor’s proposal and were hopeful the bad economy would result in no more land acquisitions in the state over the next several years.

-Jon Alexander, 3-24-10