

Buffalo News  
October 31, 2009

## Land swap in Adirondacks tops ballots in Tuesday's election

By Robert J. McCarthy

Plans to relocate a power line in St. Lawrence County may involve only six acres of remote Adirondack land.

But because the State Constitution protects those six acres as “forever wild,” a land swap to improve electricity transmission to a handful of Adirondack residents will require all of the state's voters to consider the proposal.

As a result, “State Proposal No. 1” will appear at the top of the ballot Tuesday. It would amend the Constitution to allow National Grid to construct the line through the six acres, avoiding a more costly and environmentally harmful route skirting the protected area.

In return, the state will receive 43 other acres conveyed by National Grid, while residents near Tupper Lake and Lake Colby in the Town of Colton will receive more reliable electric service in an area that often ranks among the coldest regions of the state.

So far, no opposition has surfaced, despite the challenge to what many view as one of the most sacrosanct provisions of the State Constitution — the forever wild clause. It states that no permanent structures can be built or logging undertaken without a constitutional amendment. It also bans the lease, sale or “taking” of forest preserve lands.

“We think this is a pretty good solution to a problem that's been around for 20 years,” said John F. Sheehan, communications director for the Adirondack Council.

By avoiding the more circuitous route, he explained, the project sidesteps an “ecological disaster” that would have adversely affected an old-growth white pine forest and habitat of the endangered spruce grouse. The swap of 43 National Grid acres for six acres of protected state land improves the forest preserve in the area without any significant damage along the route of the new power line, Sheehan added.

“It rounds out this area of existing forest preserve,” he said. “There is not a lot of state land in this area of the park.”

State voters have approved similar measures in the past. In 1991, a project to improve the Piseco Airport in the Town of Arietta in Hamilton County passed by a vote a 52 percent to 48 percent. That amendment authorized trading 50 acres of Adirondack Park land for 53 acres of nearby wilderness.

Arietta officials said they needed the land to trim treetops growing into the glide zone of Piseco Airport. Environmentalists who opposed the amendment said the swap would open the door for a runway expansion project.

But Sheehan said no significant opposition had developed for this year's proposal.

"If the environmental community was unhappy, we would have gotten together and stopped it," he said. "We're getting power to Tupper in a way that doesn't make a mess along the route.

"We felt it was a good deal for the environment," he added.

The bill authorizing the amendment had bipartisan backing in the State Legislature. Assemblyman Robert K. Sweeney, D-Nassau, and Sen. Betty Little, R-Warren, sponsored the measure and issued a joint statement this month urging passage.

"Unlike many proposals, there is little controversy here as environmental groups, the impacted local governments and businesses all agree that this is a smart and ecologically sensitive proposal," they said.

Despite the lack of controversy, the two said they were speaking up to bring attention to the proposal.

"We want to . . . avoid the ironic situation of voting 'in the dark' when it comes to a constitutional amendment to keep the lights on in the North Country," their statement said.

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