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Land purchase moratorium proposed

By MAURY THOMPSON

Gov. David Paterson, in his state budget proposal on Tuesday, called for a one-year moratorium on forest preserve and open space acquisitions.

The moratorium would prohibit the state from buying land or conservation easements in the Adirondack Park and elsewhere in the state until at least April 2011.

The state typically has spent about \$60 million annually statewide, said John Sheehan, a spokesman for the Adirondack Council.

Area legislators, who have been calling for the moratorium, praised the governor's proposal.

"When you are cutting programs and you are trying to decide what your priorities are, I would think that additional land purchases would be at the bottom of the list of priorities," said state Sen. Elizabeth Little, R-Queensbury.

But whether the governor's proposal can draw a broad base of support in the Legislature is questionable.

"I was the only one clapping in the audience. So if that tells you how everybody feels about it," said state Assemblywoman Teresa Sayward, R-Willsboro, referring to reaction from her Assembly colleagues when Paterson discussed the moratorium during his budget presentation.

Environmental organizations said they would fight the proposed moratorium.

"You'll see a very strong movement opposing this," said Peter Bauer, executive director of The Fund for Lake George. "The irony of this is that the state of New York purchased lands during the Great Depression. It purchased lands during World War II."

The moratorium would delay the economic benefits of tourism that goes hand-in-hand with opening up land for public recreation, said Paul Hartman, director of government regulations for The Nature Conservancy's New York chapter.

The delay would provide an opportunity for the state to evaluate its priorities and develop a realistic acquisition plan, Little said.

Paterson also proposed closing the Adirondack Park Visitor Interpretive Centers at Newcomb in Essex County and at Paul Smith's College in Franklin County.

Closing the centers would save the state \$100,000 in the 2010-11 fiscal year and \$600,000 annually after that.

Possibly, a nonprofit organization or private educational institution could take over the centers and run them more efficiently, Sayward said.