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Lawmakers to push for Adirondack Park economic development program

By MAURY THOMPSON

Republican legislators from the Adirondack Park are inviting Albany area and downstate Democratic colleagues who own second homes inside the Blue Line to join a coalition pushing for economic help for communities inside the park.

"There's value in numbers, and having everyone working together on this is critical," said state Sen. Elizabeth Little, R-Queensbury.

Little, along with Assemblywoman Teresa Sayward, R-Willsboro, and others have formed an "Adirondack Caucus" of state legislators to introduce legislation of interest to the region, such as a bill to establish a special economic zone for the Adirondack Park.

The zone, unique to the region, would be separate from the state's Empire Zone program, which is scheduled to end on June 30.

The Adirondack Park would be a "specifically targeted region," with a state-supported economic development program tailored to the unique challenges of the region, according to a proposal that is the basis of legislation being drafted.

The program would feature tax credits, a loan fund and state-funded "seed capital funding" to encourage job creation.

"Since the Adirondack Park has been designated a unique zone for the purpose of environmental conservation, we're saying that, appropriately, we should recognize and designate the Adirondack Park as a special economic zone."

The new caucus initially is made up of state legislators, all Republicans, whose districts include sections of the Adirondack Park.

Park legislators hope to add legislators from other parts of the state, mostly Democrats, who own second homes in the park or are otherwise interested in Adirondack Park issues.

"What we hope to do is branch out and get people (legislators) who own property in the Adirondacks and people who have an interest in the Adirondacks - irrespective of their political affiliation - to join us," Sayward said.

Democrats who will be approached about joining the caucus include Sen. Neil Breslin, of Delmar, whose family has a vacation home on Lake George; Assemblyman George Latimer, of

Rye, who has a second home in Thurman; and Assemblyman William Magnarelli, of Syracuse, according to Little and Sayward.

The concept of developing a specific economic program for the Adirondack Park is not new.

Various legislative proposals have been floated for years, but past efforts have come primarily from New York city area Democrats or environmental organizations.

Adirondack legislators opposed many of the previous proposals because they were tied with increased environmental regulations.

Adirondack legislators this time want to keep the emphasis focussed on the economy, Sayward said.

Another objection in the past was that a program based strictly on the Adirondack Park boundary would segment economic development efforts of counties such as Warren, Washington and Saratoga that are not wholly inside the park.

Sayward said legislators have come to realize that communities inside the park have unique challenges.

A proposal originating with local legislators in cooperation with Democrats in the majority might have a greater chance of success, said John Sheehan, a spokesman for the Adirondack Council, an environmental organization.

"I think it's always easier in the Legislature - which can be very parochial - to get measures passed that have been asked for by the home community that would be affected by them than it is to impose that sort of thing on a community by action of the whole group without the support of local folks," he said. "If there were a couple of Democrats thrown in there, that might even increase the influence a little bit."

Sheehan said the Adirondack Council supports the concept of an Adirondack Park economic zone, but the group does not feel businesses should have special "rubber stamp" treatment when being reviewed by environmental regulatory agencies.

"We think it's a good idea to have an economic development plan designed specifically for the rural communities for the park," he said. "Too often, the state's economic development efforts have been geared toward urban areas and places that are likely to generate a large number of employees at once."

Little said the recent Adirondack Park Assessment Project, an analysis involving a broad base of local government, economic and environmental organizations, demonstrated the urgency to address economic challenges in the park.

Little said the goal is to pass legislation this session to establish a program that would be funded in the 2011-12 state budget.